



# COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



"With thanks to *The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation* for their generous sponsorship of *Covenant & Conversation*. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."

בס"ד

אמור תש"ף

Emor 5780

**Radical  
Uncertainty**

## \*\* KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK \*\*

**By experiencing the succah, we can find the resilience we need today.**



### PARSHAT EMOR IN A NUTSHELL

*Emor* focuses on two kinds of holiness: that of people and of time. Chapter 21 relates to holy people: Priests, and above them, the High Priest. Because the Priests serve in the Mishkan, there are certain things they are forbidden from doing. For example, they are not allowed to come into contact with a dead body, and they cannot marry whoever they might wish.

Chapter 22 reminds us of similar laws relating to ordinary Israelites when they wish to enter the Mishkan, and then lists which imperfections would prevent an animal from being offered as sacrifice.

Chapter 23 is all about holy time, and discusses the festivals of the year, including the three pilgrimage festivals (the *shalosh regalim*) of Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot.

Chapter 24 speaks about the Menorah, which was lit every day, and the *show bread*, which was renewed every week. The parsha ends with a story – one of the only two stories in the book of Vayikra – about a man who cursed during a fight.

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What are we celebrating on each of the three pilgrimage festivals?



### THE CORE IDEA

There is something very strange about the festival of Succot, of which our parsha is the main source. On the one hand, it is the *chag* most connected with joy. It is the only *chag* in our parsha that even mentions rejoicing: "And you shall *rejoice* before the Lord your God seven days" (Vayikra 23:40). In the Torah as a whole, joy is not mentioned at all in relation to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or Pesach, only once in connection with Shavuot, and *three times* in connection with Succot. Hence its name: *z'man simchatenu*, the festival of our joy.

Yet the succah actually replicates one of the more challenging aspects of the wilderness years: "You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that future generations may know that I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God." (Vayikra 23:42-43)

For forty years, the Israelites lived without permanent homes, often on the move. They were out in the wilderness, in no man's land, where it is hard to know what to expect and what dangers lie in wait along the way. To be sure, the people lived under Divine protection. But they could never be sure in advance whether it would be forthcoming and what form this protection might take. They were experiencing a prolonged period of insecurity.

How then are we to understand the fact that Succot of all festivals is called *z'man simchatenu*, the festival of our joy? It would have made sense to call Pesach – freedom's birthday – the festival of joy. It would have made sense to call Shavuot – the day of revelation at Sinai – the festival of joy. But why do we give that title to a festival that commemorates forty years of exposure to the heat, cold, wind and rain. Remembering that, why should we feel joy?

The succah symbolises living with unpredictability. Succot teaches us that *faith is not certainty*. *Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty*. And despite the uncertainty, we can still rejoice!

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why does it take courage to live with uncertainty?
2. How do we find joy when things are uncertain?



### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

As the coronavirus outbreak has disrupted life for millions of people around the world, weddings have been among the many casualties of lockdowns, self-isolation and official bans on large public gatherings. In Israel, as gatherings of more than 10 people were banned, many couples had to make quick decisions to either delay their wedding celebrations, or forgo their dream wedding with all their friends and families in attendance.

Itamar Yakutieli, manager of the Ein Hemed Forest Wedding Venue, had an idea to help couples make this difficult decision. He launched a special service, offering free, small-scale weddings for young couples whose weddings cannot take place as planned.

One such couple, Roni Ben-Ari and Yonatan Meushar, decided to take up Yakutieli's offer, and went ahead with a tiny, intimate celebration. "It is different than what we had imagined ... but it's perfect, I think," said Roni, turning to Yonatan and laughing.

"It's a different and unique way [to get married]," he added, "But we are getting used to the situation." A handful of close relatives attended, and many other "guests" celebrated and participated virtually via Zoom.

What could be a more powerful statement of the faith and hope that we will beat coronavirus than getting married and planning for a brighter future!

### QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How is getting married during a time of crisis an act of deep faith?
2. What acts of faith have you carried out during this difficult time?



### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

As well as the question of why Succot is associated with joy, we might also ask what was the miracle to be celebrated here? Pesach and Shavuot recall miracles. But travelling through the wilderness with only temporary homes was neither miraculous nor unique. That is what people who travel through the wilderness do. They must. They are on a journey. They can only have a temporary dwelling. In this respect there was nothing special about the Israelites' experience.

It was this consideration that led Rabbi Eliezer in the Talmud (Succah 11b) to suggest that the succah represents the Clouds of Glory, *ananei kavod*, that accompanied the Israelites during those years, sheltering them from heat and cold, protecting them from their enemies, and guiding them on the way. This is a beautiful and imaginative solution to the problem. It identifies a miracle and explains why a festival should be dedicated to remembering it. That is why Rashi and Ramban take it as the plain sense of the verse.

But it is difficult, nonetheless. A succah looks nothing like the Clouds of Glory. It would be hard to imagine anything *less* like the Clouds of Glory.

Rabbi Akiva dissents from Rabbi Eliezer's view and says that a succah is what it says it is: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. What, according to Rabbi Akiva, was the miracle? There is no way of knowing the answer. But we can guess.

If a succah represents the Clouds of Glory – the view of Rabbi Eliezer – then it celebrates God's miracle. If it represents nothing other than a succah itself – Rabbi Akiva's view – then it celebrates the *human miracle of faith*.

The Israelites may have complained and rebelled. But they followed God. They kept going. Like Abraham and Sarah, they were prepared to journey into the unknown.

If we understand this to be the miracle, we can realise a deep truth about faith itself. *Faith is not certainty*. *Faith is the courage to live with uncertainty*. Almost every phase of the Exodus was fraught with difficulties, real or imagined. That is what makes the Torah so powerful. It does not pretend that life is any easier than it is. The road is not straight and the journey is long. Unexpected things happen. Crises suddenly appear. It becomes important to embed in a people's memory the knowledge that we can handle the unknown. God is with us, giving us the courage we need.

It is as if on Succot God were reminding us: don't think you need solid walls to make you feel safe. I led your ancestors through the desert so that they would never forget the journey they had to make and the obstacles they had to overcome to get to this land. "I made the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." In those booths, fragile and

open to the elements, the Israelites learnt the courage to live with uncertainty.

Other nations told stories that celebrated their strength. They built palaces and castles as expressions of invincibility. The Jewish people was different. They carried with them a story about the uncertainties and hazards of history. They spoke of their ancestors' journey through the wilderness without homes, addresses, or protection against the elements. It is a story of spiritual strength, not military strength.

Succot is a testament to the Jewish people's survival. Even if it loses its land and is cast again into the wilderness, it will lose neither heart nor hope. It will remember that it spent its early years as a nation living in a succah, a temporary dwelling exposed to the elements. It will know that in the wilderness, no encampment is permanent. It will keep travelling until once again it reaches the promised land: Israel, home.

It is no accident that the Jewish people is the only one to have survived 2,000 years of exile and dispersion, its identity intact and energy unabated. It is the only people who can live in a shack with leaves as a roof and yet feel surrounded by clouds of glory. It is the only people who can live in a temporary dwelling and yet rejoice.

Economist John Kay and former Governor of the Bank of England Mervyn King have just published a book, *Radical Uncertainty*. In it, they make the distinction between *risk*, which is calculable, and *uncertainty*, which is not. They argue that people have relied too much on calculations of probability while neglecting the fact that danger may appear from a completely unexpected source. The sudden appearance of the Coronavirus just as their book appeared proved their point. People knew there was a possibility of a pandemic. But no one knew what it would be like, where it would come from, how rapidly it would spread, and what toll it would take.

More important than the calculation of probabilities, they say, is *understanding the situation*, answering the question, "What is

going on?" This, they say, is never answered by statistics or predictions but rather by narrative, by telling a story.

*That is exactly what Succot is about.* It is a story about uncertainty. It tells us that we can know everything else, but we will never know what tomorrow will bring. Time is a journey across a wilderness.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we pray to be written into the Book of Life. On Succot we rejoice because we believe we have received a positive answer to our prayer. But as we turn to face the coming year, we acknowledge at its outset that life is fragile, vulnerable in a dozen different ways. We do not know what our health will be, what our career or livelihood will be, or what will happen to society and to the world. We cannot escape exposure to risk. That is what life is.

The succah symbolises living with unpredictability. Succot is the festival of radical uncertainty. But it places it within the framework of a narrative, exactly as Kay and King suggest. It tells us that though we journey through a wilderness, we as a people will reach our destination. If we see life through the eyes of faith, we will know we are surrounded by clouds of glory. Amid uncertainty we will find ourselves able to rejoice. We need no castles for protection or palaces for glory. A humble succah will do, for when we sit within it, we sit beneath what the Zohar calls "the shade of faith."

**I believe that the experience of leaving the protection of a house and entering the exposure of the succah is a way of taming our fear of the unknown. It says: We have been here before. We are all travellers on a journey. The Divine Presence is with us. We need not be afraid. That is a source of the resilience we need in our interconnected, hazardous, radically uncertain world.**

#### QUESTION TO PONDER:

What statement of faith are we making when we leave our houses to sit in the succah?



#### FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

*Faith is not certainty. It is the courage to live with uncertainty. It is not knowing all the answers. It is often the strength to live with the questions. It is not a sense of invulnerability. It is the knowledge that we are utterly vulnerable, but that it is precisely in our vulnerability that we reach out to God, and through this we learn to reach out to others, able to understand their fears and doubts. We learn to share, and in sharing we discover the road to freedom. It is only because we are not gods that we are able to discover God.*

**Ten Paths to God Curriculum, Unit 7 - Faith: Love as Loyalty**



#### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why is Succot described as *z'man simchatenu*, the festival of our joy, if it remembers a difficult period in Jewish history?
2. What is miraculous about human faith in a time of uncertainty (represented by the succah)?
3. What message do you think the festival of Succot has for us, now, as we experience the age of Covid-19?



## QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email [CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org](mailto:CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org) with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



## EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

### IN A NUTSHELL

1. Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt and the barley harvest. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah and the wheat harvest. Succot remembers the 40 years spent dwelling in booths in the wilderness, and the ingathering of the crops at the end of the harvest season. Succot is the odd one out here because it is not linked to a miracle-based event in history. This is explored further in *the Covenant & Conversation* this week.

### THE CORE IDEA

1. For those who believe they have all the answers, there is no uncertainty in their world, and no courage is needed to live. Those who are 100% certain they know what God's plan is, it is easy to live with faith. But this is not true faith, because no one can truly know what God's plan is. Truth faith takes courage to believe that despite the uncertainty of living in a world without clear answers, we still believe that God will be there for us.
2. This deep faith, in the face of uncertainty, allows us to focus on the joy of life despite not knowing the exact path our lives will take.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. When the world is turned upside-down and chaos seems to reign supreme, it is hard to think about and plan for the future. To get married, to build the foundations for a family, and to look towards bringing children into this world, is a profound statement of faith that the future will be better than the present. It is predicated on the belief that it is worth continuing humanity, and deciding to play an active part in that continuity.
2. During this time, anyone can make decisions and take steps that demonstrate a faith in the future. These could be acts of kindness and volunteering, the planning of future programmes in the community, or even in your own private life. Even a student doing their schoolwork is an important act, because it makes a statement of belief that tomorrow is worth working for and fighting for.

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The succah symbolises living with uncertainty. But sitting, eating, dwelling in it says that though we journey through a wilderness, we as a people will reach our destination. If we see life through the eyes of faith, we will know we are surrounded by Clouds of Glory. Amid uncertainty we will find ourselves able to rejoice. We need no castles for protection or palaces for glory. The experience of leaving the protection of a house and entering the exposure of the succah says: We have been here before. We are all travellers on a journey. The Divine Presence is with us. We need not be afraid. That is a source of the resilience we need in our interconnected, hazardous, radically uncertain world.

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. We may each experience a life of uncertainty but we can find strength and comfort in our faith in God that life will be protected. That is the source of our joy. On Succot, we dwell in a succah, a physical representation of the unknown, and still we find we are protected. This faith brings us great joy.
2. While Rabbi Eliezer's approach to the succah is that it represents God's Clouds of Glory and His protection of us, Rabbi Akiva says the succah represents nothing more than a flimsy booth. We are replicating the original succot. But if we are looking for a miracle to commemorate on Succot (like the other two pilgrimage festivals have) then this is the act of courage that is faith in the face of uncertainty. That Jews felt the presence and protection of God despite all the uncertainties of the wilderness was super-human, and miraculous.
3. Humanity is currently experiencing a deep sense of uncertainty and vulnerability, much the same as the generation that lived through the wilderness years did. Every year we sit in the succah to remember what that generation felt, and we reignite our faith in God's protection. These days we need to our faith in God more than ever, to carry us through this difficult time.