

# Why Can't A Sukah Be More Than 20 Cubits High?

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(based on a class given on *Tishrei 20, 5766* | October 22, 2005)

## *Introduction*

A *sukah* cannot be higher than 20 cubits (about 10 meters).<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the tractate of *Sukah*, the Talmud bring three opinions as to why the height of a *sukah* is limited in this way.

**Rabbah** says that if the *sukah* is higher than 20 cubits a person who is sitting in it does not realize that he is in a *sukah*. Rabbah learns this from the verse: "So that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths [*sukot*] when I took them out of Egypt."<sup>2</sup> The operative verb according to Rabbah is "know," making it apparent that for Rabbah the question of a *sukah's* height is related to conscious awareness.

**Rabbi Zeirah** says that if the *sukah* is higher than 20 cubits, when sitting in it a person is not in the shade made by the branches placed on top of the *sukah* (called the *s'chach*, סכך), but by the shade made by the walls of the *sukah*. Rabbi Zeira learns from the verse "And a *sukah* will give shade from the heat of the day"<sup>3</sup> that the main point of the *sukah* (defined primarily by the *s'chach*) is to provide shade.

The final opinion is offered by **Rava** who says that a building that is higher than 20 cubits cannot be a temporary residence. Rava learns that a *sukah* is intended to be a temporary residence from the verse directly preceding the verse brought by Rabbah: "You shall dwell in booths [*sukot*] for seven days."<sup>4</sup> This verse teaches us that we are commanded to leave our permanent residences for seven days and instead dwell in a temporary residence.

## *Height of the Sukah and the Four Species*

During the festival of *sukot* we are commanded to take and hold together what are known as the Four Species. They are a citron, called an *etrog* in Hebrew; a palm branch, called a *lulav*; myrtle branches, which are known as *hadasim*, in Hebrew; and willow branches, called *aravot* in Hebrew (we will use their Hebrew names throughout). When performing the commandment to take the Four Species and hold them together, the *lulav* is bound with the *aravot* and the *hadasim*, which together are held in the right hand, and the *etrog* is then taken in the left hand and joined to the three species. A theme common to many Chassidic teachings on *sukot* is finding the relationship between the two main

commandments of the holiday: dwelling in the *sukah* and taking the Four Species.

As we shall now see the three opinions regarding the limit on the height of the *sukah* correspond to the three species that are bound together and taken in the right hand: the *lulav*, the *hadasim*, and the *aravot*. From this we may infer that there is a fourth reason, which is not stated explicitly, which corresponds to the *etrog* taken in the left hand.

### ***Rabbah - Lulav***

As noted, the major issue according to Rabbah is one of "consciousness," or "knowledge." In Kabbalah and Chassidut, the *lulav* is seen to correspond to the *sefirah* of knowledge. Why is this so?

The *lulav* is likened to the spinal column of a human being. As such it serves to connect the head with the rest of the body, particularly with the procreative organ. In Kabbalistic terminology, for the male to be fertile, an essential "drop of mind" must travel from the head to the procreative organ via the spinal column. This is of course a metaphorical description of what it is that makes human beings capable of begetting children that have the power of mind, thought, and most importantly, consciousness. Thus, though the *lulav* is seen to connect the *sefirot* of knowledge (which corresponds to the conscious element in the mind) and foundation, which corresponds to the procreative organ. Thus, Rabbah's explanation corresponds to the *lulav*.

### ***Rabbi Zeira - Hadasim***

Rabbi Zeira bases his opinion on the requirement that the *sukah* provide shade.<sup>5</sup> In the *Zohar* the shade of the *sukah* is called the "shadow of faith" (צללית דמדימנותא).<sup>6</sup> The person dwelling in the *sukah* is living in the shadow of belief, the greatest and most powerful faculty of our souls. But the origin of belief, like the origin of the shade given by the *sukah*, is in a higher source. In the soul, the origin of belief is in the highest "head" of the *sefirah* of crown, which lies metaphorically above the person. Likewise, the shade of the *sukah*, according to Rabbi Zeira must be made by the rooftop, the highest part of the *sukah* and not the walls, which support the rooftop branches.

At first sight, we might think that this opinion should correspond to the *aravot*, for due to the fact that they possess neither taste (intelligence) nor smell (good deeds) they are often interpreted to represent the simple power of faith in the soul. However, in the book of Nechemiah we find a surprising description of how the Jews of that generation made their *sukot*. Upon returning from the

Babylonian exile, the ingathered exiles led by Ezra the Scribe and Nechemiah gathered together in Jerusalem and read in the Torah. Ezra and Nechemiah related to the people (who were mostly simple folk) the laws of the holidays of the month of *Tishrei*. The Bible relates that for covering their *sukah* rooftops the people used myrtle branches, meaning *hadasim*,<sup>7</sup> implying that the correspondence of Rabbi Zeirah's opinion corresponds to the *hadasim*.

Particular to the *hadasim* is that they have a pleasant smell, but do not carry edible fruit (taste). Smell in Chassidut alludes to the quality of self-sacrifice in one's devotion to God. There is a verse that illustrates that the *hadasim* exemplify the quality of self-sacrifice: And He [God] stands between the myrtle branches."<sup>8</sup> The sages explain<sup>9</sup> that the *hadasim* mentioned are Chananyah, Misha'el, and Azaryah who sacrificed themselves by being thrown into the furnace of fire by Nebuchadnezer for not bowing down to the statue he had made in his image.

One last point that strengthens our identification of the shade made by the *sukah's* rooftop with smell is that if a *sukah* does not have even 7 *tefachim* (about 70 centimeters) to its height it is called a "foul-smelling *sukah*."<sup>10</sup> The reason for this is because the *sukah* does not have enough air inside to allow for the air to smell fresh. Indeed, numerically "Zeirah" in Hebrew (זֵירָה), 218, is equal to the word "smell" (רִיחַ).

The Chabad tradition draws another similarity between *hadasim* and the *sukah's* shade made by its rooftop: both are supplemented beyond the required legal minimum. The rooftop covering is made as thick as possible, while extra *hadasim* beyond the minimum three are bound with the *lulav*. The simple reason for this tradition, following our explanation is to imbue those dwelling in the *sukah* with the power of self-sacrifice—the ultimate manifestation of our simple and absolute faith in G-d—and to commemorate the many Jews who sacrificed themselves (even unto giving up their lives) to sanctify God's Name in the world.

### ***Rava - Aravot***

Finally, halachic ruling follows Rava's opinion, which stresses that the point of the *sukah* is to be temporary, thereby reminding us that life is temporary and must therefore be conducted wisely. Of all the Four Species, temporality (i.e., a short-lived existence) is the lot of the *aravot*, which dry out quickest of the Four Species.

Let us take a moment to look at the temporality of the *aravot*. One of the most famous analogies drawn between the Four Species and the Jewish people is that each of the Species represents a certain type of Jew (as alluded to above). The *etrog*, which has both taste and smell, is likened to those Jews who have both

knowledge of the Torah and engage in good deeds, i.e., performance of *mitzvot*. The *lulav*, whose fruit has a good taste is likened to Jews who have knowledge of the Torah but do not invest themselves fully in the performance of good deeds. The *hadasim*, which have a pleasant smell, are representative of those Jews who commit themselves to good deeds, but have little knowledge of the Torah. Finally, the *aravot* represent those Jews who have neither knowledge of the Torah, nor good deeds. By taking them together, the analogy is drawn to the Jewish people who, regardless of their status in observance and religious conduct are all worthy of being joined together.

However, the Gerrer Rebbe in his famous work the *Sfat Emet* explains that actually the world stands on three pillars of faith: knowledge of the Torah, good deeds, and, something that was apparently missing from the above analogy, prayer.<sup>11</sup> Though the simple Jews, likened to the *aravot*, do not have knowledge of the Torah, nor can they boast of good deeds, nonetheless, they have the power of prayer. In order to differentiate between a kosher *aravah* that comes from the willow and the branches of a similar tree called the poplar (*tzaftzefah*, in Hebrew), the Talmud gives the sign that the leaves of the willow look like a smooth mouth, whereas the poplar's leaves have the appearance of a broken mouth. This is a beautiful symbol for the simple and unbroken words that come from the mouth of simple Jews who stand before God in heartfelt supplication.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Binding the Lulav, Hadasim, and Aravot***

We can now take this correspondence one step further by following the Talmudic dictum that even when there is a disagreement among the sages, "these and these are the words of the living God," meaning that all three opinions actually function together (even though halachically, we rule only according to one). According to Rabah's opinion, by dwelling in the *sukah* a person receives inspiration to know, meaning to delve into the depths of the Torah throughout the year. According to Rabbi Zeira's opinion, from sitting in the shade of the *sukah* we receive the inspiration and will-power to perform *mitzvot* during the year. And according to Rava our dwelling seven days in a temporary residence inspires us to always turn to G-d in prayer for all of our temporary needs in life. Indeed, while Torah is referred to as "eternal life," prayer is referred to as "fleeting life."<sup>13</sup>

Recall that whereas Rabbah and Rava use verses from the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, to establish their opinion, Rabbi Zeira quotes a verse from the Prophets. Indeed, one reason that we do not rule in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Zeira is because the verse from the Prophets is considered "*limot*

*haMashiach*," meaning that the verse comes to portray the Messianic era, not to define the meaning of the word *sukah* in its halachic sense. This interpretation actually adds insight to our correspondence of his opinion as seeing the *sukah* as a source on inspiration to perform *mitzvot*. *Mitzvot* are action, while knowledge of the Torah is study. "In this world," say the sages, "study [of the Torah] is greater than action, for study leads to action; but, in the future [i.e., in the time of Mashiach] action will be greater than study."<sup>14</sup> Thus, Rabbi Zeira's teaching is perfectly suited to our times, the times of Mashiach, as stressed time and again by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, that "*hama'aseh hu ha'ikar*," meaning "action is the main thing."

This is especially true in the Land of Israel to which Rabbi Zeira made *aliyah* from Babylon. The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Zeira fasted and prayed so that he might forget all the Torah of Babylon that he had studied in order to learn anew the Torah of the Land of Israel which is based on action.

### ***Searching for A Fourth Opinion***

Let us return to the impermanence requirement of the *sukah* according to Rava. In the Talmud, Abayei asks Rava: what if a person makes a *sukah* less than 20 cubits high but made out of steel walls? This seems to be a very permanent structure, would it still be considered kosher? In other words, does Rava's explanation regarding permanence exhaustively cover the reason for limiting the *sukah's* height? Rava answers that indeed, even a *sukah* whose walls are permanent is kosher, for what I meant to say is that, *in general*, people make impermanent structures lower than 20 cubits.

What we get out of this discussion is the understanding that there is something intrinsic about the height of 20 cubits that cannot be completely defined by Rava's requirement of impermanence. This leads us to add a fourth reason which is not explicitly stated in the Talmud, but as we shall see, is hidden between the first and last opinions, those of Rabbah and Rava.

As the source for his opinion, Rabbah quoted the verse: "So that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths [*sukot*] when I took them out of Egypt."<sup>15</sup> Rava quoted the verse: "You shall dwell in booths [*sukot*] for seven days."<sup>16</sup> In the Torah, the verse quoted by Rava precedes the one quoted by Rabbah. But, in between them is the termination of Rava's verse: "...All the native-born in Israel shall dwell in booths."<sup>17</sup> What we would like to say is that the hidden reason for limiting the height of the *sukah* is in these words that lie between those quoted by Rava and Rabbah.

In the Talmud, the sages say that the words "all the native-born in Israel," come to include converts, even though the literal meaning would seem to be the opposite.<sup>18</sup> From the word "all" ("all the native-born") the sages learn that all of Israel are worthy of sitting under a single *sukah*, which is why you can perform the mitzvah of dwelling in a *sukah* with someone else's *sukah*, but you cannot do the same with a *lulav* of which it says: "You shall take for yourselves..." to each person his own *lulav*. Finally, the phrase as a whole "all the native-born of Israel" while including full converts to Judaism clearly excludes non-Jews from the commandment to dwell in a *sukah*. As explained in Chassidut, the term "non-Jew," on a spiritual plane, does not only mean someone who is not of Jewish birth, but refers as well to non-Jewish, non-Torah beliefs, customs, culture and what have you that may even be found amongst Jews. As explained in the *Zohar*, only that which proclaims the unity and oneness of the Almighty can dwell in the shadow of faith of the *sukah*. Why should the fact that non-Jews are prohibited to dwell in a *sukah* be of such great concern? It should be clear to a non-Jew who wishes to cling to God and to the Torah that he or she is only responsible for performing the seven Noahide laws.

To answer this question and to understand the reason that the *sukah* is only for Jews, let us recall that there is a custom to read the book of Ecclesiastes on Sukot. The major problem that Ecclesiastes had about the way that G-d runs the world was that *מקרה אחד לכל*, "The fate of all is the same."<sup>19</sup> When it seems thus, it is difficult to explain that human beings are not as beasts of the field and should not act in the same fashion, that God has a chosen people, etc. What has this problem to do with *Sukot*? The answer is that on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the year, all creatures, small and large, human and non-human pass before God in judgment. Likewise, Jews and non-Jews pass before God equally. No one can claim special favor in His eyes for belonging to this or that group of people. The feeling that everything is as naught before God fills the air of the holiday. The question then arises, how is the nation of Israel different? How are we to retain our status as God's children and continue to bring Divine Light to the world in the forthcoming year?

The answer is given to us on *Sukot*. By erecting the *sukah*, dwelling in it for seven nights and days, holding together the Four Species and being joyous before God during this holiday we proclaim our uniqueness in the world.<sup>20</sup> The willingness of the Jewish people to dwell in the *sukah* is considered by the sages to be the ultimate litmus paper for true subservience before God, which openly illustrates our special relationship with the Almighty.<sup>21</sup> Thus, as explained elsewhere, the major issue on which God passes judgment on Rosh Hashanah is

whether or not the Jewish people will be inscribed as His chosen people, once more. Whether, "all the nations of the world will see that the Name *Havayah* has been called upon you."<sup>22</sup>

Our cause for joy on *Sukot* is thus the revelation, brought about by our keeping the *mitzvot* of this holiday, that indeed we are once more God's chosen people, for everyone to see.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as explained by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov,<sup>24</sup> *Simchat Torah*, the eighth day of *Sukot* (the ninth day outside of the Land of Israel) is unique in that on this day we can demonstrate that every single Jew, even one who does not show it outwardly, wholeheartedly wants to perform the Divine will. Rebbe Nachman explains that whenever there is great joy and merriment, it has the power to conquer sorrow and sighs. This is used on *Simchat Torah* to draw into the circles of dancing even Jews who act as if they do not want to participate in the joy of dancing with the Torah, based on the principle that even if a Jew says he doesn't want to perform G-d's will as revealed in the Torah, in his innermost heart, he does.

### *The Etrog*

Thus we have a fourth, implicit explanation for why the *sukah* cannot be higher than 20 cubits. If it were higher than 20 cubits, it would be suited to include non-Jews as equals, defeating the entire purpose of the holiday. In the imagery of Kabbalah and Chassidut, were the *sukah* higher than twenty cubits, then the *makif*, the enveloping light which hovers around those inside, would be great enough to include Jew and non-Jew alike, contradicting the verse: "all the native-born in Israel shall dwell in *sukot*."

This fourth opinion corresponds to the *etrog*, which we take in our left hand. The sages teach us that the left hand represents the power to repel and discriminate between opposing forces, for the sake of choosing one over the other. The *etrog*, more than the other species, thus represents G-d's choice of the Jewish people and that the entire Jewish nation is worthy of dwelling in one *sukah*, to exclude non-Jews. The *etrog* possesses both taste and smell, indicating that in essence all Jewish souls are perfect and full of Torah (taste) and *mitzvot* (fragrant smell). For this reason, according to *halachah* the *etrog* must be perfect in purity (cleanliness), form, and beauty (*hadar*). The root of the word *etrog* means passion, expressing G-d's passion in choosing His people Israel to be His unique "soul-mate," as it were. In Kabbalah, male energies correspond to the right hand while female energies correspond to the left hand. The *etrog* thus represents the Jewish people not only as G-d's chosen people (to serve Him as does a servant to his master) but as G-d's beloved spouse. The *sukah* is the chamber (*cheder yichud*)

where the intimate union of G-d and Israel (all Israel together) takes place in love and passion. No outsider may enter.

### Notes:

1. *Sukah* 2a.
2. Leviticus 23:43.
3. Isaiah 4:6.
4. Leviticus 23:42.
5. Implicit in Rashi's commentary and explicit in the Ritva's commentary is that the word "*sukah*" itself derives from the word "*s'chach*" (סכך), meaning the rooftop covering usually made of branches.
6. *Zohar* III, 103b.
7. Nechemiah 8. In the Talmud (*Sukah* 12a), it is explained that these were what are called "foolish" *hadasim*. In a foolish *hadas*, the three leaves in a cluster do not protrude from the same place on the branch, one of the three is above the other two. In a *hadas* that is kosher for performing the mitzvah of the Four Species, all three leaves grow from the same cross-section on the branch.  
The sages portray the leaves of the *hadas* as "eyes" ( ). In a kosher *hadas* three eyes lie on the same plane. Human beings have only two eyes lying on the same plane. However, the Torah says that *tefilin* should be placed "between your eyes." In *halachah*, we interpret this to mean "between, and above, your eyes," which would make us appear to be similar to "foolish" *hadasim*. But indeed these are the *hadasim* that are meant to be used for the *schach*. In Chassidut, the secret of the *schach* is explained to be the holy folly that reveals the super-rational, all-enveloping, levels of the soul and motivates acts of self-sacrifice. What, however, is meant by the kosher *hadasim* being three eyes on the same plane, alluded to by the literal reading of the *Tefilin* as located exactly between the eyes? What is the "third" eye that lies exactly between our two eyes? The answer is that this third eye is the eye of God Himself (as it is said, "The eye of G-d is to those that fear Him") looking into our souls through the lens of our own two eyes.
8. Zachariah 1:8.
9. *Sanhedrin* 93a.
10. *Sukah* 4a.
11. *Avot* 1:2.
12. In all, the Talmud offers three differences between the willow and the poplar: 1) the willow's branch is red, 2) its leaves are elongated, 3) and its leaves are like a smooth mouth. These three differentials correspond in order to the three aspects of speech known as *chash mal mal*, as explained elsewhere.
13. *Shabbat* 10a.



<sup>14</sup>. *Kidushin* 40b.

<sup>15</sup>. Leviticus 23:43.

<sup>16</sup>. Ibid. *ibid.*:42.

<sup>17</sup>. Ibid. *ibid.*:*ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>. The Hebrew word for "native-born" is **אֹרֶחַ**, which literally means "I will shine," and is understood by the sages to refer in particular to the first Jew, our patriarch Abraham (*Bava Batra* 15a, *Zohar* II, 110a). Abraham is considered the father of all true converts to Judaism. Once a non-Jew converts, he or she claims the right to say that Abraham and therefore, Isaac and Jacob are his or her forefathers. It is Abraham's soul that shines into the souls of all converts until the coming of the Mashiach.

<sup>19</sup>. Ecclesiastes 3:19, 9:2, 9:3. As explained elsewhere, the word **מְקֵרָה** (meaning "fate") is numerically equal to **מֹשֶׁה**, Moshe, 345. In Chassidut, it is explained that the value of **מֹשֶׁה** plus the numerical value of the word **אֶחָד**, "one," 13, is equal to **מָשִׁיחַ**, Mashiach, 358. Thus, this idiom "one fate," is inherently connected with the Mashiach, as explained in length elsewhere.

<sup>20</sup>. Not only that, but in the Temple seventy oxen were sacrificed as if they were brought in tribute for the seventy nations of the world, proclaiming the centrality of the Jewish people in our ability to intercede on behalf of others before the Almighty (see *Zohar* III, 54b, and elsewhere). Nonetheless, the seventy oxen were sacrificed throughout the seven days of Sukot: 13 on the first day, 12 on the second, etc., until finally seven oxen were sacrificed on the seventh day. The decreasing number of oxen sacrificed each day in favor of the nations of the world indicates that in order to be accepted before God, the nations need to have their vanity and arrogance subdued. That the final number is seven is related to the seven archetypal nations that dwelt in the Land of Canaan before the Children of Israel conquered it. The final seven oxen also correspond to the seven universal Noahide Laws.

<sup>21</sup>. As explained in length in the Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 3a-b.

<sup>22</sup>. Deuteronomy 28:10.

<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, as noted by the commentaries, there is no other commandment that we perform as publicly as dwelling in the *sukah*.

<sup>24</sup>. Likutei Moharan II, 23.