

Sukkot: 2013

Rabbi Jonathan Perlman

September 5, 2013

In a sermon I gave over the Sukkot holiday entitled “Permanence and Continuity,” I demonstrated that the Torah has symbolic reasons for the placement of the Pesach and Sukkot holidays in their seasons. Pesach is ordained to be in the month of Nissan because of the parallel themes of beginnings in the arrival of Spring and the creation of the Israelite nation in the Exodus story. Sukkot is the Exodus celebrated in a different way. It commemorates the continuity of the people from one generation to the next dwelling in the wilderness and yearning for permanence. The phenomenon of Fall going into winter and looking towards Spring is the symbol for the holiday. The sukkah itself with its fragile structure represents this kind of impermanence.

The Haftarah on the second day of Sukkot in I Kings Chapter Eight describes the dedication of the first Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon. The reading mentions that the dedication happened in the “seventh month” and the rabbis of the midrash believe that King Solomon waited 11 months to dedicate the Temple from the month of Kislev of the previous year. Why did they wait? Were they waiting for the building department to process the paperwork? Did they have to wait because they did not meet “code”?

I think that King Solomon waited for the right season so that the establishment of Israel's first Temple could be appreciated by all. Just as the celebration of Sukkot must take place in the Fall to teach the continuity of the people in wanderings, so too King Solomon wanted to teach about the closure of “mission accomplished.” The Temple is dedicated at a time of closure for the growing season. It is a completion of the journey for those generations who came out of Egypt to realize freedom of worship. Thus Sukkot is embellished by the suggestion of the Haftarah as the Holiday par excellence with the Sukkah as the “mini mikdash” or miniature Temple that represents the closure of the exodus narrative in the proper season of Fall.

But there is a personal reason that relates to our humanity. Reasonably Sukkot could have been placed at the beginning of Tishrei as the New Year Festival, the holiday of the nation followed by the judgment and atonement of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Instead, Sukkot is placed five days after Yom Kippur, a day out of normal time that bridges the past and present in our un-ending desire to return to God and be more God-like in our character. Though we hurry to construct a sukkah to show our fealty to the mitzvot, we also realize that we have returned to normal time and many of the promises we made are going to be dropped or half fulfilled. We might have been inspired or moved in a certain direction on Yom Kippur, but the truth is that we are mortals not gods. Being human means being vulnerable to our flawed condition and needing God to wrap Himself around us and love and support us more as we venture out in the normal world. The sukkah is expressive of this human reality. As we feel the fragility and decline in the season, we feel the new normal that we desire rubbing against the normal. We then conclude that we need more than one day of Yom Kippur to let that idea sink in. We need all seven days of Sukkot reveling in life and honoring our humanity. Our challenge is to know that the permanence of promises made is not entirely in our hands or doable. We contend with the fragility of being human and the changes that will test us for the next twelve months. Perhaps that is why King Solomon waited: to teach that wise lesson about permanence and continuity to his fellow countrymen. One day that holy Temple would fall.