

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Emor

Sukkos in the Wilderness

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לַה'

Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: on the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkos, a period of seven days for Hashem.¹

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 23 of Parshas Emor discusses the holy days of the Torah year: Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkos. This chapter is well-known to us as part of the Torah reading during the festivals of Pesach and Sukkos. This makes it more valuable to discuss certain questions of a *parshanut* nature that might otherwise go unnoticed...

WHEREFORE IS THIS FESTIVAL DIFFERENT THAN ALL OTHER FESTIVALS?

When surveying the Torah's presentation of these special days, the festival of Sukkos stands out in the following way. As a rule, when the Torah presents a festival, it begins by mentioning the specific mitzvah that applies to that festival and then states that it is prohibited to perform *melachah* (creative labor). Thus, for example:

- ▷ On Pesach – the verse begins by mentioning the mitzvah of eating matzah and then outlines which days are forbidden to do *melachah*.
- ▷ On Rosh Hashanah – the verse first mentions the mitzvah to blow shofar and then the prohibition against *melachah*.
- ▷ On Yom Kippur – the verse first mentions the mitzvah of “afflicting your souls” i.e. fasting, and then the prohibition against *melachah*.

In contrast to all of the above, when it comes to Sukkos, the Torah begins by mentioning which days are forbidden for *melachah*, and only subsequently discusses the mitzvos of the festival – sukkah and *arba minim* (four species). Indeed, not only are the mitzvos of the festival mentioned second, they are actually mentioned *in an entirely separate section*: The Torah initially introduces Sukkos in verse 34 as “the fifteenth day of the seventh month”, and then it does so again in verse 39 before presenting the mitzvos of the festival: “However, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month...”!

¹ Vayikra 23:34.

To make matters even more baffling, verse 37 – which appears between these two aspects of Sukkos – appears to be concluding the entire discussion of the festivals. The verse reads:

אֵלֶּה מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ לְהַקְרִיב אֲשֶׁה לָּהּ עֲלֶה וּמִנְחָה זָבַח וּנְסֻכִּים
דָּבַר יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ

These are the appointed festivals of Hashem, which you shall proclaim as holy callings, [on which] to offer a fire-offering to Hashem, burnt-offering and meal-offering, feast-offering and libations, each one for its day.

This is clearly a verse of summation for this section of the Torah dealing with the holy days. Yet why does the Torah conclude its discussion, only to then immediately re-open it to finish talking about the festival of Sukkos?

All of this requires our attention.

WHEN DID THE MITZVOS OF SUKKOS BEGIN?

Rav Eliezer Waldenberg² addresses these parshanut questions by asking a basic question about the mitzvos of Sukkos themselves: When did they begin?

When we consider the mitzvah of dwelling in a sukkah, we note that the Torah itself provides the reason for the mitzvah in the concluding verse of the section:

לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דַרְתֵּיכֶם כִּי בְּסֻכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

So that your generation will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in Sukkos when I took them out from the land of Egypt.³

Now, it is well-known that the sages of the Talmud differ as to which Sukkos the verse is referring to: One opinion understands the reference is to actual booths in which we lived, while the other opinion maintains that reference is to the Clouds of Glory that accompanied us through the wilderness. However, regardless of which Sukkos the Torah refers to, both are things that the people in the wilderness were experiencing directly! As such, there is room to say that there was no mitzvah at that time to build a Sukkah to commemorate them.⁴

Similarly, with regards to the mitzvah of taking the *arba minim*, we see that the Torah introduces this mitzvah with the words, “בְּאַסְפְּכֶם אֶת תְּבוּאֵת הָאָרֶץ” – when you gather in the harvest of the land.”⁵ This seems to indicate that the mitzvah is initiated when the people enter the land of Israel and begin to grow crops. Additionally, Rav Waldenberg notes that certain classic commentators understand the reason for the mitzvah of *arba minim* as expressing gratitude to Hashem for bringing us from the wilderness into the land of Israel. The Rambam writes in the Moreh Nevuchim:⁶

The [four] species express our joy at having left the wilderness, which could not support any vegetation and where there was no water, to a place of fruit-bearing trees and rivers. In recognition of this, we take of the most choice of the fruits,

2 Responsa Tzitz Eliezer vol. 7 sec. 31.

3 Verse 43.

4 See also regarding this question in Mabit, *Beis Elokim, Shaar Hayesodos* chap. 37.

5 Verse 39.

6 Sec. 3 chap. 43.

which has a pleasant aroma, and the most beautiful of the branches and leaves.

Likewise, the Abarbanel in his commentary to our parsha explains that the mitzvah of *arba minim* is an expression of our joy and gratitude for having been brought from the wilderness to the land of Israel, adding that the *aravos*, which are referred to in the verse as “עֲרֵבְי נָחַל – *willows of the stream*,” express our gratitude for having come from the wilderness where there were no natural water-sources to a land which contains rivers, streams and springs. In light of these observations and explanations, there is ample room to see how the mitzvah of *arba minim* was likewise not initialized until we entered the land of Israel.

Bearing all this in mind, we can now understand why the Torah’s presentation of Sukkos is divided into two sections: The first section contains the mitzvos of Sukkos as they applied immediately in the wilderness. At that point, the Torah’s discussion of Sukkos – and indeed, of all the festivals – concludes. There then ensues a separate section discussing the mitzvos of Sukkos that would apply when they entered the land.

Indeed, it is most interesting to note a subtle difference in the Torah’s introduction of these two sections dealing with Sukkos. The first section presents the date of the festival as: “בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר – *the fifteenth day of this seventh month*,” while the second section refers to it as: “בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי – *the fifteenth day of the seventh month*.” This further accentuates the idea that the contents of the first sections are already applicable on this coming Sukkos, while the mitzvos mentioned in the second section are for the seventh month in general; not while in the present setting of the wilderness, but rather for when the people enter the land.