

Introduction to Tractate Sukkah

Scripture supplies nearly all of the pertinent facts of Sukkot, the feast of booths or tabernacles, in Lev. 23:33–43. Num. 29:12–38 specifies the offerings on the occasion of the festival of Sukkot and Deu. 16:13–15 specifies the use of the booth:

- I. The appurtenances of the festival of Sukkot; the *sukkah*, the *lulab*
 - A. The *sukkah* and its roofing
 - B. The obligation to dwell in the *sukkah*
 - C. The *lulab* and the *etrog*
- II. The rites and offerings of the festival
 - A. The festival rites carried out on various days of the festival
 - B. The offerings

The law in *Sukkah* takes as its task the presentation of three topics:

- (1) Temple rites;
- (2) home obligations; and
- (3) special media for, and modes of, the celebration of the festival.

The building the *sukkah*, or shelter, is first; followed by consideration of the media for the celebration, the *lulab* and *etrog*; and finally the Temple rites in their own terms and context. The tractate begins with the amplification of the practical requirements of how the *sukkah* is constructed and defining what marks an invalid one. The *sukkah* is to resemble a house but should not replicate one. It is the abode of the wilderness, impermanent but serviceable under the circumstances. The *sukkah* must resemble a dwelling, casting a shadow and affording protection from the sun, but it does not shelter from the rain and a strong wind will knock it over. There are more important and definitive traits that distinguish the *sukkah* from the house. It must be constructed out-of-doors, not under a tree. It must be built for that particular holiday, meaning, the roofing (*sekhakh*) must be put up for the occasion, just as the Passover lamb must be designated for a particular “sacrifier” (the person who sets an offering aside for God, not the person physically preparing the animal for sacrifice) and for a particular Passover occasion (by definition, since the lamb has to have been born after the last Passover). The roofing moreover forms the center of interest, the walls not having to be modeled on conventional housing, and the key for the roof is that the shade it provides must exceed the light but cannot block out all light. The main purpose of the impermanent abode, like that in the wilderness, is to provide shelter from the sun.

The *sukkah* must derive from man’s artifice and intent. It cannot be formed of what is attached to the ground, but must be made of what has grown from the ground, what is insusceptible to uncleanness, and what has been cut down. It must be built deliberately by a person, as a natural *sukkah* would be an oxymoron. It must represent an occasion and not be a permanent arrangement, as a permanent *sukkah* would also be an oxymoron. The *sukkah* roofing must afford shelter by means derived from nature, but of something that has been detached from nature. Human intervention is required.

The *sukkah* in its transience is to match Israel's condition when it was in the wilderness, wandering between Egypt and the Land, between death and eternal life. It is a temporary abode suspended between heaven and earth. Just as Passover marks the differentiation of Israel from Egypt, expiating sin through the Passover offering and through the death of the first-born, and by this expiation attaining life, so Sukkot addresses the condition of Israel. It is, we must remind ourselves, the generation of the wilderness with which we deal, the generation that must die out before Israel can enter the Land. Thus entering the *sukkah* reminds Israel not only of the fragility of its condition but also—in the aftermath of the penitential season—of its actuality: still sinful and still awaiting death, so that a new generation will be ready for the Land. The festival of Sukkot recapitulates that interstitial circumstance between death in Egypt and eternal life in the Land. The now-abode of Israel-in-between is the house that is not a house, protected by a roof that is open to the elements but serves somewhat: it is Israel *en route* to death (for those here now) and then to eternal life (for everyone then).