

We have come to the end of Sukkot with its beautiful rituals that celebrate the final harvests of the season as well as the hospitality incumbent upon all who are fortunate to have more than enough for their own immediate needs. The booths we build and inhabit (weather permitting) for this special week remind us of the fragility of life and the basic need for shelter from the elements. Along with *chag ha-asif* (Festival of Ingathering) another name for Sukkot is *z'man simchateinu* (Season of Our Rejoicing). Indeed, Sukkot is our only festival carrying the explicit commandment to rejoice, which we do in deep gratitude for the bounty we have harvested, remembering that famine is unfortunately still a reality in many parts of the world. For six days we have blessed and waved our *lulav* (date palm, willow, and myrtle branches held together by a woven palm branch) and *etrog* (a fragrant citrus fruit similar to a lemon) in all six directions, symbolizing that HaShem is everywhere. The seventh day of Sukkot, which begins this year on Thursday evening, is *Hoshana Rabbah* (the Great Saving - from הושיע – to save/rescue, i.e., *hosha-na* – save, please), a semi-holiday with its own special rituals of placing all the Torah scrolls on the Bimah and circling the interior of the sanctuary with *lulav* and *etrog* while reciting *hoshanot* (a series of seven alphabetic, acrostic supplications, primarily for rain) and then beating willow branches on the ground. Because this is not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, in Second Temple times it was a source of controversy between the Pharisees, who gave it Biblical authority, and the Boethusians (sect related to the Sadducees), who, among other objections, opposed its overriding Shabbat (Bab. Talmud Tractate Sukkot 43b). Later, the sages of the Talmud discussed and debated it extensively, concluding that “the mitzvah of the willow branch is an ordinance of the prophets,” and declaring it a sort of mini-Yom Kippur. This is the day on which HaShem determines whether the people are worthy of receiving the vital winter rains that will ensure a good harvest in the coming year. Remember the second paragraph of the *shema Yisrael*, which warns against succumbing to the lure of other beliefs and disregarding the mitzvot? “And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you.” (Deuteronomy 11:17) The alarming rise in both droughts and floods, which are often the result of drought-parched land not being able to absorb water when it does finally rain, underscores the relevance of these rituals for us today. After the seven *hoshanot* processions, a final prayer is recited, and the willow branches are beaten against the ground five times in a symbolic act of ridding ourselves of any remaining sins. This prayer features the “voice” of HaShem in powerful images of delivery and redemption. Rabbinic literature associates Sukkot with water, without which nothing could survive. Therefore, following the customs of the Pharisees, the sages of the Talmud preserved the Temple ritual of *nissuch ha mayim* (the water libation) through the water-summoning rituals of Hoshana Rabbah. On the eve of Hoshana Rabbah many people study the book of Deuteronomy all night long, similar to the tradition of studying on the eve of Shavuot. Some also recite psalms, and Sephardic Jews repeat the Slichot prayers. Hoshana Rabbah is considered to be the last day of the High Holiday cycle, which ends with the final closing of the Gates of Heaven and the decrees for the year going into effect. Some traditions consider Hoshana Rabbah to be the last day to shake the *lulav* and *etrog* and dwell in the Sukkah, while others conclude Sukkot on Shemini Atzeret, which occurs the following day (Friday evening this year). Although Sukkot is officially over, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are viewed as part of Sukkot, and we may still sit in the Sukkah, albeit without the blessings. The Torah contains brief references to an eighth day (Leviticus 23:36, 39; Numbers 29:35), but viewed in the light of Shavuot, which the Talmud refers to as *atzeret*, being the official conclusion to Pesach, it could also simply be a practical way to conclude Sukkot without obligating people to attempt an additional pilgrimage to Jerusalem seven weeks later during the rainy season. Let us first define the name itself. *Shemini* means eighth, and *atzeret* is a solemn gathering implying an extension of the prior seven days. Here in the Diaspora it is a separate day, but in Israel Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are a single day. The only rituals on Shemini Atzeret are the prayer for rain, which parallels the prayer for dew that is recited on Pesach, and Yiskor. Since the early the Middle Ages, Shemini Atzeret has been associated with completing the yearly cycle of Torah readings and beginning them anew, hence the gradual development of what we now celebrate as Simchat Torah with all its joyous rituals, which include the only evening reading of the Torah and at least seven circuits around the sanctuary, now with the scrolls instead of with *lulav* and *etrog*. The *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot were originally agricultural festivals, and the overarching theme of all three remains deep gratitude for, and immense responsibility for the earth HaShem has given us. With looming climate change, the prayers we recite are as urgent as they were for our ancestors. May they inspire us to be good stewards of our precious resources!