**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden**

**as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #10:**

**The Holiday of Sukkot**

**Part I -**

**Remaining in the Garden of Eden**

**Sukkot: The Holiday of Nature**

In the Torah, Sukkot is first described in the following way: "And the feast of the harvest, at the end of the year, when you gather in your labors out of the field" (*Shemot* 23:16). This is the first layer of the holiday that we encounter in the Torah. What is the idea of harvesting? At the time of the harvest, people exit their houses and enter their fields and the surrounding areas to gather in the produce that has grown. In this sense, we can say that the holiday of Sukkot is the holiday of nature.

Later, the Torah speaks of "the feast of booths (*sukkot*)" and commands us to dwell in a *sukka* (*Vayikra* 23:33-43), i.e. a temporary dwelling with a roof made of plant life. Dwelling in a *sukka* can also be understood as reflecting life in nature. In a permanent home, one’s life can be organized in an artificial way, free from the natural conditions prevailing outside. Leaving one's house for a *sukka,* on the other hand, constitutes a return from that artificial life back to nature. In the structure of the *sukka*, as well,we encounter unprocessed nature. The *sekhakh*, the topping of the *sukka*,which is also the essence of the *sukka*, must be something which has grown from the ground, and it may not be artificially processed in such a way that it is transformed into an object subject to the laws of ritual impurity.

The mitzvaof taking the four species (*arba minim*) — *lulav* (palm frond), *etrog* (citron), *hadasim* (myrtles) and *aravot* (willows) — further expresses the idea of nature on the holiday of Sukkot. With this mitzva, a person serves God by way of what nature grows.

It should be added that there may be another matter here that distinguishes Sukkot from the rest of the holidays: the Divine service is performed primarily through the offering of animal sacrifices, which begins with the slaughter of a living creature. In contrast, the mitzvaof taking the *arba minim* is worship that is characterized by life. Halakha states that if one of the *arba minim* dries up, it is disqualified, as derived (*Yerushalmi Sukka* 3:1) from the verse: "The dead praise not the Lord" (*Tehillim* 115:17). With the *arba minim,* we worship God with living nature.

If so, the first layer of Sukkot that we encounter is its being the holiday of nature, centered on the world of plant life.

**The Holiday of Water**

Beyond the dimension of Sukkot as the holiday of nature, there is a deeper layer, the gateway to which is found in the water libation (*nisukh ha-mayim*) ceremony. Throughout the year, wine is poured on the altar, whereas on Sukkot, in addition to the wine, water is poured as well. Even though the *nisukh ha-mayim* ceremony is a unique and central mitzvaon Sukkot, it is not spelled out explicitly in the verses. Rather, it is derived by *Chazal* through the exposition of superfluous letters, or as a halakha given to Moshe at Sinai (*Ta'anit* 2b, *Sukka* 34a).

This leads us to two basic questions: First, what is the idea and the place of the *nisukh ha-mayim* ceremony on the holiday of Sukkot? Second, is there a reason why it is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah?

It would appear that the *nisukh ha-mayim* ceremony reveals another dimension of the holiday of Sukkot: Sukkot as the holiday of water. The water that is revealed in the ceremony is the inner essence of the entire holiday of Sukkot. Just as the *nisukh ha-mayim* ceremony is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, so too water itself is hidden in the depths of all the other aspects of the holiday. This is because plant life, which stands at the center of the holiday, takes its nourishment and grows by the power of water, which is found within it and gives it life. Let us consider the various aspects of the holiday and its commandments from this perspective.

The harvest involves the produce of an entire growing season, which has grown entirely from the past year's rain. Not only does the water cause the fruit to grow, but it is also the primary material of which the produce is composed.

The mitzvaof the *sukka* also relies on the power of water. The Mishna states that the *sukka* must be topped with something that grows from the ground (*Sukka* 1:4), that is to say, with something that grows from water.[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition, the Tannaim disagree about the essence of the *sukkot* in the wilderness, whether they were actual booths or perhaps the Clouds of Glory (*Sifra Emor parasha* 12; *Sukka* 11b). If they were actual booths, then their tops grew from the ground, from water, just like our *sukkot*. If they were the Clouds of Glory, the clouds themselves are nothing but concentrations of water in the form of mist.

The mitzva of the *arba minim* is also performed with plants that grow from water, but their connection to water is even stronger. The time of mentioning the rain (inserting “Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain”in the *Amida* prayer) is defined by *Chazal* based on the time of the mitzvaof taking the *arba minim*: "As it was taught: From when do we begin to make mention of the rain? Rabbi Eliezer said: From the time of the taking up of the *lulav*. Rabbi Yehoshua said: From the time it is discarded" (*Ta'anit* 2b). The *baraita* there explains the connection between rain and the *arba minim* with the fact that the *arba minim* depend upon the rain, and they are intended to make intercession for water (ibid.): "Seeing that these *arba minim* are intended only to make intercession for water, therefore as these cannot exist without water, so the world cannot exist without water.”

The *arba minim* are disqualified from use for the mitzvawhen they are dry (Mishna *Sukka*, Chapter 3). We have already seen above that, according to the *Yerushalmi,* the reason for this disqualification is: "The dead praise not the Lord" (*Tehillim* 115:17). Without water, there is no life. Serving God with four living species that have not dried up praises God with the water that is found in them. The mitzvaof taking the *arba minim*, which is fulfilled by way of the world of plant life, is connected in its essence to the water that causes these *arba minim* to grow, the water upon which the world depends.

The connection between the *arba minim* and water is particularly striking in the case of the *etrog* and the *aravot*. In the context of the discussion regarding the identity of the "fruit of the *hadar* tree" mentioned in the Torah, the Gemara (*Sukka* 35a) states: "Ben Azai said: Read not *hadar*, but *hýdōr*, for in Greek water is called *hýdōr*. Now what fruit is it that grows by every water? Say, of course, it is the *etrog.*"

What is the meaning of the phrase "grows by every water"? One of the distinctive features of an *etrog* tree is that as long as it is watered, its fruit continues to grow and does not fall, and sometimes it even gives another season of fruit. In any case, according to Ben Azai, the meaning of the phrase "fruit of the *hadar* tree" is "fruit of the water tree."[[2]](#footnote-2)

As for the *aravot*, we do not need an exposition to find the connection to water, as they are explicitly referred to in the Torah as "willows of the brook" (*Vayikra* 23:40). In reality, as well, it is quite evident that willow branches are exceedingly dependent upon water. They do not last without water for even a few days, as we see for ourselves every year on Sukkot.

Joy is a key element of Sukkot. Three times (ibid. and *Devarim* 16:14-15) the Torah mentions the obligation to rejoice on the holiday — more so than on any other festival. The peak of the joy of the holiday is also connected to water, as it takes place at the *simchat beit ha-sho’eiva*, rejoicing at the place of the [water] drawing. As *Chazal* put it: "Anyone who has not seen *simchat beit ha-sho’eiva* has never seen rejoicing" (*Sukka* 5:1). What is *simchat beit ha-sho’eiva*? This is the grand rejoicing in the Temple against the backdrop of the drawing of water for *nisukh ha-mayim*,[[3]](#footnote-3) an event that brings the joy of the holiday of Sukkot to an unparalleled level.

It is not only the *mitzvot* of Sukkot that are connected to water. *Chazal* tell us that the holiday of Sukkot in general has a special connection to water:

At four seasons (Divine) judgment is passed on the world: on Pesach in respect to grain; on Shavuot in respect to fruit; on Rosh Hashana all creatures pass before Him (God) like Maronites… and on Sukkot, judgment is passed in respect to rain. (Mishna *Rosh Hashana* 1:2)

It is specifically on the holiday of Sukkot that the people of Israel are judged in respect to rain, upon which all life and subsistence depend. This is the critical time when the fate of water for the entire year is determined.

As we have already seen, *nisukh ha-mayim* deals manifestly with water. At first glance, it might have seemed that this is exceptional for the holiday, but upon further examination it becomes clear that the connection to water is hidden also in the other *mitzvot* associated with the holiday, and so too in the special joy and judgment related to it. As we have already said, just as *nisukh ha-mayim* is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, so too water is not explicit in the holiday and its *mitzvot.*

To summarize, on the plain and simple level, Sukkot is the holiday of nature, and especially the holiday of plant life. However, at its innermost core, it focuses not on living nature and what grows in it, but rather on what causes that growth — namely, water.

In this *shiur*, we will look more deeply into how we encounter water on Sukkot. Later, we will also discuss the place of water in the *mitzva* of taking the *arba minim*.

**An Accursed Sign**

We saw above that almost all aspects of the holiday of Sukkot are connected to water, to rejoicing with it, and to judgment in respect to it. Nevertheless, we must confront a major challenge: *Chazal* agree that we do not pray for rain on the holiday of Sukkot. According to Halakha, we even refrain from mentioning rain through the insertion of “Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain”in the *Amida* prayer. If we seek the reason for this, we discover an even more extreme statement: "Rain is nothing but an accursed sign on the holiday (of Sukkot)." The source of this is the Mishna at the beginning of Tractate *Ta'anit* (1:1):

When do we [begin to] make mention of the power of rain?

Rabbi Eliezer says: On the first day of the holiday [of Sukkot].

Rabbi Yehoshua says: On the last day of the holiday.

Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: Seeing that rain on the holiday is a sign of [God's] anger, why make mention of it?

Rabbi Eliezer said to him: I also did not say to pray, but to mention “Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain”in its due season.

He (Rabbi Yehoshua) said to him: If that is so, one should at all times make mention of it.

On Sukkot, the holiday on which we rejoice over water, and on which we are judged with respect to water, and which is wholly connected to water, rain is considered an accursed sign. Even Rabbi Eliezer does not dispute the statement that rain on the holiday of Sukkot is an accursed sign, and therefore even according to him one must not pray for rain on the holiday, but only mention the power of God to control precipitation. Still, the *halakha* is decided in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yehoshua, that no mention at all is made of rain on Sukkot. We would have expected that on Sukkot, rain should be considered more than anything else a sign of blessing; but as it turns out, it is considered an accursed sign!

When we examine the Tannaitic dispute, we see that the difficulty is even greater. One might have argued that on Sukkot, the rainy season has not yet arrived, and therefore one does not pray for or even mention rain. But Rabbi Eliezer says: "I also did not say to pray, but to mention ‘Who makes the wind blow and brings down the rain’ in its due season." That is to say, the beginning of the holiday ushers in the rainy season. Just as on the fifteenth of Nisan, the rainy season ends and we stop praying for and mentioning rain, so too on the fifteenth of Tishrei, it would have been fitting to pray for rain, or at least to mention it. It turns out that even though the rainy season has begun, and even though the entire holiday of Sukkot revolves around water, rain on the holiday of Sukkot is an accursed sign.

In the Mishna (*Sukka* 2:9), we find a sharp portrayal of this assertion. *Chazal* see rainfall on Sukkot as an expression of God's harsh attitude towards the nation of Israel: "To what can this be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master, and [the master] pours a pitcher over his face."

The Gemara (*Sukka* 29a) brings a *baraita* that clarifies the meaning of pouring of a pitcher over the servant's face as disdain for his service: "For it has been taught: The master poured the pitcher over his face and said: I have no desire for your service." That is to say, rain on Sukkot is God's statement to the people of Israel, as it were: I have no desire for your service.

Why is it that precisely on the holiday that revolves around water, and precisely when the rainy season begins, rain is considered an accursed sign and expression of God's disdain for our service? We will try to answer this question in the following paragraphs.

**Between Water and Water**

We have seen the tension between the fact that water is the foundation of the Sukkot holiday, and the assertion that rain on Sukkot is considered an accursed sign. In order to understand the matter, let us go back to the first place in which water appears in the Torah, where we see that there is a separation between different waters.

In the story of Creation, water appears on the second day, in connection with the separation of water from water:

And God said: Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and let it divide the water from the water. And God made the firmament, and divided the water which was under the firmament from the water which was above the firmament; and it was so. (*Bereishit* 1:6-7)

After the second day of creation we have two types of water: "the water which was under the firmament" — the lower water, and "the water which was above the firmament" — the upper water. This distinction creates a gap and distance, which underlie the appearance of rain. Rain is part of the cycle of movement between lower water and upper water. The lower water evaporates, rises, condenses into clouds, and then returns to us as rain. Rain is our encounter with upper water.

Was there rain in the world from the moment of creation? The Torah tells us that this was not the case. The verse that opens the story of the Garden of Eden reads: "No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground" (*Bereishit* 2:5). That is to say, initially, there is no rain. Does the earth remain dry and desolate? The Torah continues with a description of irrigation that does not depend on rain: "But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground" (*Bereishit* 2:6).

In other words, what we have here is irrigation from the lower water, from the land itself and back, independent of the distant upper water.

When then does rain first appear? Why is it needed? The Torah mentions in one breath the absence of rain and the absence of man. *Chazal* connect the two matters, and hang the appearance of rain on the reality of man and his actions:

Rav Assi pointed out a contradiction.

One verse says: "And the earth brought forth grass" (*Bereishit* 1:12), referring to the third day, whereas another verse when speaking of the sixth day says: "No shrub of the field was yet on the earth."

This teaches us that the plants commenced to grow but stopped just as they were about to break through the soil, until Adam came and prayed for rain for them; and when rain fell, they sprouted forth.

This teaches you that the Holy One, blessed be He, longs for the prayers of the righteous. (*Chullin* 60b)

That is to say, it begins to rain after the creation of man and in the wake of his prayers. Rashi, in his commentary to the verse, follows *Chazal*, using the wording of the verse to establish that rain appears due to the creation of man:

“Because God had not caused it to rain” — And what is the reason that God had not caused it to rain?

“Because there was no man to till the ground” — and there was, therefore, no one to recognize the utility of rain. When Adam came, however, and he realized it was necessary for the world, he prayed for it and it fell.

From the words of *Chazal* and Rashi, it might be understood that immediately upon his creation, Adam recognizes the world's dependence on rain, prays for it, and it falls. The Netziv, however, in his commentary on the verse, teaches us that the prayer for rain and the actual rainfall comes only after Adam's sin and expulsion from the Garden of Eden:

*Chazal* explain this verse as saying that nothing grew from the ground until the sixth day, and that Adam sinned and was sent from the Garden of Eden to till the land from which he had been taken, and he prayed and God caused it to rain, and vegetation and all fruit emerged for his maintenance. (*Ha'amek Davar*, *Bereishit* 2:5)

From where does the Netziv know this? From where does he know that Adam's prayer for rain takes place only after he has sinned and been expelled from the Garden of Eden? When we look at the verses, it is difficult to disagree with the Netziv and say that Adam prays for rain before he sins. In addition to the account of the mist that rises from the ground and waters it, the Torah adds that the Garden of Eden is regularly watered by a river, and so it does not need rain:

And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food…

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it was parted, and became four heads. (*Bereishit* 2:9-10).

If so, before Adam sins and is removed from the Garden of Eden, he has no need for rain, and he has nothing to feel grateful about. When he is removed from the Garden of Eden in which there is an endless abundance of lower water, he recognizes the good of rain, for his life becomes dependent upon the upper water, and therefore he prays for it and it comes down.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Can the distinction that we have made between upper water — which makes itself available to the world through rain — and lower water — which is found in the world itself, in its springs and in its brooks — help us to understand why on the holiday that is based on water, rain is an accursed sign?

We will examine this question in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The second condition brought by the Mishna for kosher *sekhakh* — "that it not be subject to ritual impurity" — also connects us to water, for it is water that purifies a person or an object from ritual impurity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an expanded discussion of this issue, see our *shiurim* on the four species, especially those sections dealing with the *etrog*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "At the *simchat beit ha-sho'eiva* they rejoiced in the festival in honor of the drawing of the water to be used for libation, and they played flutes and harps" (Rashi, *Sukka* 42b, s.v. *He-chalil*). The *Yerushalmi* records another aspect of *simchat beit ha-sho’eiva,* the spiritual dimension: "Why is it called *simchat beit ha-sho’eiva*? Because from there they would draw the holy spirit, in accordance with: 'Therefore with joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation' (*Yeshayahu* 12:3)" (*Sukka* 5:1). This spiritual dimension of Sukkot, of the resting of the *Shekhina* which leads to the holy spirit, is also described in the Gemara with the image of drawing water, as is fitting for the holiday of water. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The wording of the Netziv suggests that he finds additional textual support for his understanding that Adam prays for rain only after he is expelled from the Garden of Eden. The verse reads: "For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground." The same exact phrase, "to till the ground," is found in one other verse, a verse that describes the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which the Netziv cites: "Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken" (*Bereishit* 3:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)