

D'rash for Shabbat Kol Ha-Moed Sukkot 10/15/11

This is an extraordinary parsha – moving, powerful, strange, distressing and demanding. If one were looking for one parsha to give someone the full sense of the Torah in its many modes, this would be a good one to select. It has narrative and law, mystery and clarity, concise passages and elaborated ones, and material to comfort, confuse and disturb a 21st Century American. And it tells of Moses conversing with G_d, G_d's attributes, the second set of the Ten Commandments, and the holiday cycle, among other high points.

But why do we read it on the Shabbat of Sukkot?

It's clear why we would read the very brief mention of Sukkot itself – although there are other parts of the Torah that describe the holiday in more detail – but why this particular chunk of Torah that goes with the mention of the festival?

I came up with three reasons.

The first is that this parsha underscores the centrality of the festivals. They are not just some added frill; they are inextricably connected to the Commandments. The commandments to observe the festivals are given here as a kind of pre-requisite to receiving the Ten Commandments for keeps. This time, the second time the Commandments are inscribed, after the Golden Calf, the Commandments are a kind of collaboration between Moses and G_d – Moses creates the tablets this time – and they are given with a fuller appreciation of human nature.

And what G_d and Moses seem to have learned is that we need structure and ritual to anchor our lives, that we need to mark the passage of time and to consider its meaning, and regular ritual to think about our place in the world. The conclusion here seems to be that we will be less likely to abide by the Ten Commandments without a structure of time, and ritual, and a community to keep us focused. Judaism's insight is that function follows form. Create a structure for life, and then the content will be observed. In the Torah's view, we need the second set of ten commandments that are given here about the holidays to be sure we will live in a manner that tries to fulfill the Ten Words.

The second reason to read this parsha during Sukkot is related to the first. Why start with this remarkable dialogue between Moses and G_d? It is a startling conversation, so like two humans talking in many ways, but remarkable also for Moses' inquiring, almost wheedling tone, with an almost desperate edge.

I think this interplay between Moses and G_d captures many of our own concerns and questions, especially at this time of year – questions raised in Ecclesiastes as well. They seem particularly appropriate for Sukkot with its focus on wandering in the desert and feeling exposed. What path are we on? Is it meaningful? Can You give us some

indication that we're going the right way, that life has meaning, that we're on a path that matters? How can we know?

Moses gets an answer from G_d, sort of, by being able to feel G_d's *kavod*, but for us, the parsha seems to say, the answer to our questions is the festivals. The holidays are how we gauge what path we're on, take our measure, and imbue our lives with meaning, feel G_d's presence as we join together. The calendar is how we measure our days, in every sense.

A third reason this parsha is so appropriate for Sukkot has to do more directly with Moses. In this parsha, we see Moses at his heights – he is bold, forceful, inquisitive, a true leader concerned with his people. But we know that in less than a week, at Simchat Torah, we will read of his death. The words we hear today seem especially poignant in the shadow of what we know we are about to learn, of a mortal leader, his physical strength undimmed, yet unable to achieve his greatest desire.

This, too, puts us in mind of the cycle of life – and the cycle of the year, and the festivals that mark it. The story of Moses, in a way, connects our personal cycle with our communal one, and also picks up the undercurrent of sadness in the joy of Sukkot – the end of the harvest, the beginning of winter, the bittersweet and darker tone of Shemini Atzeret. Ecclesiastes echoes these concerns and this tone.

So, with all this in mind, I'd like to hear everyone's thoughts on what the festivals bring to our lives, the extent to which we need them, or any other thoughts about the link between Sukkot and this parsha.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Some thoughts prompted by comments I heard:

- 1) Judaism, of course, is constantly alive to the tension between focusing too much on ritual and not enough. Today's parsha is a nice contrast to the wonderful reading from Isaiah we do on Yom Kippur with its condemnation of empty ritual. Still, even Isaiah, talks about observing Shabbat as part of an ethical life.
- 2) It's interesting that today we read the full passage about the attributes of G_d, given that we repeatedly recite the abridged version in the liturgy on the High Holidays and Sukkot. (In praying, we leave out the part of visiting the sins of the fathers on the children and children's children.) As Gilah noted at the Kol Nidre service, we feel free to edit G_d. Maybe there is a sense that after seeking atonement and feeling the joy of Sukkot, we're ready to deal with the full quotation, which we need to understand to make sense of life.
- 3) There's a midrash I love that says that before the Flood, there were no seasons. After the Flood, G_d created seasons, so that people wouldn't take the world for granted. This seems to fit with the sense of the festivals that I've ascribed to the parsha.

- 4) Rhonda asked me after services how I would deal with the fact that this is also the parsha we read for the intermediate Shabbat of Pesach. Some of the points I make above would, of course, apply to Passover as well. But that's a subject for the spring. It is still the case that the Rabbis chose to use this for Sukkot, and I think that obligates us to think about how it resonates with this holiday, even though we read this at two other times of the year, as well (Passover and as part of a longer portion in the regular cycle).