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בס"ד

Halakhot of Sukkot

I. Introduction

The festival of Sukkot commemorates the extraordinary care and protection that Hashem bestowed upon the Israelites during their perilous wandering through the wilderness. In the first instance it refers to their travels through the desert upon leaving Egypt. It also reminds us of the special providence Hashem extended Israel through its history traveling through the "Wilderness of the Nations" (Ezek. 20:35). Sukkot is one of the *shalosh regalim*, the three festivals prescribed in the Torah (the other two being Pesah and Shabuot), when the members of the nation went to the central sanctuary to celebrate.

The first day of Sukkot and the eighth day, called Shemini Asseret (essentially "a festival for itself" attached to Sukkot), are days of *yamim tobim*, full festival occasions on which work is prohibited except that connected to "okhel nefesh" (see our Halakhot of Yom Tob.). The six intermediate days are "*hol hamo`ed*," that is "non-holy" days of the festival, days on which work may be performed with certain restrictions. In the Diaspora, Sukkot begins with two days of Yom Tob and concludes with two days Yom Tob of Shemini Asseret.

II. Misvah of Sukkah

A commandment of the Torah is to reside in a sukkah all seven days of Sukkot. A sukkah – derived from "sekhakh" (covering) – refers to a booth generally constructed for temporary or modest dwelling, such as might be provided for cattle (Gen. 33:17) or an orchard watchman (Isa. 1:8). The sekhakh of the sukkah plays a critical role in determining its halakhic acceptability. Residence primarily comprises eating and sleeping but also includes other activities one does at home such as reading, resting, social conversation, etc.

The *berakha* recited for this misvah is "*lesheb basukkah*." Although one performs a misvah whenever residing in the sukkah during the seven days of Sukkot, the blessing is not recited except upon partaking of a significant minimum measurement of bread or mezonot.

Less than "*kebesa*" of bread (the volume of an average egg, see below) may be eaten outside the sukkah; more than that requires a sukkah and the *berakha* of "*lesheb basukkah*."

Cake, crackers, cookies and other baked *mezonot* items may be eaten outside the sukkah as long as one does not eat an amount that is considered having "established a meal" of the mezonot. This measure is considered by some authorities to be the volume of three average eggs, which requires reciting *hamosi*, *birkat hamazon* and eating in a sukkah with the *berakha* of "*lesheb basukkah*." The volume of four average eggs of such mezonot products definitely requires the above. In practical halakha there is a dispute concerning these measurement; some authorities consider a "*kebesa*" volume to be approximately two ounces of weight of bread or cake while others consider it to be not more than one and one-third ounces of weight of bread or cake.

In the case of cooked mezonot products such as pasta, when one eats the minimum measure they require sukkah and "*lesheb basukkah*" despite the fact that they never require the *berakhot* of "*hamosi*" and "*birkat hamazon*," but "*mezonot*" and "*al hamihya*," even when they comprise a "regular" meal. *

Fruits, vegetables and drinks are permitted outside the sukkah in any quantity. Whoever is careful to eat and drink in the sukkah even when partaking of less than the minimum measure that requires sukkah is praiseworthy. It is proper to eat mezonot items that are

of at least a kebesa in the sukkah even though they do not require “lesheb basukkah.”

When reciting the blessings, one first recites hamosi then lesheb basukkah. On Yom Tob or Shabbat, since there is qiddush, lesheb basukkah is attached to the qiddush. If one forgot to recite it at the beginning of his meal, he may do so as long as he is still within the meal, even if he no longer intends to eat bread.

On the first night of Sukkot, one is required to eat at least a “kezayit” of bread in the sukkah. (Kezayit is dependent on the kebesa, but one ounce is surely adequate.) In the Diaspora this applies to the second night also.

There are four berakhot in the qiddush of the first two nights of Sukkot: the first is on the wine, the second commemorates the festival, followed by lesheb basukkah and shehehiyanu. On the second night the order of the third and fourth blessings are reversed as explained below.

The shehehiyanu in the qiddush on all first nights of festivals expresses gratitude for being alive to fulfill the misvah of celebrating the festival. On Sukkot it also applies to the misvah of construction of the sukkah (even if the individual reciting the qiddush did not build or does not own the sukkah). Therefore, on the first night it is recited after lesheb basukkah, to cover both misvot. On the second night, shehehiyanu is only for the festival, recited because of the “doubt of the day” that used to apply. As far as construction of the sukkah is concerned, the shehehiyanu of the first night would cover it even if the first night were not really the festival, as the sukkah was already completed. Although these considerations derive from a situation that no longer obtains today we do not have the authoritative betdin to bring the halakha into alignment with the reality.

III. Exemptions From the Misvah

Women are not required to eat in the sukkah, as it is one of the positive commandments governed by time from which they are exempt. If they choose to eat in the sukkah they fulfill a misvah. However, they should not recite lesheb basukkah, as they cannot properly say “vesivanu” (“He commanded us”). This

principle applies to all such cases in which women are exempt but choose to fulfill the misvah.

In cold or inclement climates one need not sleep in the sukkah. One should not sleep in the sukkah if it is dangerous, for “danger is more serious than a prohibition.”

A sick person who is discomforted when eating in the sukkah, even if his illness is not life threatening, is exempt. The sick person’s attendant is also exempt.

When it is raining hard enough to interfere with the normal use of the sukkah as a room in one’s home, one is exempt and may eat bread outside the sukkah. If, nonetheless, one chooses to eat in the sukkah, he is not allowed to recite the berakha on the sukkah. The rabbis consider a person who does so “hedyot.” Similarly, other adverse conditions in the sukkah that cause one significant discomfort such as extreme cold or bad odor not under one’s control, also exempt one from sukkah.

If one began his meal indoors because it was raining, and the rain stopped while he was in the midst of the meal, he does not have to move to the sukkah or refrain from bread during the rest of the meal. Once he was exempt at the beginning of the meal he is exempt for the whole meal.

If it rains the first night of Sukkot before one fulfilled the misvah of eating in the sukkah, and the individual is prepared to begin his meal, he should wait a half hour or so to see if the rain stops or if there is a sign of stopping. If it does not stop, and there is no sign of stopping, he may then eat with bread in the house. Even the first night there is no misvah to eat in the sukkah while disturbed by rain.

However, on the first night, since eating in the sukkah is a specific misvah from the Torah, if the rain stopped after one began or completed his meal, he should enter the sukkah to eat at least a measure of bread with the berakha of lesheb basukkah. If the rain stopped after one went to bed to sleep for the night, it is not then necessary to go to the sukkah.

Travelers during Sukkot are exempt from sukkah during their journeying times and may eat bread

outside a sukkah providing they are traveling for purposes of business or misvah. Those traveling for pleasure are not exempt from sukkah and even if a sukkah is not available in their vicinity they should refrain from eating the measure of bread that requires a sukkah.

IV. The Sukkah

A sukkah must be at least ten *tefahim* (handbreadths) high, approximately thirty-five inches. In times past, when it was common to sit on the floor, this height was adequate. The maximum height for a sukkah is twenty *amot* or “cubits” (an average person’s forearm, approximately twenty-one inches). Thus, the maximum acceptable height for a sukkah is about 35 feet. If it were higher an individual sitting in the sukkah might not sense being under the sekhakh covering.

A sukkah must have at least two walls and part of a third. In a standard rectangular sukkah, two walls must extend for at least seven *tefahim* each (24½ inches) while the third must extend at least over four *tefahim* (14 inches).

Sukkah walls may be constituted of any material providing they are strong enough to withstand a wind normal for the particular locale during the Sukkot season. The commercial canvas walls common in our times are acceptable providing they are fastened well all along their width on top and bottom. It is preferable they not flutter more than three *tefahim* off center.

The Sukkah must be covered with *sekhakh* that shades the majority of the area of the sukkah.

Sekhakh must be:

- a. of material that grows from the ground
- b. detached from the ground
- c. able to remain for seven days without decomposing
- d. not subject to the laws of ritual impurity, thus excluding receptacles, vessels and foodstuffs.

The most usual materials for sekhakh are bamboo, evergreens and thin wooden slats. It is acceptable to use bamboos spliced into thin strips and interlaced to make a “mat,” providing it was made for overhead

covering or at least not for a floor mat (which involves a technical point of association with a potential defilement).

Sekhakh should not be so solid that heavy rain cannot penetrate the sukkah. It is preferred to be sufficiently thin so that some stars may be visible from the sukkah.

An air gap in the sekhakh of less than three *tefahim* (10½ in.) does not invalidate the sukkah, but one should not eat under such a gap. Invalid sekhakh of less than four *tefahim* (14 in.) in the midst of kosher sekhakh does not invalidate the sukkah and one is permitted to eat underneath such a spot. In a minimum-size sukkah (of seven *tefahim*) these two lenient regulations are inapplicable, as there would not be enough space remaining for a kosher sukkah.

An area that extends into the sukkah from a side wall may have invalid sekhakh (such as a regular roof) up until four *amot* (seven feet) without invalidating the sukkah. The reasoning is that the part of the ceiling connected to the wall may be considered a continuation of the wall (a curved wall). However, the invalid sekhakh area is not considered part of the sukkah; thus, there must be a minimum size of sukkah without it. When eating in such a sukkah one must be under the valid sekhakh.

A sukkah should not be built under any projection (e.g. a ledge, an overhang or trees). If part of the sukkah is under a projection, that part is invalid and one should not eat in that spot.

It is a misvah to decorate the sukkah. Decorations may be attached to the sekhakh even though the decorations are made of material that is invalid for sekhakh. Decorations within four *tefahim* of the sekhakh are annulled to it and one may eat under them.

V. The Four Species - Lulab, Etrog, Hadas and `Araba

The Torah prescribes to take (lift up) the four species on the first day of Sukkot and rejoice. The Talmud defines these as etrog (citron), lulab (palm branch), hadas (myrtle branches) and araba (willow branches).

In the central sanctuary the misvah was performed all seven days of Sukkot. The rabbis extended the misvah to all seven days everywhere.

The misvah is performed once daily during daytime only. It is not performed on Shabbat as the rabbis feared it would lead to carrying.

Women are not obligated in this misvah as it is a positive misvah governed by time. They may choose to perform the misvah, but without a berakha.

One lulab, three hadasim and two `arabot should be bound together, so that the three species comprise a single unit. It is customary to bind them with lulab leaves. The binding should preferably be done before Yom Tob so that the binding material can be cut to size and knots made. If it was not done before Yom Tob, it may be done on Yom Tob in an inferior manner, without cutting and without proper knots.

In fulfilling the misvah, one takes the three species bound together in his right hand, recites the berakha, then takes the etrog in his left hand (even if left-handed) and holds the four species together, and waves them. The central spine of the lulab (shidra) should face towards the person. The berakha is recited just before taking the etrog in hand in accordance with the rule that berakhot on misvot are recited just before fulfillment. If preferred, one may hold the etrog upside down before the berakha and turn it right side up after the berakha, as the misvah is not fulfilled until the four species are held right side up. Right side up means the point of detachment from the tree is to the bottom.

On the first day two berakhot are recited: “al netilat lulab” and “shehehiyanu.” On the rest of the days only the first berakha is recited.

While waving, one should silently request G-d to provide beneficial rains and dew and helpful winds during the coming year. One should have kavana (focused thoughts) for the land of Israel, the country he is in and, in a general way, the world-at-large.

The Torah indicates that we should each take our own set of four species. This applies to the first day (in the Diaspora the first two days). If one does not have his

own set, someone may present him with a “gift” with the understanding that it will be returned. If the congregation owns its own set, each member is considered a partner and each is understood to relinquish his share on behalf of whoever wishes to use it.

There is a technical problem involved with the giving of the lulab set to children on the first day. Halakhically, a child can acquire property when an adult gives it to him, but cannot give over property. Therefore, if a child does not have his own set, an adult should be careful not to transfer his to the child as a “gift” on the first day before all the adults who intend to use that set that day have done so.

The lulab must measure at least four tefachim (14 in.); hadas and araba stalks must measure at least three tefachim each (10½ in.). An etrog must be at least the volume of an average egg.

An etrog from which even a small amount is missing is invalid. This includes the node from which the *pitum* protrudes. Etrogim that grow naturally without such a node are acceptable. The upper portion of an etrog (the upper slope until the top) should be very presentable, without flaws such as discoloration or “scales.” Flaws on the lower portion of the etrog are not as serious and its acceptability depends on the extent.

Proper hadas has three or more leaves protruding from the same horizontal line all along its stem. At the minimum, it should be “tripled” for at least four and one-half inches along its stem, which is the majority of the *bedi`avad* measurement of hadas. If all the leaves dry up to the extent that they no longer are green but “whitish,” it is invalid.

Proper araba has smooth-edged leaves. If the majority of the leaves dry up or fall off, it is invalid.

Whatever is invalid because of “missing,” poor appearance or blemishes is only invalid the first day.

Hadas and particularly araba spoil relatively quickly. To preserve them, it is helpful to wrap them in a large sheet of aluminum foil, wet newspaper or a damp towel and refrigerate.

A halakhic principle is to “beautify the misvot.” As the etrog is defined as the Biblical “hadar,” it is especially appropriate to seek an especially presentable etrog.

VI. Shemini Asseret

The festival of the eighth day (and the ninth day in the Diaspora), Shemini Asseret, is a separate festival in many respects. Thus, the halakhot of sukkah and the “four species” do not apply to it.

It is customary to eat in the sukkah on the first day of Shemini Asseret without reciting the berakha on the sukkah. This is based on the practice of conducting as they did before establishment of a set calendar, when they had the doubt regarding the day, i.e. perhaps the eighth day is really the seventh day and still Sukkot.

The reason we do not recite the berakha on sukkah because of the “doubt” that they had is that in the evening it would be recited in the qiddush, thus creating a totally inappropriate situation: we would mention Shemini Asseret and explicitly contradict our declaration with the blessing of lesheb basukkah. Merely sitting in the sukkah, however, does not create a contradiction as we may choose to eat outdoors independently of the festival.

However, since we now know the day is Shemini Asseret and there is no requirement to sit in the sukkah, slight discomfort permits eating indoors, as the misvah to be joyous in celebrating the festival is from the Torah and the custom to comport in accordance with the “doubt of the day” that they had before the set calendar cannot override it.

We begin reciting “mashib haru`ah umorid hageshem” in the amida of musaf of Shemini Asseret. If one mistakenly recited “morid hatal” he does not repeat, as dew is appropriate all year long. We do not begin “Barekh `Alenu” in the amida (that includes the “tal umatar” request for rain) until December 4th or 5th.

VII. Simhat Torah

Simhat Torah is celebrated on Shemini Asseret; in the Diaspora it is celebrated on the second day. On this day we conclude the reading of the Torah and begin

reading it anew. It is then appropriate to focus our intentions on increasing our study of the Torah this time around.

We read from three Sifre Torah. In the first we conclude the Torah, in the second we begin Beresheet and in the third we read the maftir for the day. Although we normally recite qaddish after a required reading of each Sefer Torah of Yom Tob or Shabbat, the custom is not to recite qaddish after concluding the Torah so as not to interrupt between concluding it and beginning it again.

Three “hatanim” (grooms of the Torah) are designated for the readings. The “Hatan Me`ona” reads the portion of the Torah that precedes the concluding portion, the “Hatan Torah” concludes, while the “Hatan Beresheet” begins from the beginning of the Torah.

It is customary to give many aliyot on this day, including to children to increase their love for the Torah. Very young children are sent up in groups with an older child leading them in the berakha. The extra aliyot are generally given before the aliya of Hatan Me`ona although some have the custom to send up the Hatan Me`ona as “hamishi” (before the extra aliyot).

A special celebration is made in honor of the Torah. The rabbis and the public dance with the Torah and circle the Torah seven times with singing and dancing both at night and by day. If indicated, it is permitted to take the Sefer Torah outdoors to increase the celebration.

VIII. Prayers

Ya`ale veyabo is recited in each *amida*. If it was omitted during the intermediate days (*hol hamo`ed*, when a weekday *amida* is recited), and the individual did not realize it until having concluded, he repeats the *amida*, for he made no mention of the special day. If he realized the omission before concluding the *amida*, he should return to “*rese*” and repeat from that point on, which includes *ya`ale veyabo*. On Yom Tob, if mention of the festival was made in the *amida* independently of *ya`ale veyabo*, one does not need to repeat.

Complete Hallel with a berakha is recited after the amida of shahrit each day for all nine days. The lulab set is waved in all six directions on each of the days of Sukkot except Shabbat (that is, on six days) during the recital of certain verses in Hallel. While waving, one should silently pray for a year of adequate rain and dew.

Hoshanot are recited daily for the seven days of Sukkot after Hallel. A Sefer Torah is placed on the tebah and each individual circles around it while holding a set of the four species. Our custom is to bring the Sefer Torah to the tebah before “Barukh She’amar.” On Shabbat, as the four species are proscribed, Hoshanot are not recited. Some recite Hoshanot composed specially for Shabbat but do not bring out a Sefer Torah for it.

Specified selections are read from the Torah each morning. The minimum number of aliyot on Yom Tob is five plus *maftir*. The number of aliyot on hol hamo`ed is four.

Each day of Sukkot, before arbit and in the morning prayers, we recite Psalms 42 and 43 that connect to

the theme of the occasion. For Shemini Asseret we recite Psalm 12.

Musaf is said daily.

The last day of hol hamo`ed is *Hosh`anah Rabbah*. There is a custom to stay up all night and read the complete Books of Debarim and Tehillim. We pray for one more chance.

On Hoshanah Rabbah seven sections of hosh`anot are recited, during each of which the congregants circle the Sefer Torah on the tebah.

At the conclusion of musaf, five arabot, bound together, are beaten five times on the ground with a silent prayer that G-d should grant us a year during which the earth yields its produce abundantly.

Tefillin are not donned for all nine days.

Ya`ale veyabo is recited in birkat hamazon throughout the festival including the intermediate days.

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