The Symbolism of the Sukkah

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The Sukkah stands out among all Mitzvot. It is the only commandment that involves a ritual dwelling. One is totally surrounded by the mitzvah for an extended period of time. For seven days, eating, sleeping, reading, relaxing, studying and almost all activities are performed within the sukkah. Yet the mitzvah is not only to eat, sleep, read, relax or study—but to be, to be within the sukkah. One simply enters the sukkah-space and the mitzvah is performed. One need not really do anything. No action, no gesture, no exertion, no effort is required. There is no real commandment to build a sukkah (although this is certainly a meritorious act), but only to stay in one. Surely a singular mitzvah.

What is the meaning of this ritual? What are we supposed to experience within the sukkah? What is the point of this extended stay? What does the sukkah symbolize? The answer to these questions is long and complex, for rituals and symbols operate on many levels, and have many meanings. This study explores one dimension of the symbolism of the sukkah and the accompanying religious experience: the sukkah as symbol of the clouds of glory and the experience of dwelling in its shade.

1. The Sukkah and the Clouds of Glory

The typical explanation for the sukkah is that it symbolizes the booths in which the Israelites dwelled during their journey through the desert. On Passover we eat matzah because our ancestors ate matzah when they left Egypt, and on Sukkot we reside in booths to commemorate those in which they lived for forty years. This explanation follows from Lev 23:42–43, the source of the commandment:

You shall live in sukkot seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in sukkot, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I, the Lord your God.

Yet this understanding is not as simple as it seems at first glance. We should not immediately picture the Israelites actually dwelling in the type of booths that we build today. Leviticus relates that they dwelled in sukkot, but does not say what those sukkot were. The rabbis debated exactly what this meant. In the Sifra, the halakhic midrash to Leviticus, we find the following dispute:

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R. Eliezer says: They were real sukkot. R. Akiba says: The sukkot were the clouds of glory.

For R. Eliezer the Israelites dwelled in real booths in the desert. For R. Akiba, however, the Israelites did not reside in booths at all. They dwelled amidst the "clouds of glory," within the clouds that marked the presence and radiance of God. R. Akiba's opinion became the majority rabbinic interpretation. It is found in the targums (the Aramaic translations of the Torah), in later midrashim, and in medieval codes. Thus the dominant trend in Jewish thought never pictured the exodus generation dwelling in leafy huts but rather in glorious clouds. The leafy sukkot we build symbolize those clouds.

Why did R. Akiba interpret the exodus sukkot as clouds?

First, sukkot are generally not found in the desert. They are built in fields for the protection of watchmen, workers or animals and constructed from the products of the field—leaves, branches, reeds, foliage, wood and hay. Where would the Israelites have found such materials in the desert wasteland? Desert travelers stay in tents, not booths.

Second, outside of this lone verse in Leviticus, the Bible never claims that the Israelites stayed in booths. There are several descriptions of the camp of the Israelites in the desert, but not one pictures the tribes dwelling in sukkot. Tents are occasionally mentioned, but not booths. Why does Lev 23:42 suddenly assume that the Israelites dwelled in sukkot, while the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy know nothing about it?

Third, Leviticus relates that God "made the Israelite people dwell in sukkot," not that "the Israelite people built sukkot for themselves." This implies that God provided the sukkot. But if God made the sukkot, we might expect them to be miraculous and supernatural. A God who brought ten plagues, signs, and wonders can certainly be expected to provide more than simple shacks. Moreover, it is more likely that we are commanded to reside in booths to commemorate a miracle than a routine and ordinary mode of dwelling. If there is nothing special about the exodus sukkot, why make a religious institution out of it?

Two other considerations influenced R. Akiba. First, the word sukkah in the Bible sometimes refers to a cloud-covering. The Psalms, describes the celestial manifestation of God in vivid imagery: "He made darkness His screen; dark thunderheads, dense clouds of the sky were His sukkah round about him (Ps 18:11-12)." Likewise Job 36:29 relates: "Can one, indeed, contemplate the expanse of clouds, the thunderings from His sukkah?" The storm-cloud from which God thunders is pictured as the divine pavilion or sukkah.

Note that the language "His sukkah" might hint at the type of sukkot in which God "made the Israelite people live." God made them live in "His sukkot," in clouds. Isaiah prophesies that a cloud will hover above Mt. Zion and "shall serve as a sukkah for shade from heat by day and for shelter and protection against drenching rain." Thus a cloud can be described as a "sukkah"; the terms can be used synonymously. Second, while booths are never mentioned in the exodus narratives, clouds are always found around the Israelite camp. God provided a pillar of cloud to lead the Israelites in the desert and speaks to Moses from the midst of the cloud. God also appears above the tent of meeting in the form of a cloud. Now it turns out that the pillar of cloud first appears at a place called Sukkah. Exodus 13:25 relates that the Israelites "journeyed from Rameses to Sukkah. "They soon depart with a wondrous escort:

Exod 13:20 [They set out from Sukkah and encamped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness. 13:21] 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.

R. Akiba interpreted the term sukkah not as a place, but in light of the following verse. The Israelites "set out from Sukkah," from the clouds within which they had camped, and which thereafter led the way in the desert.

We now have all the clues to appreciate R. Akiba's interpretation. Given the considerations above, R. Akiba found it difficult to interpret sukkah of Lev 23:42 as real booths. On the other hand, he noted that the term sukkah in poetic biblical passages sometimes referred to a cloud—sukkah. Moreover, the only appearance of the term sukkah in the Exodus narrative occurs just before the first description of the pillar of cloud. He reasoned that the term sukkah in Lev 23:42, in which God "made the Israelites dwell," must refer to that divine cloud. The Israelites never resided in leafy huts, but among divine sukkah-clouds, the "clouds of glory."

II. The Nature of the Clouds of Glory

Since the sukkah symbolizes the clouds of glory in which the exodus generation lived, it is necessary to investigate how the rabbis conceived of the clouds. The clearest description is provided by Tosefta Sotah 4:2

God gave to [Abraham's children] seven clouds of glory in the desert, one to their right, and one to their left, one before them, and one after them, and one above their heads, and one as the shekhina that was in their midst. And the pillar of cloud would precede them, killing snakes and scorpions, burning brush, thorns and briers, reducing mounds and raising low places, and making a straight path for them, a continuous, ongoing highway, so it is said, The ark of the covenant of the Lord traveled in front of them (Num 10:33).

The clouds of glory envelop the Israelites on all four sides and form a type of force field around the camp. The seventh cloud obliterates dangers that lie before them and smooths the rough desert terrain so that the journey would be manageable. One of the clouds is called the shekhina, the divine
presence, and stands in the middle of the camp as symbol of God’s nearness. Already we sense the three main characteristics of the clouds of glory that appear in rabbinic traditions: protection, presence, and love.

First, protection. The Tosefta describes how the clouds destroyed snakes and scorpions, ensuring that the Israelites would not be harmed as they marched through the wilderness. The clouds naturally sheltered the Israelites from the hot sun overhead and, more miraculously, insulated them from the hot sand below their feet. Yet the clouds not only provided protection against natural dangers, but also protected Israel from their enemies. According to the Mekhilta, when the Egyptians tried to attack the Israelites on the shores of the Sea of Reeds, they “would shoot at them from the bow and stones from their catapults, which the angel and the cloud intercepted.” The clouds also protect Moses and Aaron from stones and arrows during the incidents of the murmurings of the people. The clouds even provided personal protection for the individual Israelite wherever he or she went: “If one of the Israelites was hit by the wings of the cloud, the cloud would be with him, behind him, until he returned to the camp.” Given this absolute protective shield, the rabbis are pressed hard to explain how the Israelites could have been vulnerable to attack. Commenting on the Amalekite assault upon the “stragglers” at the rear of the camp (Deut 25:18), the midrash explains that the enemy could harm only those who “straggled” from [obeying] God’s ways and found themselves cast out from under the wings of the cloud. Only when the Israelites sinned and lost the protection of the cloud was he exposed to attack. In a later version of the midrash, the Amalekites must trick the Israelites into leaving the enclosure of the clouds of glory. Similarly, the rabbis explain that the Canaanite King of Arad was only able to attack the Israelites because the clouds of glory temporarily disappeared following the death of Aaron (Num 21:1-2). While the clouds covered the camp, the Israelites were inviolable. And they possessed the ability to heal. When the Israelites were scorched by fire following the revelation on Mt. Sinai, God sent the clouds of glory to discharge a therapeutic dew over the people.

Second, the presence of God. As a miraculous guide and escort through the desert, the clouds clearly symbolize the continual presence of God among the Israelites. The “glory” is of course “God’s glory,” the kadosh, with which the biblical authors depict God’s tangible presence. Tosefta Sotah calls one of the clouds the “shekhina in their midst,” and other sources employ the term ‘anan shekhina, the “cloud of the presence.” Several midrashim identify the shekhina with the clouds: “When Israel saw the pillar of cloud they knew that the shekhina revealed itself to Moses.” Num 12:10 relates that the cloud rose from the tent after Aaron and Miriam murmured against Moses, and the midrash comments that “immediately the shekhina departed.” The mosaic of the Beit Alpha synagogue and the paintings of the Dura synagogue also symbolize the presence of God by a cloud.

Third, divine love. The midrash describes the initial appearance of the clouds of glory in terms of a wedding:

And the children of Israel went from Raamses towards Sukkot (Exod 12:37). . . .

Sukkot of clouds of glory came and settled upon the roofs of Raamses. They made a parable: What is this like? To a groom who brought a canopy (‘apiryon) to the entrance of the house of his wife in order that she would come to him immediately.

Above we noted that R. Akiba interpreted the term sukkot as not a place but as the clouds of glory. The advent of these sukkah-clouds is compared to the arrival of the wedding canopy, the huppa or ‘apiryon, at the home of the bride. God, as it were, signaled his love for the Israelites, his readiness to consummate a marriage, by sending his canopy, the sukkah-clouds. When they entered the clouds of glory the Israelites entered the domain of a loving husband. A later midrash insists that although the Israelites worshipped the molten calf, God “did not cease loving them. The clouds of glory accompanied them, and the well and the Manna did not cease.” The clouds of glory, the mythical well, and the Manna thus serve as outstanding symbols of God’s love.

In other passages the clouds of glory represent paternal love.

And the pillar of cloud moved from before them and went behind them (Exod 14:19).

R. Yehuda said: Here is a verse made rich in meanings by many passages. He made it of a parable; to what is the matter similar? To a king who was going on the way, and his son went before him. Brigands came to kidnap him from in front. He took him from in front and placed him behind him. A wolf came behind him. He took him from behind and placed him in front. Brigands in front and the wolf in back, he took him and placed him in his arms, for it says, I have pampered Ephraim, taking them on My arms (Hos 11:3).

The son began to suffer; He took him on his shoulders, for it is said, In the desert which you saw, where the Lord, your God carried you (Deut 1:31).

The son began to suffer from the sun; He spread on him His cloak, for it is said, He has spread a cloud as a curtain (Ps 78:39).

He became hungry; He fed him. . . . He became thirsty, He gave him drink. . . .

The parable compares the relationship of the cloud and the Israelites in the desert to that of a king and his son on a journey. When dangers arise the king takes precautions to protect his son. The analogy suggests that the clouds of glory are not simply an impersonal screen, shield, or barrier, but are associated with love and nurture. This sentiment also emerges from the Hosean prooftext where God holds Ephraim (= Israel) in His arms like a father doling upon his son. Two verses earlier in Hosea God relates how he
III. Religious Experience, the Sukkah, and Shade

The sukkah thus symbolizes the clouds of glory, protection, the divine presence, and love. The ritual dwelling in the sukkah should cause the occupant to experience these sentiments. But how? Of course knowledge of what the sukkah symbolizes might call the symbolism to mind and invite one to appreciate it. On the other hand, intellectual knowledge does not always translate into experience, and it is the living experience of divine protection, presence, and love, not these concepts in the abstract, that makes the ritual work. To understand the religious experience of dwelling in the sukkah—to grasp how the symbolism is actually experienced—it is necessary to investigate the rabbinic conception of the sukkah. And to do so we must turn to the halakhic sources that define the rabbinic sukkah rather than aggadic traditions about its symbolism.

The defining characteristic of the sukkah in rabbinic sources is that it produce shade. The first Mishna in the tractate rules that a sukkah must produce more shade than sun, and much of the following legislation governs how the shade may and may not be produced. Skhakh, the thatched roofing that casts the shade, is the major requirement of the sukkah. Few laws relate to the walls of the sukkah, other than establishing a minimum number and maximum and minimum height. That four posts of a mere handbreadth in diameter may serve as "walls" and that the walls may be made from almost any substance suggest that they are of secondary import. The skhakh, on the other hand, is meticulously regulated. In elucidating these and other laws the talmudic commentators conclude that skhakh and shade are the essence of the sukkah. Thus the Tosafot comment:

Granted that we do not worry about the walls, whether one makes them permanent, nevertheless, with the skhakh—because the essence of the term 'sukka' is an account of its having skhakh—it is not fit...

Rashi observes, "It is called a sukkah on account of the shade, since it provides shelter (mesukkah) from the heat."

Several other laws demonstrate the importance of shade. A sukkah constructed within a house is not valid. In this case the sukkah does not provide shade. It does not screen the occupant from the sun or provide protection against the elements, for the whole structure is contained under the solid ceiling of the house.

Likewise one who sleeps under the bed in a sukkah, or eats beneath a sheet or some other barrier, has not fulfilled his obligation. In this case he does not directly experience the shade produced by the sukkah. The requirement is not simply that there be shade, but that the shade be experienced by the occupant. This law illustrates that symbolism alone is insufficient. The rabbis are concerned that a religious experience take place.

This mishna picks up on the original function of the sukkah as a protective shelter for guards or workers in the fields. Isaiah compares Israel to a vineyard and God to the owner or guard. The mishna extends the metaphor by enjoining that Israel build sukkot for its guard. Just as the guard dwells in the sukkah and watches over the field, so God will dwell in the sukkah and protect its occupant. There is some irony in this interpretation in that the sukkah typically shelters the guard, who in turn watches over the field, yet God obviously needs no shelter from the sukkah. Rather the sukkah becomes a symbolic space for God to dwell among his people. One can see that this tradition is related to the conception of the sukkah as a symbol of the clouds of glory, the manifestation of the presence and protection of God. Here the symbolism is reified: God—not his glory or cloud—actually enters the festival sukkah.
The Mishna rules that a sukka may be constructed under a tree. This law is extremely significant. In this case the resident experiences shade. The environment created within the sukka is identical to that of a sukkah that does not stand beneath a tree—shade produced by leaves, branches, or foliage. But this sukka is not valid because the resident does not experience the shade from the shkakh. Rabbinic law insists that the sukkah—the shkakh—produce shade and that the occupant experience the shade of the sukkah.

A telling exception to the laws of shkakh also emphasizes the centrality of shade. The Mishna rules that wooden beams of a certain size may not be used for shkakh, and that if a single beam of sufficient size is placed on the sukkah, the resident may not sleep under it. Wooden beams, however, meet the demands the rabbis established for shkakh: they derive from organic matter and they are not presently growing in the ground. The Talmud explains that the reason beams are disqualified is that they begin to resemble a normal ceiling. Like plaster, bricks or large boards, wooden beams create the inside of the abode, not a shaded place. Shade is a comparative concept; it is the lesser brightness or heat caused by an object intercepting rays of light.

To recognize shade involves an awareness of an area in which light is absent even as the sun is perceived in the environs. The rabbis disqualified beams to ensure that a sukkah produce shade that could be experienced.

Several laws concerning the structure of the sukkah are justified by considerations of shade. Mishna Sukkah 1:1 rules that a sukkah may not be more than twenty cubits high. R. Zera and R. Abahu in the name of R. Yohanan explain that when the roof reaches such a height, its shade does not extend to the ground, and hence one does not reside in the shade of the sukkah. In this case the shade comes from the walls, which are not considered the essence of the sukkah. Rabba, on the other hand, explains that if the roof is higher than twenty cubits, one does not "know" that he is inside a sukkah. At such a height the resident is unaware of the shkakh above him, although he may be well aware of the nearby walls. These amoraic explanations presuppose the necessity that the resident experience the shade produced by the shkakh.

The desire to create shade seems to be primarily responsible for the laws that define shkakh as foliage. Shkakh must come from materials that "had roots in the soil," from vegetation of various sorts. The Mishna’s examples of materials used for shkakh are all substances that provide shade: cut foliage, such as straw, wood or brushwood; vines, gourds, and ivy; sheaves of grain, stalks, and bundles of stubble. The laws make sense if we understand that shade is generally associated with trees and other vegetation, as in the hot summers of the Middle East.

One should not think that the concept of shkakh or the requirement to experience shade is an inherent aspect of the sukkah, as if these laws are

"natural" or "inevitable." The Bible only commands that one reside in a sukkah; it gives no instructions as to how it should be built. The Samaritans, for example, build sukkot within their houses. Their exegetes relied exclusively on the written Torah and arrived at that practice. The rabbis, on the other hand, with the oral law, defined the sukkah in terms of shkakh and shade. These are characteristic of the rabbinic conception of the sukkah, and create the religious experience the rabbis intended.

IV. The Shade of God

To dwell in the sukkah is to experience shade. The resulting religious experience derives from the meanings of shade in Jewish tradition. Shade represents protection, the divine presence, and love—the main characteristics of the clouds of glory!

In the most basic terms shade provides protection from the blazing sun. Recall that Jonah was extremely happy in the shade of his sukkah and so uncomfortable when the gourd withered that he wished for death. Shade therefore became a metaphor for general protection. Lot beseeches the Sodomites not to harm the strangers who have come under the "shade of my roof beam," that is, the protection of his domain. This metaphor is widely applied to the protection that a leader or king provides. Isaiah proclaims doom for those who dare: "To seek refuge with Pharaoh, To seek shelter under the shade (protection) of Egypt. The refuge with Pharaoh shall result in your shame; the shelter under Pharaoh’s shade in your chagrin." The same metaphor is regularly applied to the protection provided by God: "The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade (shadow) at your right hand. . . . The Lord will guard you from all harm, He will guard your life." The most profound biblical expression of this symbolism appears in Ps 91:

1. O you who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shade (zel) of Shaddai—
2. I say of the Lord, my refuge and stronghold, my God in whom I trust,
3. That he will save you from the fowler’s trap, from destructive plagues
4. He will cover (yasekh) you with His pinions; you will find refuge under his wings; His fidelity is an encircling shield.

To reside in the shade of God is to be within a divine "shelter," "refuge," "stronghold," and "shield." He who does so is protected from snares, diseases, and plagues described in the rest of the Psalm. The psalmist uses the metaphor of the sheltering wings of a bird, an image which evokes a sense of maternal love in addition to protection. The Bible often expresses
this metaphor more graphically as the “shade of God’s wings,” which also evokes a sense of love: “How precious is Your faithful care, O God! Mankind shelters in the shade of your wings.”

Rabbinic traditions display similar associations with shade. R. Abahu interprets Hos 14:8, “Those who sit in his shade shall be revived,” in terms of gentiles “who come and take refuge in the shade of the Holy One, Blessed be He.” Thus the image for conversion, for “drawing near” and seeking refuge with God, is that of entering under God’s shade. Potential converts find God’s presence manifested as shade. The following parable expresses a related idea:

Whoever learns the Torah, Prophets and Writings, Mishna and midrash, halakhah and aggadot and serves the sages—God Himself guards him. They made a parable. To what is it similar? To a king who was walking with his son in the desert. When they encountered the sun and the burning heat, the father stood up in the sun and made shade for his son, so that he should not be touched by the sun and burning heat. Thus it is written, The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade at your right hand (Ps 121:5).

The biblical verse, which describes God as shade (or shadow), is interpreted in terms of God guarding the individual. One merits that protection by studying Torah. The parable of the king and his son again goes beyond protection and introduces a sense of paternal love. Indeed, this parable should call to mind the parable related to the clouds of glory, cited above, which also compared the protection of clouds to that which the king provides for his son. Note that when the boy suffers from the heat of the sun, the king interposes his body to protect him. Thus the kings in the two parables, and the cloud and God in the applications, all provide shade. The qualities of the clouds of glory and those of the shade produced by the sukkah are strikingly similar.

A development of this imagery appears in the concept of the “shade of God” in rabbinic sources. This notion goes beyond the metaphoric use of shade and postulates a concrete manifestation of the divine protective presence. According to the midrash, “were it not for the shade of God that protects a human being, the demons (necigim) would kill him.” The Palestinian Talmud promises that “whoever engages in [the study] of Torah and acts of loving-kindness will sit in the shade of God.” The “shade of God” thus relates to a substantive realm that bestows God’s special care. That shade is the most perfect protection:

How great is the power of those who are righteous and those who do good deeds! They do not find shelter [merely] in the shade of dawn, nor the shade of the wings of the earth, nor the shade of the wings of the sun, nor the shade of the wings of animals, nor the shade of the wings of the Cherubim, nor the shade of the wings of the Serafin, but in the shade of Him Who Spoke and

The midrash turns on the metaphoric meaning of shade as protection, and postulates many levels of shelter corresponding to the different providers of shade. It promises, however, that those who perform good deeds are not simply protected in this metaphoric shade but in the very “shade of God,” the highest form of protection.

The pieces of the puzzle are now complete. Shade is an expression of the sheltering divine presence, while the clouds of glory represent the tangible form of the presence. A close parallel between the halakhah and the aggada emerges. Shade in the halakha parallels the clouds of glory in the aggada. The laws deeming a sukkah valid only if there is more shade than sunlight parallel the symbolism of the sukkah as a divine cloud. The laws that define the nature of shakh and require that the resident dwell under its shade reflect the aggadic conception that the clouds enveloped the Israelites on all sides. Shade therefore links the associations of the clouds of glory with the annual commandment to reside in the sukkah, Jews dwell directly beneath the shade of the sukkah just as their ancestors dwelled within the protective shelter and the shade of the clouds. At a deeper level, both the halakhic and aggadic traditions are reflections and expressions of the religious experience of dwelling in the sukkah. Residing in the shade of the sukkah is to experience divine protection, love, and intimacy. The laws that require shakh and that govern the nature of the sukkah create the environment where that experience takes place, while the clouds of glory which the sukkah symbolizes convey the same cluster of emotions.

V. Shade and the Sukkah in Jewish Thought

The symbolism we have been exploring occasionally found clear expression in medieval and modern Jewish thinkers. Meir ben Gedaliah of Lublin (Maharam) in his commentary to Tractate Sukkah explains:

This is what the verse [Lev 23:42] means: You shall live in sukkot in order that future generations will remember the surrounding clouds of glory that were in the desert. By what means will they remember the surrounding clouds of glory? When they see and perceive that they dwell in the shade of the shakh of the sukkah.

A clear and succinct expression of this symbolism! Surrounded by the shade of the sukkah, the occupant is moved to recall the clouds of glory that surrounded the Israelites in the desert, providing shade and protection. Note that the Maharam specifies that the symbolism is experienced by actually dwelling in the shade. Simply to look at a sukkah, even if one knows that it symbolizes the clouds of glory, is not sufficient. Rabbi Yehiel Mekhile
Epstein, in his code ‘Arukh HaShulhan’ develops this trend of thought by connecting the protective shade of the sukkah to the aftermath of Yom Kippur:

On Yom Kippur, when we repent, God forgives our sins. The proof of this is that immediately after Yom Kippur he commands us to make a sukkah, so that we dwell in the shade of the Holy Blessed One, as it says, “I love to sit in his shade (Song 2:3) – this is the commandment of the sukkah…” This teaches that despite all our sins, God still loves us and watches over us to protect us from all sorrow and harm. He causes us to dwell in his holy and pure shade, and he shelters (sukkah) us.

The proximity of Sukkot to Yom Kippur stimulates Rabbi Epstein to attribute a special assurance or reassurance to the meaning of the ritual dwelling. The Days of Awe and the process of repentance – recanting sin, resolving to improve, asking for forgiveness – creates a psychological distance between the people and God. The High Holiday liturgy indeed pictures God as an imposing judge and powerful king than a loving parent. And despite the promise of forgiveness, the penitent cannot help but worry that the judge has rejected his repentance and consigned him to suffer for his sins. The sukkah restores the harmonious and loving relationship between God and the people. By entering in the “holy and pure shade” of God, the Jew is welcomed back into the divine presence. She experiences the proximity and love of God, and internalizes the fact that sin has been forgiven and the relationship restored. The shelter provided by sukkah is the (almost) tangible sign that God again shelters – sukkah – the occupant.

Medieval Qabbala refracted this symbolism through a mystical lens so as to attach mystical importance to dwelling in the sukkah.

The Zohar invokes the notion of the shade of God (Shaddai), and explains that this divine shade provides a mystical protection of the soul, rather than physical protection from the elements. The shade of the ritual sukkah, unlike the shade of an ordinary sukkah, has this crucial power. The idea of the “shade of faith,” a prominent idea in the Zohar, is naturally associated with the sukkah, and seems to be a development of the “shade of God” found in rabbinic sources. The exodus generation dwelled under the clouds of glory in the “shade of faith,” and those who now dwell in sukkot dwell in that same shade and merit divine blessing: “He who dwells beneath the shade of faith gains freedom both for himself and for his descendants forever and is blessed from the blessings from on High.”

The well-known custom of ushpizin, of inviting “guests” in the sukkah, reflects yet another transformation of this symbolism into mystical terms: “When one sits in this dwelling, the shade of faith, the shekhina spreads her wings over him from above, and Abraham and five other righteous heroes come to dwell with him.”

The seven “guests” or “heroes” – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joseph, Aaron, and David (= the shekhina) – are seven sefirot. These were identified with the seven clouds of glory and the seven days of the festival. Each day of Sukkot the qabbalists invited these seven sefirot to abide with them in the sukkah. Just as the Israelites in the desert were accompanied by the seven sefirot (the clouds), so the qabbalists summoned the sefirot to surround them in their sukkah, which symbolized the clouds.

Above we cited a midrash which enjoined that one make a sukkah for God so that he can guard Israel. The qabbalists translated this idea into mystical terms, calling upon the seven sefirot to join the resident in his sukkah. God resides in the shade of the sukkah together with the Jew who fulfills the commandment.

It is fitting to close with a selection from the liturgy. The prayer hashkiveinu, the second blessing following the shema in the evening service, invokes the idea of a “sukkah of peace”:


The prayer asks God for protection at night and especially during sleep, when evil forces are most prone to act. At this vulnerable time God should spread a protective sukkah over the individual and shield him from all harmful forces. Safe in the shade of this “sukkah of peace,” also called the shade of God’s wings, he will not be harmed. God seems to inhabit the
"sukkah of peace" and watch over his people, just as the watchman inhabits the sukkah found in fields and watches over the crops. It is significant that the symbolism and experience of the ritual sukkah has been appropriated by the liturgy to serve as a general metaphor for divine protection. Each night one prays to lie down in a "sukkah of peace," that the divine protection not be limited to the festival of Sukkot when actually sleeping in a sukkah. This use of the symbolism testifies to the power of the sukkah ritual. The shade of the sukkah provided such a consummatory sense of God's protection, love, and presence that one hopes to have that experience each night of one's life.

NOTES


2. Sifra Emor 17:11 (10f.a-b). This tradition appears several times in rabbinic literature, and some versions reverse the attribution such that R. Akiba advocates real sukkah and R. Eliezer the clouds of glory. Reversed attributions appear in the Sifra 11b and Meekhitha RSBY, 33. Parallels to the Sifra appear in Meekhitha Pisha 34 (48), Meekhitha Beshaloth, peritta (68), and Meekhitha RSBY, 47. The Sifra version is more reliable for several reasons. First, R. Eliezer often uses the term manakah ("real") in his interpretations. See Sifre Deut 721 (246), Meekhitha Nezikin 26 (277) and bQ. R. Eliezer Ben Hurcanus--A Scholar Outcast (Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1984), 68-82 on R. Eliezer's tendency toward literal interpretation. Second, Targum Onkelos and the other Aramaic targums translate sukka as the clouds of glory. Targum Onkelos is generally consistent with Akbani hermeneutics, which suggests that this was R. Akiba's interpretation. Most medieval writers explicitly follow the Babylonian Talmud and attribute the "clouds of glory interpretation to R. Eliezer.


4. In more technical language: For R. Eliezer the annual ritual re-enacts the exodus from Egypt, just as the biblical Israelites resided in rudimentary shelters as they fled from Egypt, so subsequent generations re-enact that event and occupy a similar shelter. For R. Akiba the annual ritual does not re-enact, but rather commemorates, the exodus Sukkah, the clouds of glory.


5. Ex. 16:15; 33:9, 16; 16:27, 24:5; Deut 1:27, 5:27.


7. See Ber. 67b, comment to Tosef. Orah Hayyim, 625.

8. ib. 4:5-6.


12. In other words, R. Akiba's interpretive method was pehahat, not drashah. Note that Rashbi, in his commentary to the Torah, explains the term sukkah here as the clouds of glory, following R. Akiba. And Rashbi's intention was to explain the "plain sense of the text" (pehahat shel mapa), see Rashbi's comment to Gen 3:8. See too Ramban's explanation of Rashbi in his commentary to Lev 23:43. (This is not to say that this interpretation actually is the pehahat, but that medieval commentators thought it was the pehahat.)

13. On the "glory," see n. 22.

14. Sot 2:2 (Vienna manuscript). Cf. Sifre Num. 833 (79); Sot 10:33 (266); Meekhitha RSBY, 47 to Exod 13:20; Meekhitha Beshaloth, peticha (R1, the clouds are termed "clouds of glory" in line 17); B.T. 19:22.

15. Sot 10:33 (266); Tanhumah, Beshaloth 31 (110a).

16. Meekhitha Beshaloh 84 (102); Meekhitha RSBY, 50-61. This idea may derive, in part, from Ps 105:39: "He spread a cloud for a shield." (malkah).

17. Exod 16:1-10 and Num 14:16 as interpreted in Meekhitha Pisha 52 (163) and Meekhitha RSBY, 109 to Exod 16:10. And see T.B. 15:21; Yalkut Shimoni 743; TanH 4:63; bSot 35a and L. Ginsberg, Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-38), 696, n. 538.


22. Meekhitha Beshaloth 95 (236). Cf. ib. 1:10. DR 7:11 relates that the garments of the Israelites never wore out in the desert (Deut 8:4) because the cloud rubbed and whitened them.

23. The Bible does not use the term "clouds of glory," although the glory sometimes appears as a cloud; the priests were not able to stand and perform the service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the House of the Lord (1 Kgs 8:11). See: Exod 24:15-16; 34:34; 1 Kgs 8:12-13 and 2 Chr 5:13-6:2. Rabbinic literature conflated these images into the "clouds of glory."
31. SKR 2.6: Yalqut Shimoni, Shiri Hachittin §986 relates the verse to the clouds of glory: "his left hand is under my head (Song 2:6)—that means the clouds that surrounded Israel from above and below." Thus one source relates the verse to the sukkah, and a variant tradition to the clouds of glory.

32. The return of the clouds of glory in the world to come is a widespread motif. See shekita Yohe 14 (48); Mekhilta Beelah, pesiha (80). Cf. Mekhilta RSBY, 77 to Exod 12:20; Rb 10 (487). Clouds also carry eschatological overtones in the Bible through their connection to the Day of Judgment: Ezek 30:3, 38:9, Joel 2:2; Zeph 1:15, Isa 45:8.

33. S 2/4:
34. S 1:12–13; msuk 1:9.
35. S 1:12–13; msuk 4 b; baraita, msuk 1:1, 51c. msuk 1:5 and tsuk 1:2 explicitly state that the law of shekach do not pertain to the walls. Only R. Yoseh rules that the walls must wade more shade than sun, bsuk 7b.
36. Msuk chapters 1 and 2.
37. Tosafot, bsuk 2a, s.v. ef.
38. Rashi, b. s.v. amar. That shade is the essence of the sukkah is clear from its amicah translation, metatselita, the regular term in the targums, which comes from the root L. shade.
40. Msuk 1:3, 2:1; bsuk 10b, 21b.
41. Msuk 1:2, Sifra 'Eomer 17:4 (102d).
42. Msuk 1:6–7. Cf. the baraita, S 1:7, bsuk 14a-b and bsuk 14b which debate the ximal size of beams. Msuk 1:4. Several formulations of this principle appear in the manuscripts. This explanation follows Rav, bsuk 14a and yshek 1:7, 52b.
43. For the same reason the shekach should not be so thick that no light whatsoever can be perceived through it. See Levsh Halfat, §513.
44. Bsuk 2a (it. Zrod); yshek 1:1, 51d (it. Yohanum).
45. Tsuk 1:2; bsuk 7b.
47. Nehemiah 8:15 provides a partial description of the building of a sukkah. The people to the mountainide and gather "leafy branches of olive trees, pine trees, myrtles, palms and myrtle trees to make booths." However, it is not stated exactly how those branches were w, whether for sukkah or for the walls or both. Moreover, the rabbis did not treat this verse authoritative or they would have required that all five substances be used. See, however, R. Huda's opinion, Sifra 'Eomer 17:10 (103a); yshek 3:4, 53d and Tosafot, bsuk 37a, s.v. hareshiit.
48. See Sylvia Poylos, "The Samaritan Calendar and the Roots of Samaritan Chrono-
50. Jon 4:5–9. Indeed, the ritual sukkah probably derives from the original function of aot as shelters in which guards of fields found respite from the hot sun.
52. Isa 30:2–3.
54. Ps 17:3, 36:8, 57:2, 63:8; Isa 31:5, 49:2.
55. Ps 36:8. See too Ps 17:8, 57:2.
56. VR 1:2 (6), Bara 8.1. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan translates Deut 23:16, the prohibition insisting a runaway slave, as a prohibition against delivering a gentile who desires "to sit under the shade of My shekhanah back to idolatry. According to yshek 3:2, 68a, yshek 7:4, 21d, never perform good deeds merits to sit in the shade of God. See too bsuk 32a.
58. Of course clouds provide shade, and the clouds of glory protected the Israelites from sun.

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62. yshek 3:7, 74b. The proof text is Ps 36:8: "How precious is Your faithful care, O God! Mankind shelters in the shadow of your wings." Cf. Pk 15:1 (264); ARS 4:4 Yt 4:1, 68a (it. Sot 7:4, 21b).
63. Rish Rabbah 5:4. The midrash comments on Ruth 2:12: "May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge."
64. Shade unambiguously symbolizes the presence of God in various versions, Chapter 337. The midrash explains that Exod 37:1 specifies that Bezalel himself fashioned the ark (rather than delegating the task to another) because "there [in the ark] resides the shade of God, who contracts his presence (shekhanah) there. On this account he was named bezalel (bez el = in the shade of God), since he made the shade of God between the keruvim, as it says, Then I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two keruvim that are on top of the Ark of the Pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people (Exod 25:22)." The most concentrated locus of God's presence, that which dwells in the ark, manifests itself as shade. In another version of the midrash, cited in M. Kasher, Torah shelma (Jerusalem: Hatchiyah, 1954), 21:51, Bezalel makes the shade of God, "in order that all Israel can dwell in his shade." Cf. bBar 55a, Tan Vayageh 3 (332–33).
65. The parallel between the laws of the sukkah and the clouds of glory periodically appears in medieval Jewish thought. For example, Mordecai Jaffe, Levsh Halfat, §626:1 explains that the sukkah must be built directly beneath the sky because the clouds were directly beneath the sky. And see Barqit Hadashah to Tzur, 'Orah Hayyim, §625, who explains why we are not commanded to build seven sukkah corresponding to the seven clouds. He was troubled by the lack of perfect parallel between the halakha and the aggada, between the ritual object and its symbolism.
66. Comment to bsuk 2a, s.v. aman.
67. See 'Orah Hayyim, Rokhet 105b, §505. The midrash he quotes is found in S 2/3.
68. Sukkot occurs but four days after the conclusion of Yom Kippur. It is also customary to begin building the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur. See Isserles to Shulhan 'Arukh, 'Orah Hayyim, §624.
69. See too Bahya Ben Asher (d. 1310), Kad HaKenah, in Kittei Rabenu Bahye ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosaad Harav Kook, 1909), p. 279: "Thus, whoever fulfills the commandment of the sukkah and enters it and turns his eyes toward the shekach made for shade, he realizes that God is the shade of the people of Israel, and that He protects them as shade protects against the sun, as it is written, The Lord is your guardian, the Lord is your shade at your right hand (Ps 121:5) and it is further written, I loved to sit in his shade (Song 2:3)."
71. Zohar, 325b.
74. Zohar 2:135a. See Tishby, The Wisdom of the Zohar, 1249. In Zohar 3:256a the shekhina is identified directly with the sukkah: "The shekhina: that is the sukkah."
77. The current liturgical custom concludes with this form of the blessing on Sabbaths and Festivals. On weekdays the ending is "Praised are you, Lord, eternal guardian of your people Israel."
78. Cf. Barqit Hadashah to Tzur, 'Orah Hayyim, §625.