

JUDAISM 45 (Fall, 1996)

## *The Symbolism of the Sukka (Part 2)*

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IN "THE SYMBOLISM OF THE SUKKA," PUBLISHED IN THE Fall 1994 issue of JUDAISM, I discussed one dimension of this theme: the sukka as a symbol of the "clouds of glory."<sup>1</sup> According to the dominant rabbinic tradition seven "sukkot of clouds of glory" surrounded the Israelites throughout their desert travels following the exodus. These sukka-clouds shielded them from the blazing sun above, protected them from the hot sand below, and guarded them from dangers such as thorns, scorpions, and even the weapons of their enemies. Six clouds covered the six sides of the Israelite camp while the seventh, the pillar of cloud of God's presence (*shekhina*), stood in the middle. The festival sukkot in which we dwell each year symbolize these clouds and hence the protection, love, and presence of God. This sense of the divine is not only communicated through the symbolism of the sukka but is experienced in the shade that the roofing of the sukka casts. Shade offers protection from the sun and became the dominant metaphor for protection and peace in Jewish tradition. In the shade of the sukka one experiences the "shade of God" and the same sense of divine protection, love and nurture which the Israelites felt while sojourning within the clouds of glory.

There is, however, a second strand in rabbinic tradition which believes that the Israelites dwelled in "real sukot" throughout their desert travels, not in "sukkot of clouds of glory."<sup>2</sup> The ordinary, flimsy sukot the Israelites inhabited were part of the hardships of the exodus and their difficult life in the desert. For forty years they "dwelled in a wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates" (Numbers 20:5). The desert experience was a test of Israel's faith, a place of "hardship" and adversity (Deuteronomy 8:15-16).<sup>3</sup> In this view the ritual sukka does not directly symbolize the clouds of glory or the consummate divine protection it bestowed.

This second dimension of the symbolism of the sukka conceives it as a symbol of the transience, temporariness, and insecurity of this world. To be sure this symbolism is in some tension with the symbolism of the clouds of glory. But that is part of the power and complexity of religious symbols, which are multivalent and polysemous, operating on several levels and expressing different meanings simultaneously. Indeed, the complex, sometimes contradictory, nature of religious symbols devolves from the complex, sometimes contradictory, nature of the human condition and experience of the divine.

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## 2. Biblical and Talmudic Images

In the heat of summer a sukka provides agricultural laborers with a shady, protective shelter from the sun. Guards and watchmen sit in the shady sukka during the long hours of duty throughout the summer months. In villages, too, a sukka built on the roof of a house or in the adjacent courtyard offers a cool place to dine or sleep during periods of extremely hot weather. But throughout winter the picture changes. Workers abandon the fields until the next harvest season. Winter rains and chills force watchmen to seek warmer, sturdier shelters during their infrequent visits to check on the orchards. For weeks and months sukkot stand neglected by their builders, subject to wind, rain, storm, and frost. Gradually the roof falls in, the arboreal covering withers and wastes away, the walls or corner-posts weaken. Until the next growing season the sukka stands alone in the field—isolated, dilapidated, crumbling.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible accordingly employs the sukka as a symbol of fragility and vulnerability. Amos' famous prophecy compares the breached Davidic kingdom to a fallen sukka: "In that day I will set up again the fallen booth of David: I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew. I will build it firm as in the days of old" (Amos 9:11). The prophet gives us an idea of how a sukka typically appeared in the winter months. The roof collapsed, gaps formed in the walls, and the structure was ruined. This picture served as a vivid metaphor for the decayed state of David's kingdom, its cities ruined, and its line of defenses breached. Just as the watchmen would rebuild the sukka for the following season and mend the damage, so God promises to restore David's territory. Until then the fallen sukka stands alone in the field embodying instability and insecurity.

Similar imagery appears in Isaiah's opening prophecy: "Your Land is a waste, your cities burnt down; before your eyes the yield of your soil is consumed by strangers—a wasteland overthrown by strangers! Fair Zion is left like a sukka in a vineyard, like a hut in a cucumber field, like a city beleaguered" (Isaiah 1:7-8). The prophet compares the devastated country, with its wasted land and burned cities, to a sukka in a vineyard. Like a land pillaged by enemies, unprotected, exposed to strangers, its inhabitants exiled, so the sukka in a vineyard stands alone, unprotected, and vulnerable. We should imagine that the vines have been harvested and the denuded vineyard abandoned until the following season. Similarly Job says of the evil man: "The house he built is like a bird's nest, like the sukka a watchman makes. He lies down a rich man, with his wealth intact; when he opens his eyes it is gone" (Job 27:18). The sukka again symbolizes impermanence and fragility. It is frail as a bird's nest and liable to collapse overnight.

This cultural symbolism was complemented and reinforced by the halakhic conception of the sukka that developed in the Talmudic period. The Babylonian Talmud defined the sukka as a "temporary dwelling" (*dirat 'arat*) as opposed to the house, a "permanent dwelling." The Talmudic sages

understood the Bible's command that one leave one's house and dwell in a sukka for seven days to imply that the sukka itself should be constructed for brief stays and not extended habitation.<sup>5</sup> A sukka was a type of dwelling built for a "temporary," seven-day stay, not for "permanent," ongoing dwelling. Based on this notion the Talmud places various structural limits on the sukka. For example, a sukka may not stand higher than twenty cubits because only permanent dwellings are built to such heights.<sup>6</sup> The structural limitations based on this notion are actually few and far between.<sup>7</sup> Much more important are the definition of a sukka as a "temporary dwelling" and the connotations of that phrase. The essence of the sukka became its temporariness. Jewish thought conceived of the sukka as something inherently impermanent and associated it with things ephemeral, transient, and fleeting.

## 3. Medieval Literature

Exegetes, homilists, and philosophers based important religious and ethical lessons on the concept of the sukka as a temporary dwelling and on the commandment to relocate from the house to the sukka, from a "permanent dwelling" to a "temporary dwelling." Their comments typically devolve from Lev 23:42-43: "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." Meir Loeb Malbim explains these verses as follows: "Future generations should not be overconfident at the time of the harvest, when their houses are full of good, and think that this world is their purpose and the foundation of their life." Rather, "they should appreciate that *I made the Israelite people dwell in sukkot*, and should realize that this world is a guesthouse and a temporary dwelling. Thus they leave their permanent dwelling for a temporary dwelling, which is what the sukka symbolizes, as the sages have written."<sup>8</sup>

Malbim seeks to explain why the Festival of Sukkot takes place specifically at the time of the autumnal harvest. After all, the Israelites sojourned in sukkot throughout the forty years they wandered in the desert. Why should future generations commemorate that ongoing situation specifically at harvest time in the month of Tishrei? Why not dwell in sukkot for seven days during Adar or Tevet or some other month? Indeed, the Israelites first began to dwell in sukkot during the month of Nisan when they left Egypt and immediately required shelter. Perhaps future generations should celebrate the festival of Sukkot in Nisan following Pesach rather than in Tishrei following Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?

Malbim explains that there is in fact good reason why one should leave home and dwell in sukkot, particularly at harvest time. After the harvest season stocks of food have been replenished and houses swell with crops and bounty. Humans naturally look upon the fruits of their land, their good fortune, and

material prosperity as hard-won triumphs. We take deep satisfaction in what we have produced. We believe that we have realized our goals and accomplished our purpose in life. But this, for Malbim, is a dangerous delusion. This world is but a "guesthouse" and "temporary dwelling" over against the World to Come. To remind us that our focus should not be this-worldly goods but rather other-worldly salvation, God commands us to leave our homes specifically at the time of greatest prosperity, when houses fill with the bounty of the harvest. Just at that time God commands his people to leave behind the riches of the home for poorer domiciles so as to retain the proper perspective.

For Malbim, this important truth is communicated more by entering the sukkah and understanding why God commanded his people to dwell there than by the dislocation experienced by departing from one's house. Both the sukkah and this world are temporary dwellings. The temporariness of the sukkah symbolizes the ephemerality of the present world. While residing in the temporary sukkah the resident comes to appreciate her true purpose in life—not to dedicate herself to producing abundant crops but to the religious worship that God demands.

Ephraim Solomon ben Aaron of Luntshits, author of the commentary *Keli Yaqar*, offers a similar explanation of the commandment: "*All citizens in Israel shall dwell in sukkot* [Leviticus 23:42]. It says specifically "citizen" which refers to sojourners. That is, at the time of the gathering of the crops from the field, each individual desires to return from the fields to his house to take up his permanent residence there. The Torah worried lest because of this permanent dwelling he become over-confident, thinking his strength mighty, and *grow fat and kick* [Deuteronomy 32:15]. Therefore it specifically says *All citizens*. God commanded those who aim to be sojourners in this world, and not residents, to leave their permanent dwellings for temporary dwellings, so that each one recognize how little his stature, for he is only a sojourner and alien in this world, not a resident who establishes his dwelling place. This way he will not trust in the shade of his house, but *will dwell in the shade of Shaddai* [Psalms 91:2], as the Israelites did when they went forth from Egypt."<sup>10</sup>

Like Malbim, the *Keli Yaqar* points out that it is precisely at the time of the harvest that overconfidence and hubris are the greatest dangers. Surveying what are ostensibly the fruits of one's own hard work, one tends to lose sight of the fact that God ultimately provides all the goods of the world. The permanence of the house with its full stocks seduces the owner into thinking his condition secure. To forestall such haughty thoughts the Torah commands that one leave the house and dwell in the sukkah, a temporary dwelling. The frail sukkah reminds the resident of life's fragility; take away crops and house and there is little to boast about. The sukkah exposes our true state: we are "sojourners" in the world, who come in naked and leave naked. This explains why the Torah uses the rare term "citizen" (*ezrah*), which the author interprets to refer to temporary settlers rather than permanent residents. The commandment is directed to those who realize that they are but passing through the

temporary world. Hence the sukkah symbolizes the essence of human existence in this world—temporary, ephemeral, and fleeting. The resident of the sukkah learns to place his trust not in the work of his hands but in the "shade of God."<sup>10</sup>

This lesson—that one learn to trust in the "shade of God"—is championed by Isaac Arama in his biblical commentary *Agedat Yisrael*. "... [God] fixed the Festival of Sukkot on the fifteenth of the seventh month, which is the beginning of the rain and the cold, and commanded us to leave our permanent dwelling where we live throughout the year to stay in the sukkah, which is a temporary dwelling, beneath the heavens. This is the opposite of what the rest of the world does at this time. For they come in from the fields and courtyards to houses covered with wooden roofs. That is to say, desist from your concerns about the weather according to which you plan to take shelter in the solid houses that you build, and come take shelter in my shade. . . . For truly *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, and abides in the shade of the Almighty* (Psalms 91:1) lives a secure life."<sup>11</sup>

Isaac Arama observes the anomalousness of relocating from a secure house to a fragile dwelling. Normal human behavior, as exemplified in the "rest of the world," is to leave the fields and orchards following the harvest season and move back into the house. After the crops have been gathered there is no reason to lodge outside of the house, no reason to sleep under a flimsy shelter when a wooden roof beckons. Indeed, anyone aware of the changing seasons knows that the weather is turning colder now. The Bible, on the other hand, commands Jews to invert natural human conduct and to leave the "permanent dwelling" of the house for the temporary dwelling of the sukkah specifically when these climatic changes take place. They should ignore the climatic reality and take shelter not in the protection of the house but the protection of "God's shade."<sup>12</sup>

There is a keen paradox in Arama's commentary, for in his view the sukkah actually provides superior protection to the house. There one experiences true divine security in the shade of the sukkah—the shade of God: "Permanent" and "temporary" are deceiving in that the temporary sukkah provides the permanent protection of God's presence. By dwelling in the sukkah one professes belief in the transience and vulnerability of the seemingly permanent world.

Arama emphasizes this idea by insisting that one leave behind all wealth, comforts and material possessions and move into a "small sukkah." There the bare necessities—a bed, table, chair, light, and food for the day should suffice. In this way the preoccupation with amassing wealth ceases, "for he should suffice only with what is necessary as long as he is in this vestibule which is a temporary dwelling." Here Arama cites Mishna Avot 4:15, "This world is similar to a vestibule before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the banquet-room." The sukkah is thus identified with temporary existence in this world, the vestibule, before one enters the World to Come.

A stunning new application of this symbolism appears in Moshe Alshikh's *Torat Moshe*, one of the leading Kabbalistic commentaries on the Torah: "The soul is spiritual, its glory transcends the heavens, and it has there a permanent dwelling. When it comes to this world it is as though they say to it: go from your permanent dwelling and stay in this temporary dwelling, and prepare for yourself every type of food you eat in the higher world, because surely you will return to your permanent dwelling. You will bring there the bread of the temporary world from Torah and from the six hundred and thirteen commandments, for this is the bread for your soul."<sup>13</sup>

Alshikh interprets the move from the house to the sukkah as an allegory of the soul's migration from its permanent dwelling in the spiritual realms to the material existence in the body. The temporary stay in the sukkah parallels the soul's brief stay on earth. Just as entering the sukkah fulfills a commandment, so the soul's purpose in its "temporary world" of the body is to fulfill the commandments. Here the soul nourishes itself on the spiritual "bread" of the commandments before returning with this mystical "food" to the higher worlds. The sukkah thus symbolizes the fleeting existence of the soul in the material world.

Alshikh therefore considers the sukkah a symbol of the impermanence of this world, as we saw in the Malbim. He insists that we should not care whether we have riches in the world or poverty, whether we sleep on comfortable beds and pillows or on rocks and boards, whether we eat delicacies or bread and water, whether we dress in fine linen or sackcloth. The sukkah reminds each person to think of herself as a wayfarer in this world and to be satisfied with whatever she happens to be given. It is all a temporary condition, for soon she returns to her house in heaven, with eternal comforts and riches. "What does wealth matter to me as long as I carry the burden of the Torah and the commandments in this passing and fleeting world. I make an effort in the temporary dwelling so as to become rich in the permanent dwelling." The sukkah teaches that "there is no permanent dwelling except the higher world, and on the day of one's birth she goes from the permanent dwelling to the temporary dwelling." Alshikh also observes that dwelling in sukkot can be seen as a reminder of the fact that the *shekhina* is in exile. Just as the *shekhina* has been separated from its proper place among the other *sefirot*, so we leave our proper residences on Sukkot for a temporary exile in the sukkah.<sup>14</sup>

Jonathan Eybescheutz in his volume of homilies *Ye'arot Devash* also considers the sukkah a type of exile: "The Torah instructed that on Sukkot, which occurs at the end of the period of repentance, we take upon ourselves an exile, and consider the whole world as nothingness and as a shadow. Therefore they [the sages] said, "Leave your permanent dwelling and dwell in a temporary dwelling" [bSuk 2a]. This teaches that we are sojourners on the earth, without permanence, and our lives are like a shadow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight—[Jonah 4:10] the wind blows and he is no more. And what profit is there for a man in all the gains he make beneath the sun" [Qohelet 1:3].<sup>15</sup>

Eybescheutz understands the move to the sukkah as a type of voluntary exile that functions to atone for sins.<sup>16</sup> The season of repentance extends after the Days of Awe until the end of Sukkot, so such acts of atonement are appropriate.<sup>17</sup> In addition, while residing in the sukkah one realizes the insignificance of this world, that it is but "nothingness" and "a shadow," and that human life is equally insubstantial. The allusion to Jonah 4:10 adds to this idea in a masterful fashion. Recall that Jonah first enjoyed the shade of the plant that grew upon his sukkah and then felt so miserable when God destroyed it that he wished to die. God taught him a lesson by suggesting that if Jonah could be so bitter about the destruction of the plant "which appeared overnight and perished overnight" then he should understand God's concern for the citizens of Nineveh. The short-lived plant provided the shade of Jonah's sukkah, and it is that shade or shadow—the same Hebrew word, *tsel*, is used for both—that Eybescheutz compares to the brevity of human life. Just as the shade of Jonah's sukkah was ephemeral, so human existence in this world is ephemeral. Just as Jonah learned an important lesson in his sukkah, so the annual sojourn in a sukkah teaches this important truth. Indeed, Eybescheutz proceeds to recommend that one metaphorically inhabit a sukkah throughout the year: "The God-fearing man, the one who trembles at the words of the King, he should not only have this sukkah on the Festival of Sukkot alone, but throughout the year he should consider everything a temporary dwelling, and he should reside in the shade of the sukkah, and leave his permanent dwelling. . . . For the righteous, the whole world should always be a temporary dwelling."<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. The Experience of Shade

The sukkah, for these and other authors, symbolizes the ephemerality and brevity of human life in this world. But how is that symbolism experienced? To some extent of course the structure and appearance of the sukkah express these notions. The knowledge that the sukkah is defined legally as a "temporary dwelling" may also contribute, although intellectual knowledge is not always translated into experience. Yet to understand fully how the "temporariness" of the sukkah is experienced it is necessary to analyze the rabbinic concept of the sukkah.

The essence of the sukkah, for the rabbis, inheres in the special thatched roofing, the *skhakh*, and the shade it produces.<sup>18</sup> The terms "sukkah" and *skhakh* derived from the same root that means "to weave together," "to cover with branches," or "to form shade." Elsewhere the Mishna uses the term *skhakhot* to refer to overhanging branches of trees.<sup>19</sup> Rashi explains that "it is called a *sukkah* on account of the shade, since it provides shelter (*mesukhakh*) from the heat."<sup>20</sup>

The bulk of the halakhic requirements of the sukkah pertains to the *skhakh* and the shade. The first Mishna of the tractate rules that a sukkah that casts less shade than sun is invalid. A shelter, hut, or shed with rudimentary walls but a

plastered or wooden roof remains a shelter, hut, or shed—it is not a sukka. One may not build a sukka within a house, since inside the house one cannot sense the shade of the sukka.<sup>21</sup> For the same reason one may not sleep under a bed in the sukka or eat beneath a barrier that impedes the shade.<sup>22</sup> In these cases the sukka produces shade but that shade is not experienced by the occupant. Nor may a sukka be built under a leafy tree.<sup>23</sup> Here the occupant of the sukka experiences the same shady covering he would experience within the sukka. But the shade is not produced by the *shkakt* of the sukka alone, so the sukka is not valid. Rabbinic law requires that the occupant directly experience the shade of the sukka. In sum, the essence of the rabbinic sukka is the shade it casts, and the essence of the ritual is to experience the shade.

What then does one experience in the shade of the sukka? In Jewish tradition shade primarily represents the protection of God, as seen in the comments of Isaac Arama and, as I mentioned at the outset, in relation to the symbolism of the clouds of glory.<sup>24</sup> Yet shade is a profoundly ambivalent concept in Judaism and in other religions. If shade bestows protection from the sun, offering refuge and tranquility, it also involves the absence of light, the body, and the corporeal world. Shade is not material, not quite of this world. It cannot be grasped or held. Shade suddenly appears when a cloud moves in front of the sun, and disappears just as suddenly when the cloud passes by, lasting but an instant. This second aspect of shade is expressed in Eybeschutz's homily and finds prominent expression in Jewish thought. Shade and shadows are associated with the fleeting, the ephemeral, the non-substantive.

A psalm recited at funerals compares the brief life of a human being to a fleeting shadow: "Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow" (Psalms 134:4). The poor and downtrodden narrator of Psalm 102 laments, "My days are like a lengthening shadow; I wither like grass" (102:12). Reflecting on the brevity of human life Job observes, "Man born of woman is short-lived and sated with trouble. He blossoms like a flower and withers; he vanishes like shade and does not endure" (Job 14:2). Note that shade is coordinated with what is short-lived and impermanent. Likewise Qohelet warns that "It will not be well with the scoundrel and he will not prolong his days, which are as a shadow" (Qohelet 8:13). In the prayer he recites on his death bed, King David acknowledges, "For we are sojourners with You, mere transients like our fathers; our days on earth are like a shadow, with nothing in prospect" (1 Chronicles 29:16). These images are particularly striking in this context. As he is about to pass from this world King David realizes that life amounts to a brief and transient sojourn and compares it to a passing shadow.<sup>25</sup>

The rabbis express the same idea in an extreme way in their commentary to Qohelet 1:2, "'Utter futility!' said Qohelet, 'Utter futility! All is futile!'" "Solomon said something and did not explain it, and David his father explained it. . . . Solomon said, *Who can possibly know what is best for a man to do in life—the few days of his fleeting life, which he spends as a shadow* [Qohelet 6:12]. What kind of a shadow? If it is like the shadow of a wall—it has substance. If it

is like the shadow of a tree—it has substance. David came and explained, *His days are like a passing shadow* [Psalms 134:4]. Rabbi Huna said in the name of R. Aha: 'Like a bird that passes by and its shadow passes with it.' Samuel said, 'Like the shadow of bees which has no substance at all.'<sup>26</sup>

The passage asks what "Solomon," the putative author of Qohelet, had in mind when he compared human life to a shadow. If he meant the shadow of a wall or tree, then the simile is not so harsh. At least the shadow of walls and trees is substantive. Such shadows provide the benefit of shelter from the sun and heat as long as they last. And each day, when the sun shines again, the shadows return. The passage rejects this possibility and explains the simile in terms of a similar simile found in the Psalms, attributed by the rabbis to David. Human life is not like the shadow of a wall but like a *passing* shadow, the kind of shadow that has no substance or use. The additional comments of the rabbis amplify this point. Rabbi Huna explains the "passing shadow" as that provided by a bird flying overhead which disappears in a flash. Samuel suggests that Solomon meant that human life is like the shadow of a bee, so insignificant that it lacks all substance. For the rabbis shade or shadows represented the briefest and most ephemeral existence.

A similar image appears in the prayer *Unetane togef*, recited in the *musaf* *'amida* in the high holiday liturgy. The prayer relates how God determines the fate of human beings on the Day of Judgment: who will live and who will die, who will prosper and who will suffer, who will be at rest and who will wander. It then proceeds to a gloomy description of the human condition: "A human being's origin is dust and his end is dust. He spends his life in the earning of his bread. He is like a fragile vessel, like the grass that withers, the flower that fades, *the shadow that passes*, the cloud that vanishes, the wind that blows, the dust that scatters, the dream that flies away." The relentless series of images graphically illustrates the brevity and frailty of human life. Like the "shadow that passes," life in this world lasts for the briefest of moments.<sup>27</sup>

We can now appreciate how impermanence and transience are experienced within the sukka. The occupant constantly experiences the shade of the *shkakt*, which Jewish tradition associates with the brevity and insignificance of human life. Biblical commentators and moralists who understand the sukka as a symbol of the ephemerality of this world and human existence draw on this experience.

## 5. The Reading of Qohelet

This awareness of the sukka as a symbol of the ephemerality of life in this world helps to understand why the Book of Qohelet is read on Sukkot. This tradition has long puzzled commentators. Sukkot is considered the most joyous festival, "the time of our rejoicing," when "you shall have nothing but joy" (Deuteronomy 16:15). The festival follows the autumnal harvest at the close of the agricultural year when the cessation of labor invites unbridled celebration. Appropriately the festival of *Simhat Torah*, "Joy of the Torah," takes place on Sukkot. The

Book of Qohelet, on the other hand, is a somber, harsh, even depressing meditation on the human condition. It bemoans the meaninglessness of life, human finitude and mortality, the inexorability of time, the shortness of memory. Qohelet appears to be the antithesis of the joyousness of Sukkot.

The answer to this incongruity may lie in recognizing this second dimension of the festival and of the symbolism of the sukka. If the sukka represents the impermanence of this world and reminds the occupants of the insignificance of material possessions, then its symbolism and the message of Qohelet are analogous. Reading Qohelet in the synagogue publicly and concretely expresses each individual's private experience in the "temporary dwelling."

Many of Qohelet's sober thoughts call to mind the ideas the commentators express in terms of the symbolism of the sukka. Qohelet tells us, "I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and I planted vineyards" (Qohelet 2:7). He amassed cattle, silver, gold and other riches and became more wealthy than all previous rulers: "Then my thoughts turned to all the fortune that my hands had built up, to the wealth that I acquired and won—and oh, it was all futile and pursuit of wind. There was no real value under the sun" (2:11). Qohelet realized that riches simply bring momentary pleasures, not lasting value. And he knew that when he died, his riches would bring him no benefit at all. The wise man, Qohelet tells us, understands that "there is a time for every experience, including the doom, for a man's calamity (death) overwhelms him" (8:5-6). He realizes that he is mortal and has limited time on earth, that all he has are "fleeting days" (9:9). Qohelet did not share the rabbinic confidence in eternal life in the World to Come, where the rabbis expected their "permanent dwelling place" to be. But he forcefully expressed the rabbis' sense of the impermanence of this world and all human affairs. Thus the liturgical reading of Qohelet and the ritual dwelling in the sukka combine to instill an important religious value.<sup>38</sup>

This does not mean that Sukkot is not a time of celebration and rejoicing. Sukkot remains *zeman simhatenu*, "the time of our rejoicing," at the conclusion of the harvest. Rather the sukka as symbol of the impermanence of this world channels the joy of the festival in a specific direction. We rejoice not on account of material prosperity in this world, though that is surely reason to give thanks, but at the joy of fulfilling the commandment, of residing in the "shade of God," and of the future inheritance of the World to Come. The joys of this world, like this world itself, are not unreal, but they are certainly fleeting and ephemeral.

The two images clustering around the sukka—the sukka as symbol of the clouds of glory and the sukka as symbol of the impermanence of this world—express two fundamental rabbinic ideas. Human beings are under God's protection, care, and providence in this world, just as the Israelites were in the desert sojourn. Yet this world, material possessions and all this-worldly experience—joy, suffering, prosperity, satisfaction, and sickness—are transient. Only divine protection transcends this world and endures in the next. Samson Raphael Hirsch brings the two together:

Not troubled and careworn, not sad and gloomy, not *mitsta'ar* (troubled) is the life which we lead in the tabernacle (sukka) built by the trust in God and covered by the love of God. Why should it worry you that it is only a *dirat 'arai* (temporary dwelling), transitory hut, that one day it will leave you or you will leave it? The walls may fall, the covering may wither in the storm, God may call you outside; but the sheltering love of God is everywhere and constantly with you, and where it bids you to dwell, where it protects you, there *teshvu le'ain taduru*,<sup>39</sup> you dwell, were it only for a moment, in the most fleeting and transitory dwelling, as calmly and securely as if it were your house forever.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

1. "The Symbolism of the Sukka," *Judaism* 43 (Fall 1994), 371-387. See too Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods*, Brown Judaica Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), chapter 6.
2. *Sifra 'Emor* 17:11, edited by I. Weiss (New York, 1946 [Vienna, 1862]), 103a-b; *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael*, *Parah* §14, edited by H. Horowitz (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 48; *Mekhilta Beḥaṭat, petiḥta*, p. 80; *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai*, edited by J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 33 and 47; bSuk 11b.
3. On the different views of the wilderness experience in the Bible, see S. Talmon, "The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, edited by A. Altman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 31-62.
4. In many agricultural societies one can still see booths, huts, and other such shelters in this condition during the winter months.
5. See bSuk 2a. The origin of the concept of the sukka as "temporary dwelling" is complex and devolves, in part, from other legal considerations. See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "The Sukkah as Temporary or Permanent Dwelling: A Study in the Development of Talmudic Thought," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 64 (1993): 137-166. This definition is not found in the Palestinian Talmud.
6. bSuk 2a.
7. See *Mishna Berurah* n. 5 to *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim*, 628:1, n. 12 to 628:2, n. 3 to 633:1, n. 2 to 634:1.
8. *Halotza vhamisva*, §207.
9. Commentary to Lev 23:42.
10. Rashbam (Rabbi Samuel b. Meir) offers a similar interpretation of the commandment in his commentary to Lev 23:43: "This is the explanation. You shall observe the festival of the Lord seven days when you have gathered in the yield of your land (Deuteronomy 16:13) at the time when you gather in the yield of the land and your houses are full of every bounty—grain and oil and wine, in order that you remember that I caused the Israelites to dwell in Sukkot in the desert for forty years, without an inheritance and territory. Then you will give thanks to Him who gave you an inheritance and houses full of good, and you will not say in your hearts *My own power and might of my own hand have won this wealth for me* (Deuteronomy 8:17). . . . Therefore they leave their houses, which are full of plenty from the gathering, and dwell in sukkot, so as to remember that they [the Israelites] did not have an inheritance in the desert or houses in which to dwell. Because of this God set the festival of Sukkot during the time of the gathering of the grain and wine. So that one not become proud because of the houses full of plenty lest he say *My own power. . . won this wealth for me* (Deuteronomy 8:17)." Rashbam also explains the commandment to leave the house and dwell in the sukka as a way to instill appropriate attitudes and values. A rigorous biblical commentator, Rashbam does not mention the rabbinic term "temporary dwelling." Yet his comment draws on the theme of the sukka as the opposite of the security and permanence of the house. The annual dwelling in sukkot, like the Israelites dwelling in sukkot during the exodus, expresses a lack of territory, habitation, or possessions. The sukka serves as a reminder that material prosperity comes from God, not from independent human effort. Similar ideas can be found in Isaac Aboab, *Menorat Hama'or*, edited by



- C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1961), 315-316. See too Philo, *The Special Laws*, 2:208-214.
11. Isaac Arama, *Aqedat Yis'haq* (Pressburg: V. Kitzseer, 1849), 3:91. See too 3:93a. Similar thoughts are expressed by Samson Raphael Hirsch: "Sukka, the building of the tabernacle, teaches you trust in God. Whatever may be your station in life, whether you are richly or poorly endowed with the goods of this world, you are neither dazzled by abundance nor frightened by want. The goods of the earth are not your goods. It is *mitsvet gornekha*, with that which others reject and despise that you build this tabernacle of your life. You know that whether men live in huts or in palaces, it is only as pilgrims that they dwell; both huts and palaces are only *dirat 'arat* [a temporary dwelling], form only our transitory home"; Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Collected Writings* (New York: Feldheim, 1984), 2:49. (On *mitsvet gornekha* see Deut 16:13 and bSuk 12a.) Note the interpretation of Sukkot as a pilgrimage festival not in terms of a pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple but a pilgrimage in this world.
12. See too Isaac Aboab, *Menorat Hama'or*, edited by C. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1961), 318.
13. Moshe Alshikh, *Torat Moshe* (Jerusalem: Lev Sameah Institute, 1990), 3:187-188 to Lev 23:33-34. For another allegorical interpretation see Shlomo Goren, *Torat Hamo'adim* (Tel Aviv: Tsiyoni, 1964), 113.
14. *Ibid.*, 3:194-195 to Lev 23:43.
15. Jonathan Eybescheutz, *Ye'arat Dezash* (New York: Edison, 1971), 41b. The final phrase echoes Ps 103:16, "Man, his days are like those of grass; he blooms like a flower of the field; a wind passes by it and it is no more."
16. This draws on older rabbinic sources. See *Pesiqta DeRav Kahana*, edited by B. Mandelbaum (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1987), pp. 457-458: "R. Eleazar bar Maryom said: Why do we make a sukka after Yom Kippur? To tell you this: You find that on Rosh HaShana God judges all human beings, and on Yom Kippur he seals the sentence. It may be that the sentence of Israel will be exile. Accordingly they make a sukka and exile themselves from their homes to the sukka, and God counts it as if they were exiled to Babylon. . . ." On exile as atoning for sin see bSanh 37b and bBer 56a.
17. In the middle ages Hoshana Rabbah, the last of the intermediate days of Sukkot, was considered the day when the judgment of Yom Kippur was sent forth from heaven.
18. See "Symbolism of the Sukka," 377-378, for full discussion and further examples.
19. mAh 8:2, tAh 9:3, mNaz 7:3, mNid 7:5.
20. Rashi, bSuk 8b, s.v. *'amar*. The Aramaic term for sukka is *metaita*, from the root TLL, shade.
21. mSuk 1:2; *Sifra 'Emor* 17:4, 102d.
22. mSuk 1:3, 2:1; bSuk 10b, 21b.
23. mSuk 1:2; *Sifra 'Emor* 17:4, 102d.
24. I discuss this at length in my previous article. See "The Symbolism of the Sukka," *Judaism* 43 (Fall 1994), 371-387.
25. See too Ps 109:23.
26. *Qiblat Rabbah* 1:2. The rabbis claimed Solomon authored the book of Qohelet. The term "explained" (*perash*) has the sense of "specify." David "specified" what kind of shade Solomon meant.
27. The prayer *Ki 'anu 'amekha* also concludes "Our days are as a passing shadow, but your years are endless."
28. Eybescheutz, above p. 6, cites a verse from Qohelet in his explication of this symbolism.
29. bSuk 27a. This is a Talmudic principle: "you shall dwell [in the sukka] in the same manner in which you live [in a house]."
30. *The Collected Writings*, 2:50.