YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Parashat BO**

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**Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel *a"h***

**by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family**

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**In memory of Albert W. and Evelyn G. Bloom z"l,**

**who creatively fulfilled the mitzva of "והגדת לבנך".**

**Shanen Bloom Werber, Dov Bloom, Elana Bloom, Michael Bloom**

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"From Ra'amses to Sukkot"

Rav Shimon Klein

Introduction

You shall dwell in *sukkot* for seven days; all who are home born in Israel shall dwell in *sukkot*; in order that your generations may know that I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 23:42-43)

In these verses, *Am Yisrael* is commanded to dwell in *sukkot*. God instructs that "your generations" will dwell in *sukkot*, and thereby return, in their consciousness, to the *sukkot* in which "I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell… when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." Which *sukkot* is the Torah talking about?

Some commentaries have explained this as a reference to the desert booths in which *Bnei Yisrael* dwelled during their long desert wanderings.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, it is difficult to fit this interpretation into the plain meaning of the text. There is no verse anywhere describing the desert wanderings that describes *Bnei Yisrael* as dwelling in *sukkot*.[[2]](#footnote-2) Instead, starting from the first year and lasting until the entry into the land, we find many verses describing the people as dwelling in tents.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It would seem, therefore, that the description "For I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Israel" is telling a different story.

"As I was bringing you out of Egypt," God says, "I caused something else to happen at the same time." This is an invitation to re-examine the verses in *Sefer Shemot* and their descriptions of the Exodus and to identify another important event happening simultaneously, something significant enough to have one of the three pilgrim festivals instituted in commemoration of it.

First Station

*Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from Ra'amses to Sukkot, some six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. (*Shemot* 12:38)

This verse brings together two events – the Exodus from Egypt and the first station on the journey, Sukkot. *Bnei Yisrael* are expelled from Egypt, and they stop almost right away in Sukkot to bake and eat their *matzot*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Did they dwell in *sukkot* at this station? It would seem that they did. The text seems to be pointing to the connection between the name of the place, "Sukkot,” and the *sukkot* that were there.[[5]](#footnote-5) It would also seem that the presence of the *sukkot* at that site is what guided *Bnei Yisrael* in the direction of that place even while they were still journeying (as suggested by the suffix in Hebrew, "*sukkota*,” meaning "to *Sukkot*").[[6]](#footnote-6) The same message arises from the verses in *Sefer Vayikra*: "For I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in Sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt," meaning, "Immediately after bringing them out of Egypt, I caused them to dwell in Sukkot." The verse almost literally points to the description in *Sefer Shemot*, which documents that *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from Ra'amses in Egypt to a place called Sukkot, where they dwelled in *sukkot*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Why is the dwelling or stopping in Sukkot a reason for the establishment of a festival? What is the significance of this event?

A Seam-Line in the National Consciousness

The hypothesis that we shall advance in this *shiur* identifies a seam-line in the spiritual position of the nation and of Moshe, its leader, at the beginning of this unit. Upon reaching the first station at Sukkot, something happens in the depths of the people's consciousness, broadening their perspective and offering a new angle on all the events that follow.

Let us start with the people and attempt to identify their feelings. The first description of their state appears in the following words:

And *Bnei Yisrael* groaned from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry rose up to God from the labor. (2:23)

Another description is conveyed in God's words to Moshe:

"I have surely seen the affliction of My people that is in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their pain." (3:7)

There is affliction, crying, and pain. This affliction is mentioned once again when Moshe comes to the people with his message:

And the people believed, and they heard that God had remembered *Bnei Yisrael* and that He had seen their affliction, and they bowed their heads and worshipped. (*Shemot* 4:31)

Another aspect of this period, mentioned further on, is the "anguish of spirit":

But they did not listen to Moshe, for anguish of spirit and for hard labor. (6:9)

During the next stage – throughout nine of the ten plagues – there is no mention of the mood among *Bnei Yisrael*. During this period, the people are simply spectators, observing the greatness of God and His strong hand and the great trauma that befalls Egypt. Their return to center stage takes place during the plague of the firstborn, during the series of powerful events that they experience. They are expelled from Egypt (11:1) and they eat the Pesach sacrifice in great haste:

"And so shall you eat it: your loins girded, your shoes upon your feet and your staff in your hand, and you shall eat it in haste; it is a Pesach unto God." (12:11)

In fact, the Egyptians are pressing upon them to leave:

And Egypt urged the people, so as to send them with haste from the land, for they said, “We shall all die.” And the people took up their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders. (12:33-34)

And here comes something new: "And *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from Ra'amses to Sukkot" – the nation comes to Sukkot, their first station. Before this point, they were unable to tarry, but now they have time to do so:

And they baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of *matzot*, for it had not leavened, for they had been expelled from Egypt and were not able to tarry, nor had they made themselves provisions. (12:37; 39)

This is a moment of rest that allows them to experience, for the first time, the taste of the freedom that they have just been granted. It is a first station after the "big bang," a stopover that brings about a new psychological experience whose first expression will appear in the next description.

Reviewing What Has Happened

And *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from Ra'amses to Sukkot – some six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. And a mixed multitude went up also with them, and flocks, and herds, very much cattle. And they baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of *matzot*, for it had not leavened, for they had been expelled from Egypt, and were not able to tarry, nor had they prepared themselves provisions.

And the sojourning of *Bnei Yisrael* who dwelled in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And it was at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it was on that same day, that all of God's hosts came out of the land of Egypt. It is a night of watchfulness to God for bringing them out of the land of Egypt; this is God's watch-night for all of *Bnei Yisrael* in their generations. (*Shemot* 12:37-42)

In these verses, following immediately after the description of the journey "to Sukkot,” the text embarks on a comprehensive review, as though answering the question, "What exactly happened to us?" The facts are not new; what is new is the fact that they are being reviewed; they are a subject of discussion.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is the first time that attention is given to numbers, as well as to the question of "Who is it that is going?" The answer is: *Bnei Yisrael*, as well as the mixed multitude that is going with them, and flocks and herds of cattle. This camp, with all that it contains, is now taking time off to bake *matzot*, for they have been expelled from Egypt and until this point they have been unable to tarry.

The textual account does not stop here, and the review continues in its backward movement: "And the sojourning of *Bnei Yisrael* who dwelled in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years." The text is answering the question, "How long is it that we were there, in Egypt?" This very day now assumes new significance; it is the day that comes at the end of four hundred and thirty years! The day assumes historical significance, and it is important both to God and to Israel.

All of the above forms a continuous description that produces awareness of a given reality, with a new perspective on it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## God's Command vs. Moshe's Speech

Let us now turn our attention to Moshe.

Moshe's situation is different from that of the nation. Moshe has grown up free and has not experienced the "anguish of spirit" that characterizes his people. In the next few verses in the text, we detect a different, more fundamental change that comes over him during the sojourn in Sukkot. In order to understand this change, let us start off with a preliminary comment.

At the burning bush, Moshe is appointed as God's emissary, and it is as such that he presents himself to the people as well as to Pharaoh. During this period, little initiative is required of him. God guides him at every step, and again and again he carries out God's instructions. This is eloquently illustrated in God's words to him in chapter 12, in a unit that is built on a step-by-step structure, like a set of practical instructions indicating what he should do at each stage.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Now, during the stopover in Sukkot, something happens in the depths of his consciousness, a sort of awareness of and connectedness to his essence. Moshe is raised, as it were, on the wings of the spirit, achieving a new level and perspective.

God spoke to Moshe, saying, “Sanctify unto Me (*kadesh li*) every firstborn, whatever opens the womb amongst *Bnei Yisrael*, of man and of beast it is Mine. (*Shemot* 13:1-2)

With these words, God commands Moshe concerning the sanctity of the firstborn, and following this command, Moshe addresses the people: “Moshe said to the people…." (ibid. 3). If one were to stop at this point and ask himself what Moshe is likely to tell the people, the answer would be quite simple: God has commanded Moshe to sanctify the firstborn, so presumably Moshe will convey the same message. Indeed, Moshe does address the people in this regard, but contrary to what we would expect, he starts his speech with the following declaration:

"Remember this day, in which you came out of Egypt, from the house of slavery, for by strength of hand did God bring you out of there; no leavened bread shall be eaten." (ibid.)

Moshe goes on to talk about leavened bread and *matza*, about recounting the story to the next generation, and about a sign and remembrance upon the hand and between the eyes. Only at the end of this lengthy speech does he return to God's original message and convey the commandment concerning the firstborn. His version of the command is much longer than the original and different in many ways:

And it shall be, when God brings you to the land of the Canaanites, as He promised to you and to your forefathers, and gives it to you, that you shall pass on (*ve-ha'avartem*) to God all that opens the womb and every firstling that emerges from a beast which you possess; the males shall belong to God. And the firstling of an ass shall you redeem with a lamb, and if you do not redeem it then you shall break its neck, and every firstborn of man among your children shall you redeem. And it shall be, when your son asks you in the future, saying, “What is this?” That you shall say to him, “With strength of hand did God bring us out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. And it was, when Pharaoh almost would not let us go, that God slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstling of beasts; therefore, I sacrifice to God all that opens the womb – the males, while the firstborn of my children I redeem.” And it shall be for a sign upon your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for with strength of hand did God bring us out of Egypt. (*Shemot* 13:12-16)

God speaks of a sanctification of the firstborn that is not dependent on anything, while Moshe speaks of a sanctification of the firstborn after entering the land and goes on to provide a reason and justification for it. God speaks of "sanctifying," while Moshe speaks of "passing on" (or "setting apart") and "redeeming." God speaks of the firstborn of man and beast alike, while Moshe draws a distinction between the ass and all other beasts.

The discrepancies between God's command to Moshe and Moshe's command to the nation are indeed considerable. What is their significance?

This gap represents a sphere that is one of the most beautiful, fascinating, and profound aspects of *Tanakh*. Wherever the text records that God commands something and then goes on to describe how the command is carried out or conveyed by a prophet, we find a fundamental, significant discrepancy. Where no such discrepancy exists, there is no need for the text to repeat the story over again; it simply records the command and then affirms, "And he did so,” or "And he spoke thus to the people." Repetition is an invitation to listen closely, and this attention sometimes reveals some astonishing discrepancies.

At our point in the text, this gap is something new; it is a phenomenon that we have not encountered up until now. Later on, however, it becomes a routine matter for Moshe. An entire *Sefer* – *Devarim* – records his speeches on the eve of the entry into the land, and for the most part, he reviews subjects that are known to us already from the previous *sefarim*. And yet, while everything documented in the previous *sefarim* is recorded precisely as God wants it to be, Moshe describes things differently in *Sefer Devarim*. The differences extend to every literary unit, every description of facts, and even some of the *mitzvot* themselves.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This discrepancy indicates that God does not control the hearts of His servants. God leaves room for man; He conducts dialogue with his desires and wishes, with his inner world. Prophets and sages hear God's word in its purity, and His word is perceived as the reflection of the great and eternal Divine truth, but it does not fill the vacuum, and it invites man – the prophet – to speak up and have his say.

To return to our unit: God's command concerning the firstborn is conveyed without any context. Its realization in that form would have lent it the air of a local act reflecting obedience to God's word. Moshe identifies the spiritual principle that is its essence and he expands and leverages it, describing the historical process by which the nation enters its land and moves around in it, stage by stage. Intermediate stations create a developing consciousness. Now that Moshe starts to convey the commandment concerning the firstborn, representing the very start of the process, it is already reflected in the world of a generation growing up in the land, a developed, future nation. This attribution illuminates the spiritual significance of the command, which was not made explicit in God's original word.

**The Subject – God's Strong Hand**

God's command sets forth the sanctity of the firstborn, while Moshe emphasizes a different point: God's strong hand. He introduces his speech to the nation with the exhortation:

Remember this day, in which you came out of Egypt, from the house of slavery, **for by strength of hand did God bring you out of there**… (*Shemot* 13:3)

Moshe commands the people to remember the day of the Exodus from Egypt, and his impassioned words reflect an entire world-view. "Remembering" does not mean nostalgia that conjures a past that is gone; rather, "remembering" speaks to a spiritual principle which transcends time and hence exists also in the present. From this point until the end of the unit, the "strength of hand" appears in different forms. It takes the form of the prohibition against eating leavened bread, the commandment to eat *matza*, the prohibition of having any leavened bread or leavening to be found "in all of your borders" (ibid. 7), the commandment to “tell your son…,” the command to place a sign upon the hand and a remembrance between the eyes, the unit on the firstborn, and – following from it – another sign "upon your hand" and "between your eyes."

What prompts Moshe to speak about "strength of hand" while God has made no mention of it? The answer is to be found in Moshe's own words, in the interpretation that he gives for the commandment of the firstborn: "With strength of hand God brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery… Therefore, I sacrifice to God all that opens the womb – the males, while the firstborn of my children I redeem." This is the significance that Moshe identifies in the command concerning the firstborn, and it is in light of this that he presents the unit, with this concept at the heart of his words from beginning to end.

What is God's "strength of hand"? It means what God does. A reference to God's "hand" as being "strong" means that in His actions, God is not dependent on, nor bound by, the laws and conventions of nature. We might compare this to a father who holds the hand of his young son and walks with him on a route and at a pace that the father chooses. The child moves his legs, he cooperates, but in truth it is the father's strong hand that is motivating and activating his movement. In this unit, the Exodus from Egypt embodies God's independent action, expressing the fact that without God extending His hand, the nation would not have emerged from the slavery in Egypt.

All of this is Moshe's point of departure. Now he goes on to describe a historical process that the nation is about to embark on. Today, he tells them, you are standing at a certain point in time: "This day you come out, in the month of spring" (ibid. 4). The next stage will be that you will enter the land, and in the land you will undergo processes of development and maturization. All of this will be accompanied by a spiritual development through observance of the *mitzvot*. These will become gradually more sophisticated, playing an increasingly tangible role in different spheres and serving as a "*mishkan*" for God's independent action.

We will now look at some milestones that outline the process undergone by the nation and "God's strong hand,” in its various manifestations, that accompany each stage.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**A Developing Perspective**

Moshe's address starts off in the present tense:

Moshe said to the people, “Remember this day (*ha-yom ha-zeh*) that you came out of Egypt, from the house of slavery, for with strength of hand did God bring you out of there (*mi-zeh*); no leavened bread shall be eaten." (ibid. 3)

You have right now left Egypt, Moshe tells them; take out your diaries and mark this day as an historical event.[[13]](#footnote-13) God's strong hand, as manifest on this day, will henceforth be commemorated by a corresponding commandment: "No leavened bread shall be eaten." The prohibition concerns one day – the day of the Exodus. The essence or meaning of the prohibition is that leavened bread symbolizes the power of natural processes to bring about change over time; thus, dough can rise and attain a more praiseworthy state. The prohibition against enabling this process is understood as a return to the Divine act, which is independent of natural laws and circumstances. It is a sign and symbol of God's strength of hand.

A second milestone comes with the next stage:

"And it shall be, when God brings you to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Emorites and the Hivvites and the Jebusites, which He swore to your forefathers to give to you – a land flowing with milk and honey…" (ibid. 5)

When you are already in the land, in the living space that is given to you – not as you are today, landless nomads – then the prohibition against leavened bread with assume new form:

"Seven days shall you eat *matzot*, and on the seventh day shall there be a feast unto God." (ibid. 6)

Not one day, but seven days; not only a negation and distancing from unleavened bread, but a positive eating of *matzot*, which you will have prepared with care, guarding yourselves from *chametz*. In this way, your activity will resemble the Divine activity, the "strong hand" that does not rely on the laws of nature. In contrast to the first stage, which addressed the day of the Exodus from Egypt, attention is given now to the seventh day – "and on the seventh day shall there be a feast unto God." This day brings the seven-day period to a conclusion and expresses all that has been invoked and remembered and nurtured during those days.

The next milestone:

"Nor shall any leavened bread be seen with you, nor shall any leaven be seen with you throughout your borders." (ibid. 7)

The timeframe mentioned previously – seven days – is now accompanied by a framework in space – "your borders,” along with a more abstract distancing from leavened bread. Not only is the consumption of *chametz* forbidden, but even having it present in the space over which a person has responsibility. All of this is a new "*mishkan*" for God's strong hand.

**The Past in Service of the Present**

The next milestone comes in the form of inter-generational interaction. A person is occupied with the different expressions of God's hand that accompanied him at the time of the Exodus, and now he is required to convey the message to a generation that did not experience that event. His guidance is found in the next command:

"And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘[It is] because of this (*ba'avur zeh*) that God acted for me when I came out of Egypt.’" (ibid. 8)[[14]](#footnote-14)

This is a most surprising declaration. In contrast to what we would have thought up to this point – that the aim, the point of the exercise, is the memory of the Exodus – here we find the matter turned upside down. It turns out that it is "because of (or by virtue of) the reality in which I find myself right now, with God's strength of hand finding expression in different forms and manifestations, that God performed the signs and wonders for me with His strong hand in Egypt." Cause and effect have been exchanged. The aim, the point of the exercise, is now shown to be the strength of God's hand that appears in its various manifestations in a person's living context. In this sense, the great event of the Exodus from Egypt serves as a trigger, allowing all of this to exist. This focus will also be maintained in the stages that follow.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**The Past in Service of the Future**

Another important milestone is a second mention of entry into the land:

"And it shall be when God brings you to the land of the Canaanites, as He promised to you and to your forefathers, and He gives it to you."

How is it possible to enter the land once they are already in it? Let us examine the two "entries" into the land alongside one another. They share the same skeleton, but there are differences between them. These discrepancies have the effect of presenting the "second entry" as a further stage in the nation's development:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Coming to the land I (*Shemot* 13:5;8)** | **Coming to the land II (*Shemot* 13:11;14)** |
| A  A | And it shall be, when God brings you to the land of the Canaanites | And it shall be when God brings you to the land of the Canaanites |
| BB | and the Hittites and the Emorites and the Hivvites and the Jebusites |  |
| CC | which He promised | as He promised you |
| DD | to your forefathers | and your forefathers, |
| EE | to give to you, | and gives it to you… |
| FF | a land flowing with milk and honey… |  |
| GG | Then you shall tell your son on that day, saying… | And it shall be, when your son asks you in the future, saying, “What is this”… |

A-B. "The land of the Canaanites and the Hittites… and the Jebusites" describes a concrete, tangible encounter with each of these nations separately. This description is suited to the stage immediately after entry into the land. "The land of the Canaanites,” in contrast, is a general term for all the tribes living in the land. This description is better suited to a later stage; it offers some perspective and abstraction.

1. "**Which** He promised" – The promise serves to identify the land to which God brings you. "**As** He promised" means "in accordance with the promise." The promise is the subject, and it assumes importance.
2. "Which He promised to your forefathers to give to you" – The land was promised in an oath to the forefathers. The right of those who now enter the land is by virtue of that promise to the forefathers; they have no right of their own. In contrast, "As God promised you and your forefathers" means that the oath relates to you – those who are entering the land. The forefathers are a step removed.
3. "**To give** to you" – The giving is described here as an intention, but not yet as being realized. "Giving" means that the land will move from God's domain to the domain of the people. This transition may put the people in a new position in relation to its land. At this stage, however, this remains a vision, not a reality. In contrast, "And gives it to you" is not just a plan for the future, but rather actual giving. The land belongs to the people living upon it, and this fact has many ramifications. (In *Sefer Devarim*, the land is in the domain of the people, as emphasized over and over [8:10; 26:15]. In *Sefer Vayikra*, the land is in God's domain [15:23]).
4. "A land flowing with milk and honey" – The land is the subject; the encounter is with the land, and therefore some elaboration on its virtues is called for. In contrast, in the second unit on "When God brings you to the land,” the continuation of the unit says nothing more about the land. The text moves on to the mitzva of sanctifying the firstborn. The land is a platform for that which takes place within it on the human level.
5. "Then you shall tell your son on that day, saying…" – The intergenerational interaction takes place on that day, on the day when you fulfill these *mitzvot*. "And it shall be, when your son asks you in the future (literally, ‘tomorrow’), saying, ‘What is this’” – the encounter takes place "tomorrow"; it essentially belongs to the future. In the first verse, the son does not ask, because he does not yet occupy an independent position. There is continuity in the passing down from father to son. In the second verse, the son himself initiates the discussion. This position reflects an allowing of space for the next generation; there is freedom for the world of the son, and the intergeneration discourse assumes a dialogic nature.

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And now for the mitzva of the firstborn. As noted, in the second mention of the entry into the land, God's promise of the land refers to the generation that is actually entering, while the forefathers stand a step removed, allowing the future to happen. Now there is further expression of this idea:

"And you shall pass on to God all that opens the womb and every firstling that emerges from a beast which you possess; the males shall belong to God… and every firstborn of man among your children shall you redeem." (ibid. 12).

The firstborn is the first representative of the new generation, and the speaking to him essentially represents speaking to the future. Relating to the firstborn as being sanctified is tantamount to a sanctification of the next generation and of hopes for the future. During the plague of the firstborn, God struck the firstborn of Egypt in an act that would seem to be a clear negation of Egypt's future. In contrast, God demands an assertion, a confirmation, of the firstborn of Israel; moreover, He attributes value and sanctity to them.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Pesach vs. Sukkot**

Let us now return to the verses in *Sefer Vayikra*:

In order that your generations may know that **I caused** *Bnei Yisrael* **to dwell** (*hoshavti*) in Sukkot when **I brought them out** (*be-hotzi'i*) of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 23:43)

This verse describes two different positions – one of "sitting,” or "dwelling,” and one of "going out." "I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in Sukkot" is a description of the nation dwelling in Sukkot, the first station where they stopped, rested, and were exposed to a new spiritual position. Another, previous position – "when I brought them out” – points backwards to the context: this took place during the Exodus from Egypt.

Ultimately, these two positions will be embodied in two different festivals. Pesach tells the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the "*be-hotzi'i*" – the independent Divine act executed through the plagues and the strong hand. Sukkot will tell the other story, the "*hoshavti*" – the stopping and resting that accompanied the "going out,” taking the people to a different place in terms of consciousness and psyche.

The meaning behind the unit in *Sefer Vayikra*, in the transition from "going out" to "dwelling,” is also the deeper meaning of the story as recounted in *Sefer* *Shemot*. God commands Moshe to sanctify every firstborn. Moshe identifies this command as a spiritual principle – "God's strong hand” – and he defines this as the essence of the Exodus from Egypt. This principle finds expression in the festival of Pesach. At the same time, inspired by the dwelling in Sukkot, Moshe is exposed to a new spiritual position, and he translates this spiritual idea, developing a body of laws around it. This gives expression to the other principle – "I caused them to dwell in *Sukkot*,” representing the human perspective that is gradually developed, creating a "*mishkan*,” a dwelling-place, for the absolutely independent Divine act.

The festival of Pesach is celebrated on the date of the Exodus from Egypt, as testimony to the season of offering the Pesach sacrifice, the middle of the night, and the Exodus from Egypt the next day. In these historical events, God was manifest through His strong hand, and the events are eternalized for all generations. The festival of Sukkot does not commemorate a historical event. Its timing – in the seventh month, rather than in the first month, when the nation actually dwelled in Sukkot – also distances the historical, ceremonial memory. It would seem that the silence of the Torah in the verses of *Sefer Shemot*, the omission of any explicit description of the dwelling in Sukkot, is part of the same idea – a downplaying of the ceremonial dimension, focusing instead on the internal processes that a person is encouraged to undertake.[[17]](#footnote-17) The command, "in order that your generations **will know** that I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in Sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt," likewise speaks of "knowing,” an inner understanding, rather than a "remembering" or "commemoration" of what happened. The manner in which this knowledge is expressed is through dwelling in a protected space, a temporary home, in which man interacts with this home or space. It is at the "going out of the year" (*tzet ha-shana*), the festival of the ingathering – a period which in many respects invites and embodies a summary or stocktaking of the entire year – that your generations "will know." They will understand the added value of the protected space in which they dwelled, and will thereby come to merit an understanding of the meaning of inner redemption.

This new movement in the world of the spirit enters the consciousness of *Bnei Yisrael* with their first stopover in Sukkot, where something happens inside of themselves. It is a first step on the long road of man and of a nation. In its most profound sense, it speaks of making room, of a space that is left by God for man, in which he might grow and with which he might surround himself – not as an adaption to or compromise with external circumstances, but rather as a chosen way of life.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Rashbam: "So that you will remember that I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell in *sukkot* in the wilderness, for forty years, without any habitation and without any inheritance. And this will lead you to give thanks to Him Who gave you an inheritance and houses full of all good things, and not to say in your hearts, 'My strength and the power of my hand have achieved all this wealth for me.'"

   Ibn Ezra: "'For [I caused *Bnei Yisrael* to dwell] in *sukkot*' – which they constructed after crossing over the Red Sea to Sukkot, even though they remained in the wilderness of Sinai for almost a year; and such was their custom at all the encampments. Hence, this season, too, is a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is difficult to propose an event or situation that was not important enough to be mentioned in the text, but on the other hand calls for a seasonal commemoration every year for all generations. It should also be noted that the verses from *Sefer Vayikra* are conveyed to Moshe during the second year after the Exodus (after the construction of the *Mishkan*; *Shemot* 40:17). If *Bnei Yisrael* dwelled in *sukkot* for forty years, the description of their situation should be formulated in the present tense ("*meshiv*"), as appropriate in reference to a period that is still ongoing at this stage, rather than in the past tense ("*hoshavti*" - "I *caused* to dwell…"). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, in the account of the manna: "This is the matter which God has commanded: Gather of it every man according to his eating, an *omer* for every individual according to the number of your people shall you take it, every man for those who are **in his tent**" (*Shemot* 16:16). Likewise, in the description that follows the sin of the golden calf: "And it was, when Moshe went out to the Tent, all of the people arose, and they stood, each man at **the entrance to his tent**, and they looked after Moshe until he had gone into the Tent" (*Shemot* 33:8). In *Sefer Yehoshua*, we find a description of the people standing on the bank of the Jordan River just before it splits so that they can enter the land: "And it was, when the people moved from **their tents** to cross the Jordan, and the *kohanim*, bearing the Ark of the Covenant, [went] before the people…" (*Yehoshua* 3:14). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is in Sukkot that they bake the dough that they have carried with them from Egypt: "And they baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of *matzot*, for it had not leavened, for they had been expelled from Egypt and were not able to tarry, nor had they made provisions for themselves" (*Shemot* 12:39). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Like the "*sukkot*" in *Sefer Bereishit*: "Yaakov journeyed to Sukkot and he built himself a house there and made *sukkot* for his cattle; therefore he called the place *Sukkot*" (*Bereishit* 33:17). Yaakov names the place "Sukkot" because of the *sukkot* that he is going to put up there for his cattle. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The *heh* suffix indicates a direction or tendency. Thus, "Sukkot" is the destination to which *Bnei Yisrael* are headed from the very outset of the journey. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The fact that the place is called Sukkot may now be understood as an indication of the importance of the *sukkot* that were there. They may be important because of their intrinsic value (preceding the current event) or because of *Bnei Yisrael* dwelling in them there and in the wake of the *mitzva* that is established for all generations. Towards the end of our discussion, we will address the question of why the Torah blurs the matter of the existence of *sukkot* at this site. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This interpretation of the verses rests on the assumption that the text does not engage the reader in discussion over the heads of the characters depicted in the narrative. If, at a certain point in time, the Torah tells us how many people comprised the nation or what the camp consisted of, it means that these matters were a topic in that reality, too. At the same time, the verse does not describe the actual taking of a census, nor is there a description of sitting and eating in *sukkot*; this is conveyed only through contrast with the previous situation. The people baked their dough because previously they had not been able to tarry. From this negative formulation, we deduce the positive corollary: they are now able to tarry and rest. All of this indicates a very delicate, initial movement in the psyche of the nation, still lacking volume and tangible presence. Nevertheless, its existence is sufficiently important to create a discussion, and also to address the ramifications that this movement will have. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the following verses, God commands Moshe and Aharon concerning the laws of the Pesach sacrifice for all generations. This command is not self-evident; the nation has just now finished eating the Pesach sacrifice, and God's command here has no immediate implications. A comparison between the command here and the descriptions of the Pesach sacrifice, which until now have focused mainly on the Pesach in Egypt, points to the new, additional significance and meaning imbued at this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The first instruction pertains to Rosh Chodesh Nisan (12:2); the next to the 10th of Nisan and the taking of the sheep (ibid. 3-4); followed by instructions concerning the 14th of Nisan and the Pesach sacrifice (6-7); the evening of the 15th when the Pesach sacrifice is to be eaten; the preparations for leaving (8-14); and the day of the 15th and the seven days of the festival (15-20). In general, bearing in mind this practical guide, there is a gap between God's speech to Moshe and the instructions that are conveyed to the people after His message. In the final elements of the process, the practical element becomes even more dominant, with the absence of any mention of deeper dimensions. The logic of this gap is self-evident: the people are impatient, they are profoundly affected by their slavery, and this is not the time to engage them in lengthy conceptual and philosophical discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some examples: In *Sefer Vayikra*, God speaks about *Eretz Yisrael* as being His land, and He forbids a person who purchases land to treat it as though it belongs entirely to him: "The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (*Vayikra* 25:23). In *Sefer Devarim*, in contrast, Moshe talks about the land as being given to the people and as belonging to them: "Every place where the sole of your foot treads shall be yours, from the wilderness and the Lebanon, from the river, the Perat River, to the uttermost sea shall be your border" (*Devarim* 11:24); or, "You shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" (8:10). Likewise, time – as measured and defined through the calendar – is depicted by God in *Sefer Vayikra* as being of a Divine order, as it were, and belonging to Him: "The appointed times of God which you shall proclaim to be holy gatherings – these are My appointed times… it is a *Shabbat* unto God in all your dwellings" (*Vayikra* 23:2-3). Moshe, in contrast, speaks of time as belonging to the jurisdiction of the nation and as operating in accordance with man's definitions: "You shall observe the festival of Sukkot for seven days, when you have gathered in your corn and your wine" (*Devarim* 16:13). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. These landmarks are just a sample, since comprehensive coverage of the subject requires intensive study of the text, which lies beyond the scope of the present *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The phrase "for with strength of hand did God bring you out **of there** (*mi-zeh*)" conveys a beautiful nuance: Moshe says, "out of there" and points to Egypt. The physical pointing to the place creates a tangible link to the place in which they now find themselves, giving it a presence and also creating a contrast. The dominant place at this moment is Egypt, to which Moshe is pointing. In contrast, the place in which they now find themselves is not sufficiently important to be noted. This silence, or omission, will soon be contrasted, in turn, with the verses that follow, in which there is an explicit emphasis on place – with the stage of entry into the land.

    There is a fascinating transition from one perspective to another in the space between our verse and the next one – "Today (*ha-yom*) you have come out, in the month of spring" (13:4). In the first verse, the Exodus from Egypt is mentioned twice in the past tense: "Remember this day (*ha-yom ha-zeh*) that **you came out** (*yatzatem*) of Egypt, from the house of slavery, for with strength of hand **did God bring you out** (*hotzi*) from there; no leavened bread shall be eaten." In the second verse, the Exodus is depicted in the present tense: "This day (*ha-yom*) you have come out (*yotzim* – literally, "you are coming out"), in the month of spring". What is the meaning of this change? The answer lies in the shifting of perspective between one verse and the next. In the first, Moshe adopts a concrete position, "here and now,” and emphasizes the specific point in time: "This day." His mention of Egypt is likewise accompanied by a gesture that makes the place tangible: "… did God bring you out of there." The formulation in the past tense is necessary, since physically the nation has in fact already left Egypt. However, in the next verse, Moshe speaks of "today" (*ha-yom* – literally, "the day"), which is an abstract idea with no tangible reference. Its context is broad – "the month of spring,” expressing a sort of expansion and abstraction. It is still the middle of the month of spring, and it therefore makes sense that the Exodus is referred to here in the present tense: "Today you have come out" (or "are coming out"), since in this broad context the Exodus is still happening; to a considerable extent, it has only just started. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Why does the Torah use the word "*zeh*" rather than "*zot*"? The feminine form would seem more appropriate, considering that it seemingly refers to the *matza*, or perhaps to the service (*avoda*) mentioned previously in feminine form: "And you shall perform this service (*ha-avoda ha-zot*) in this month." Apparently, the expression "*ba'avur zeh*" refers to the entire description that has preceded it. The feminine form, "*zot*,” would have created a more direct link specifically to the *matza* or to the Pesach service; the masculine form makes the reference more general. It is another step, as it were, in broadening a person's spatial perception, to include an entire spectrum of manifestations of God's strong hand. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For instance, in the very next stage: "And it shall be for you as a sign upon your hand and as a remembrance between your eyes, in order that God's Torah may be in your mouth, for by a strong hand did God bring you out of Egypt" (ibid. 9). The "hand" embodies man's actions. Action will henceforth be accompanied by a sign, and the sign will create spiritual significance, imbuing the action with a higher dimension of meaning. "For you" – this is personal, inner attention. "Between your eyes" – the eyes see, and it is in the space between the eyes that memory will rest. A person looks at reality, and this looking will now be accompanied by a sign that keeps another, spiritual dimension within the picture. This additional dimension is also attributed to the strong hand, as we find at the conclusion of the verse – "for by a strong hand did God bring you out of Egypt." However, attention should be paid to the following: Like the recounting to the sons, which proceeds in the present and not in the past, now too the focus is the aim, "in order that God's Torah may be in your mouth," rather than the past memory. The sign and the memory keep the spiritual dimension present in a person's life. They become living, existential movements in his contemporary existence, and this will have implications for God's elevated and lofty Torah, which should be constantly present and part of a person's speech and of his life. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In contrast to the aspect of sanctity of the firstborn, who is set apart in God's first command, the firstborn status is depicted here in a more natural way, more firmly connected to life and to values. For example, God speaks in terms of an act of sanctification (*kadesh li* – sanctify unto Me), while Moshe speaks of "passing on" the firstborn (*ve-ha'avartem*). "Passing on" is an action that involves movement from one domain to another; it says nothing about the inherent separateness or sanctity of the firstborn. (Compare, "You shall pass on [*ve-ha'avartem*] his inheritance to his daughter" – *Bamidbar* 27:8). Likewise, in contrast to the repeated attribution "to Me" in God's words ("Sanctify **unto Me** every firstborn… of man and of beast; it is **Mine**"), emphasizing God's presence in the first person, Moshe refers to God in a more distant way, using the third person ("you shall set apart **for God** all that opens the womb and every firstling that emerges from a beast which you possess; the males shall belong **to God**"). In contrast to the original command, which depicted sanctifying every firstborn directly to God, the expression "which you possess" implies that the firstborn is initially owned by the person; only afterwards is it given to God. God's command also makes no mention of the possibility of redemption, such that the firstborn retains an absolutely separate status. Moshe, in contrast, speaks of "redeeming" the firstborn, restoring it to the circle of life. The expression "*sheger behema*" expresses the idea that a beast "sends forth" (*meshager*) its young from its body, thereby testifying, as it were, to the young belonging to its mother. The command, "and every firstborn of man among your children shall you redeem," likewise identifies the firstborn as the son of the person who redeems him, connecting him to the chain of generations, in stark contrast to the command, "Sanctify unto Me every firstborn,” which connects the firstborn directly and exclusively to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This difference in the nature of the two festivals also finds expression in the Mishna. R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi organizes the *mishnayot* of *Massekhet Pesachim* in chronological order (starting with "*arvei pesachim*,” the eve of the festival, and ending with a chronological description of the *Seder* night). This chronological structure matches the unit in *Shemot* 12, which sets forth the laws pertaining to this period stage by stage. The festival of Sukkot, in contrast, invites a more inward focus, and it is therefore appropriate that both the textual verses and the *massekhet* are organized conceptually rather than chronologically. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)