

The Unknown Fruit: Sukkot 5787

Rabbi Jonah Rank - Hebrew Seminary Rosh Yeshivah

On one Friday morning in the 14th century in the Rhineland, a young Rabbi Ya'akov HaLevi Moelin was surprised to find his father, Rabbi Mosheh, assembling his *sukkah* with little time to go before Shabbat. The traditional prohibition of building during Shabbat (Mishnah, Shabbat 7:2) meant that the morning activity was about to end. Could his father be done in time? Soon, a crowd gathered and joined the son in expressing their dismay at the elder's poor judgment.

The senior Rabbi Moelin finally offered his defense: “ואתא מצוה לידך לא תחמץ” (“When a *mitzvah* comes to you, don't waste it”).

Rabbi Ya'akov must have realized there was some wisdom in his father's unorthodox approach to *sukkah*-building. Rabbi Ya'akov would later rule:

מיד לאחר יום כפור יעסוק כל אדם לעשות סוכתו משום שנשלמו ימי תשובה
ויום ראשון שנכנס לחטא ח"ו יקדים את עצמו לאתחולי במצוה כדי לקיים
ילכו מחיל אל חיל.

Immediately after Yom Kippur, every person should get busy making their *sukkah* because, once the Days of Repentance have ended [at the conclusion of Yom Kippur], what if, on the first day [of being sin-free], someone accidentally enters the realm of sin—God forbid!? [Rather,] one should ready one's self to begin a *mitzvah*, so as to fulfill [Psalm 84:8's ideal] that “[one who finds strength in

God] shall go from strength to strength.” (*Sefer Maharil* [*Minhagim*], *Hilkhos Sukkot* 1.)

Rabbi Ya’akov grew fond of Sukkot in a time when what made Sukkot special felt unclear to many Jews. When his older colleague Rabbi David Abudarham in Seville had to justify why the Amidah prayer on Sukkot calls this festival “זמן שמחתנו” (*Zeman Simchatenu*, “the Season of our Joy”), the only answer he could imagine was: the Torah commanded us to be joyous on Sukkot (*Sefer Abudarham, Seder Tefillot Sukkot*, citing Deuteronomy 16:15). Rabbi Ya’akov, when asked to explain this liturgical nickname, shared that Sukkot used to be celebrated with the kindling of four *menorot* (מנורות, “candelabra”) in Jerusalem (*Sefer Maharil* [*Minhagim*], *Hilkhos Chag HaSukkot* 5.) Because no Jewish writer seems to have ever mentioned this practice before Rabbi Ya’akov did, it is possible that he fabricated a myth of a discontinued practice—but probably because he wished it were true.

In fact, Rabbi Ya’akov became obsessed with Sukkot. When he was asked if Jews could eat fruits on Sukkot outside of a *sukkah*, he replied that Jewish law really did not allow for that. Moreover, he said, there should be no eating or drinking outside of a *sukkah* on Sukkot—except for water. (*Sefer Maharil* [*Minhagim*], *Hilkhos Chag HaSukkot* 6.) Given that no such laws existed before Rabbi Ya’akov (and these laws have not remained binding), why would Rabbi Ya’akov approach Sukkot with such fantasy?

The answer may lie in medieval rabbis’ concern that Sukkot’s joyfulness felt too distant. Constructing and deconstructing a temporary home must have exhausted Jews who could not determine if their actual houses were permanent homes. Rabbi Ya’akov, born circa 1365 in Mainz, lived to see his hometown synagogue converted

into a church; therefore, it is no wonder that he moved to Worms, where Jews often lived comfortably, even while quietly remembering that the local Jews were massacred in 1089.

Not long before him, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (born c. 1269 in Cologne, and dying in 1343 in Toledo) had written:

תלה הכתוב מצות סוכה ביציאת מצרים... לפי שהוא דבר שראינו בעינינו
ובאזנינו שמענו ואין אדם יכול להכחישנו...

The Scripture attached the *mitzvah* of the *sukkah* to the exodus from Egypt... since it is a matter we saw with our eyes and heard with our ears. There is no person who can deny this... (*Arba'ah Turim, Orach Chayyim* 625.)

Ben Asher's words should not be read literally. Deaf and blind Israelites certainly experienced the exodus from Egypt—and most Jews in his day either experienced or knew to be on the lookout for an expulsion or another reason to pack one's bags quickly.

With only four days in between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, this Season of our Joy tests our ability to build a portable home fast. Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, and like medieval Jews unsure of their neighbors' intentions, we sit in our *sukkah*, as if we too do not know if we are staying or going—or where we would land if we were suddenly on the move. Worrying is not a *mitzvah* though; rather, we must seek happiness even in times of uncertainty. For this reason, Sukkot compels us to adapt and to search for happiness amidst the turbulence of Jewish history. It is sacred to enter the unknown and, while we're at it, enjoy a fruit and life's other small blessings.

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