

# Chag HaSukkot:

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## Did Israel sit in Sukkot in the Wilderness?

"You shall live in Sukkot (booths) for seven days, all citizens in Israel shall live in Sukkot (booths); in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths, when I brought them out of the Land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God." (23:41-43)

The Torah informs us that the Sukkot, the huts or booths in which we reside for the week of Chag Hassukot correspond to a specific historical reality. God "made the Israelite people live in booths" during the Exodus from Egypt, and we imitate and simulate that collective experience on Chag Hassukot. Now, this familiar passuk has always raised a number of questions: What exactly does the Torah have in mind when it speaks about God housing us in "Sukkot" during the Egyptian Exodus? What booths is the verse referring to? Does the Torah record such an event?

Most readers are probably familiar with the Talmudic discussion in Sukka 11b:

'I made the Israelite people live in booths.'  
It refers to the "clouds of glory" said Rabbi Eliezer.  
Rabbi Akiva says: God made real Sukkot for them.

For Rabbi Eliezer, the booths of the wilderness are the miraculous protective "Clouds of Glory." For Rabbi Akiva, God's booths are actual huts in which the Israelites lived during their years of sojourning in the wilderness. Let us take Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva and investigate their respective opinions.

### CLOUDS OF GLORY

Rabbi Eliezer talks about Ananei HaKavod – Clouds of Glory. What are these clouds? The Mekhilta offers us some clarity:

"There were seven clouds<sup>1</sup>: Four of them to each side/direction (of the Israelites), one was above them and another below their feet. A further cloud would pass in front of them leveling the valleys and flattening the mountains." (Mekhilta Beshalach 1)

We are dealing with a miraculous phenomenon where we have mysterious clouds with protective powers that shielded and eased the path of B'nei Yisrael as they trekked through the wilderness. The Annanei Hakavod are said to have flattened mountains, as well as shielding the Israelites from the sun, and other harsh aspects of desert living. According to Rabbi Eliezer, the Sukkot that we inhabit mirror and reflect the cloud-experience of the wilderness.

This concept has its advantages and disadvantages. Advantages will include a straightforward reading of the passuk: I placed the Israelite people in sukhot. This is a

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<sup>1</sup> Interesting that in the Mekhikta, other views are offered:  
Rabbi Yehuda – 13 clouds  
Rabbi Yoshiya – 4 clouds  
Rebbi – 2 clouds.  
So there is far from consensus amongst the Tannaim on this point.

Godly form of envelopment and protection, and hence God's protective clouds might fit the bill.

### REAL BOOTHS?

But for adherents of the *peshat* approach to Chumash the *Ananei Hakavod* are a red flag. After all, the text of the Chumash never mentions clouds leveling mountains, or clouds under the feet of the Israelites! Those who adopt a more rational mode of thought and more text oriented approach are immediately attracted to the more realistic proposition by Rabbi Akiva, that the Israelites lived in huts, shelters. After all, if we are commanded to live in huts in commemoration of the booths of our ancestors in the wilderness, we should assume that B'nei Yisrael did indeed live in huts!

They are in good company. The Ibn Ezra also didn't favour the theory of *Ananei Hakavod* very much!

### THE APPROACH OF THE IBN EZRA

**"Some of the early scholars said that there were seven clouds, but to my mind, there were only two, and possibly only a single cloud."** (Ibn Ezra)

The Ibn Ezra is commenting on the verse in Shemot that informs us that the Am Yisrael were lead by a cloud as we departed from Egypt:

"The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they may travel by day and night." (Shemot 13:21)

The Ibn Ezra reads that verse in the following manner:

**"A pillar of cloud by day**, to guide them: to show them the route. It also protected them<sup>2</sup>, and this is the meaning of the phrase (in Tehillim 105:39) 'He spread a cloud as a screen.'

**A pillar of fire by night**, to give them light – It might be that the pillar of fire was within the pillar of cloud at night, as its states (Shemot 40:38) 'fire will be within it at night.'

**That they may travel by day and night:** They traveled around the clock ... These clouds, if there were two, remained with them until they crossed the Yam Suf (Reed Sea) but in my opinion, they then ceased to accompany them for there wasn't a need to travel at night after Pharaoh and his army had drowned in the Sea. (Shemot. Peirush Katzar 13:21)

But questions remain. And the most significant of them is the origins of Sukkot. If we have debunked the theory of the "Clouds of Glory," then what are the Sukkot that Bnei Yisrael lived in during the wilderness era?

The Ibn Ezra answers:

"...Near Mt. Sinai was a forest of Acacia trees. When they arrived there (Sinai) and were told that

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<sup>2</sup> The Ibn Ezra may be referring to Shemot 14:19 where we read how the "the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up place behind them. It came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel ... and one could not come near the other throughout the night."

Might this episode be one of the primary sources for the concept of Annanei Kavod - protective clouds - in each direction?

At any rate, the Ibn Ezra seems to think (on the basis of the verse in Tehillim) that the pillar of cloud spread itself wide over them to shield them from the scorching desert sun.

they would reside there for some time – and there was no (protective) cloud as I have already explained – each person constructed a hut ... and they cut down the entire forest..." (Ibn Ezra . Peirush HaAroch Shemot 25:5)

the Ibn Ezra's theory helps explain what the Biblical Sukkot were, but it also goes some way to inform regarding the source of the wood that the people contributed to the construction of the Mishkan.

So this is a neat answer. But, is it correct?

**OTHER EVIDENCE – WHAT DWELLINGS DID ISRAEL LIVE IN?**

Let us check it out. Did the Israelites live in wood huts? Did they chop down a forest? Many places record the manner in which Bnei Yisrael dwelt in TENTS<sup>3</sup>, termed Mishkan or Ohel:

"And they (Moshe and Yitro) went into the tent." (Shemot 18:7)

"And the people bowed down, each person at the doorway of his tent" (Shemot 33:10)

"and Datan and Aviram emerged defiant at the portal of their tents." (Bamidbar 16:27)

"How comely are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places (mishkenotecha) O Israel." (Bamidbar 24:5)

In each place they talk about tents, and the term "Sukkot/Sukka" are noticeably absent! In fact, other than the Festival of Sukkot, that word is NEVER used as a term for a residence or abode for Bnei Yisrael when they are in the Wilderness! Never!<sup>4</sup>

So, we are stuck. Because the Israelites lived in OHALim and not SUKKOT. And now we are raising serious doubts as to the identity of the living shelters that housed Bnei Yisrael during their forty years in the wilderness. if our Sukkot commemorate the huts of the Midbar, do they refer to the physical object of a Sukka? Where does this leave us?

**S"CH"CH**

So let us investigate the verb S"CH"CH which is the grammatical root of the sukka. What does that word tell us? (I have scanned in the concordance listing in the next column.)

If you examine virtually every instance of the verb S"CH"CH in the Tanach, it refers to God's protection in some way. More specifically, it frequently refers to Temple references<sup>5</sup>, but that is far from exclusive. The overwhelming majority refer to God as directly shielding or protecting a person:

"You shielded my head on the day of war" (Tehillim 140:8)  
 "With his wing he shelters you" (Tehillim 91)

<sup>3</sup> See also Devarim 1:27, 5:27, and possibly Bamidbar 19:14  
<sup>4</sup> One could claim, even with the Ibn Ezra, that they used the wood to create some sort of frame, and that the walls were made of cloth, and that this sort of wood-frame/cloth structure is known as an Ohel, a tent. That would assist us with logistical issues, but it still leaves us bewildered as to the word "Sukkot."  
 As for the word "Sukkot", there IS a PLACE named Sukkot (Shemot 12:37; Bamidbar 33:5) which was their FIRST stop in the Wilderness after leaving Egypt. Might the Torah be relating the booth-Sukkoth to the place called Sukkoth? That seems unlikely. (– more about this at the end of the shiur)  
<sup>5</sup> See the work of Yaakov Nagen from Yeshivat Otniel, who elaborates upon the Sukka-Mikdash connection or symmetry.

This is about basking in the divine presence, or being protected by Him.

מִשְׁכָּן	: סִכַּךְ (סִדָּךְ) סוֹכֵךְ, הַסִּדָּךְ, סִי, סָה, סָהָה, מְסָךְ, מוֹסָף, מִסְכָּה: יָשָׁה סִכְכָּה, סִכְכִּים, סִבּוּת, סִבּוּתִים
סִכַּךְ	פִּי אֵל (פִּי אֵל) צִפְחָה וְ אֵין גַּם סוֹכֵךְ] (בֵּי אֵלֵי הַסִּדָּךְ] שֵׁם מִסְכָּה, כִּסְהָה: 19:14
1 וְשָׁכַחְתִּי כִפִּי עָלַי עַד-עֲבָרִי	שְׁמוֹת לִגְזֵי
2 סִבּוּתָהּ 2 סִבּוּתָהּ לְרֵאשִׁי בַיּוֹם נִשְׁקַח	תְּהִלִּים קָמָא
3 סִבִּיתָהּ בְּאֶפֶס וַתִּרְדַּפְנִי	אֵיכָה 131
4 סִבְתָּהּ בְּעֵינַי לֶךְ מִעֲבוּר תִּפְלָהּ	אֵיכָה 141
5 וְסִבְתָּ עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֶת-הַפְּלִכֶת	שְׁמוֹת מִצְרַיִם
6 אֶת-כְּרִיב מִמִּשְׁחַת הַסּוֹכֵךְ	יְהוֹקָאֵל כְּהֵנָּה
7 וַאֲבָדָהּ כְּרוּב הַסּוֹכֵךְ	יְהוֹקָאֵל כְּהֵנָּה
8 סִכְכִּים 8:9 סִכְכִּים בְּכִנְפֵיהֶם עַל-הַכַּפֹּרֶת שְׁמוֹת כְּהֵנָּה לְזֵרִי	
11 וְסִכְכִּים עַל-אֶרֶץ בְּרִיתֵךְ	דְּהֵי אֵל כְּהֵנָּה
12 תִּסְכְּנִי בְּבִטָּן אֲמִי	תְּהִלִּים קְלִטָּה
13 וְנִסְכְּוּ הַפְּרָכִים עַל-הָאָרֶץ	מִי אֵל חֵד
14 יִסְכְּהוּ צִאֲלִים צִלְלוֹ	אֵיכָה 222
15 לְעוֹלָם יִרְגְּמוּ וְתִסַּךְ עֲלֵימוֹ	תְּהִלִּים 122
16 בְּאֶבְרָתוֹ יִסַּךְ לֶךְ	תְּהִלִּים 444
17 וְיִסַּךְ עַל אֶרֶץ וְעַדוֹת	שְׁמוֹת מִצְרַיִם 211
18 וְיִסַּךְ אֱלֹתֵי בְעַדוֹ	אֵיכָה 233
19 וְיִסַּךְ בְּדִלְתֵיהֶם יָם	אֵיכָה לְחֵת 188

Or, for example, the Ark of the Covenant has cherubs that are "shielding – sochechim - with their wings over the Kapporet" The Ark is the place where God's presence is manifest! "and I will speak to you ... from between the Cherubs" (Shemot 25:18)

And after this realistaion, we begin to gain the impression that this verb is dealing with God's direct protection, or even more than that, with God's Presence itself!

And we may recall the passuk in Shemot: "God's presence – Kevod Hashem – appeared in CLOUD." (Shemot 16:10) Are ANNANEI KAVOD in truth, a metaphor for God's presence, his manifest protection?

And here I find myself coming full-circle. We are back to the start. We began by hearing Chazal talk about seven protective divine clouds. It sounded bizarre, textually unfounded, too irrational, supernatural. So we explored Tanach for a rational physical booth within which to understand the phenomenon of the sukkot of the Wilderness. And now, with a linguistic analysis, we understand that in truth, the word "sukka" refers quite directly to God protecting man.

In other words, the word "Sukka" refers quite clearly to the notion that we thrust our trust into God's hands and we rely upon Him. Or even further, that God allows us to have relationship with Him. Maybe this is actually the inner meaning of the Midrashic concept of the 7 protective clouds.

When we sit in our sukka this week, we are expected to allow our "home" to be rather more fragile than it usually is. But that very understanding – that we are limited and not absolutely able to control our personal and physical environment, our destiny – this very understanding affords us more "room" to recognize God's caring hand, God's presence in our lives

Wishing you a Chag Sameach!