

YISROEL GREENWALD

Shelter Beneath the Clouds

GLORIOUS CLOUDS – GLORIOUS SUKKOS

Sitting in a *sukka* can be a magical experience. Under ordinary circumstances, the mere thought of having to move out of a comfortable home to spend a week in accommodations no larger than a garage would make one shudder with dread. But on Sukkos, the experience is not merely bearable, but even beautiful. Even the stark bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling seems to shine with an ethereal glow. And the children's decorations, which normally would be considered too tacky to even display on a fridge door, seem to sparkle with the brilliance of a priceless chandelier. How can these strange feelings be explained?

Our sages teach that every mitzvah that the Jewish People accepted with joy,

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they still perform with joy. If we find the *sukka* such an inviting and comfortable place, we can safely assume our forefathers also shared those same feelings. It's no wonder, either, as the *sukka* commemorates the *ananei hakavod* – the clouds of glory – that accompanied the Jewish People in their sojourn in the desert.¹

The benefits provided by these miraculous clouds surpass our wildest imagination. Aside from shielding *Bnei Yisroel* from the harsh elements and dangers of the desert wasteland, it also was climate controlled to an optimal temperature of comfort. No less than the concierge of the most expensive hotels, the clouds not only cleaned and pressed their clothing, but also provided continuous alterations as required. Our sages teach that the clouds even radiated a spiritual light that surpassed natural forms of illumination, which gave them the penetrating vision to see within the contents of closed containers.² Most importantly, the clouds served as a tangible reminder of *Hashem's* presence amidst His people and demonstrated His constant love and protection.

THE DARKER SIDE OF CLOUDS

This being the case, the prayer many say upon entering the *sukka* seems entirely incongruous: "In the merit of leaving my home, may it be reckoned as if I wandered in exile."³ Reb Tzaddok Hakohein asks: the definition of *galus* is pain and discomfort, while dwelling in the *sukka* is the exact opposite – so much so, that one who is in discomfort is altogether absolved from sitting in the *sukka*. So, how can we compare such a pleasant and beautiful experience as sitting in a *sukka* to the suffering of exile?

Apparently, the clouds contained an entirely different dimension, as well. If, as the saying goes, "Every dark cloud contains a silver lining," the reverse is also

¹ *Mechilta, Beshalach* 13

² *Beraisa De'meleches Hamishkan*, chap. 14.

³ This prayer is based on the *Pesikta* that says that the reason the festival of Sukkos immediately follows Yom Kippur is that if one is deserving of exile, the dwelling in the *sukka* should be considered as having gone into exile.

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axiomatic: "Every silver cloud has its dark lining, too." Although the clouds were dominantly positive, they also contained some harsh components, as a recessive trait. For instance, when the Jews sinned in the desert, the clouds immediately descended⁴ in a dramatic show that served as a harbinger of Divine rebuke and retribution that were soon to follow.⁵

Although we mentioned earlier that the clouds' conveniences surpassed service in the most luxurious hotel known to man, a five-star space station would be a more accurate analogy. Cocooned in a delicate life-support system, their lives continuously hung in a delicate balance, which in turn was directly linked to their spiritual level. The clouds instantly repelled those who were spiritually unfit, as was the case with those who worshiped idols from the tribe of Dan. To be continuously cognizant of the powerful hand of *Hashem* – ready to apportion either pain or pleasure – may have been a source of strain and consternation to anyone less worthy than the generation of that great era.⁶

The *dor hamidbar* rose to the challenge that the clouds presented. Despite the inherent harsh components present, they focused totally on the positive aspects of the clouds. They viewed them for what they truly were: the omnipresent sign of a loving Father Who guides His child by the hand and protects him under His watchful eye. If, to this day, we feel a small

inkling of the warmth of His Divine love while we sit in the *sukka*, we have our forefathers to thank for instilling those feelings within us.

FROM CLOUDS OF GLORY TO CLOUDS OF EXILE

The mitzva of *sukka* serves as a perennial reminder of those miraculous clouds of glory that enveloped the Jewish nation in the desert. But whatever happened to those clouds after the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel? The *Mechilta* says that those clouds never dissipated, but continue to exist for all times.⁷ Even in our most distant future history, the clouds of glory will not only exist, but also continue to play an important role. At the time of the resurrection of the dead, *Hashem* will call upon those clouds of glory and instruct them to pour the dew of eternal life upon the Children of Israel.⁸

The *Mechilta* appears to defy comprehension. Granted that those magnificent clouds await us in the World to Come, but how do we appreciate that they are with us in all times, even in our dark periods of exile? We can perhaps reconcile this difficulty with another passage from the *Mechilta*, "Come and see, the healing of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is unlike the healing of a doctor of flesh

⁴ See *Shemos* 16, 10; *Bamidbar* 17,7; *Devarim* 31, 15

⁵ The commentators make clear that the clouds of glory also served as a testing ground of the Jewish People's level of faith. When the clouds settled during the course of their wanderings, it was a sign for the Jewish People to set up camp at that location. When the clouds moved onward, it signaled to the Jewish People to resume their travel. At times, as soon as the Jews settled down at a particularly inviting oasis, the clouds immediately urged them to move onwards. At other times, when the landscape was unusually bleak and inhospitable, the clouds remained stationary for long periods of time. This unpredictable situation was potentially unnerving, yet the Jewish nation accepted it with serene faith, and the Torah records their desert travels in exact detail as a testimony to their exalted stature in this regard. (See *Seforno*, *Bamidbar* 9, 17-23 and 33,2.)

⁶ The clouds' dual aspect of containing elements of both blessing and punishment is even more

readily apparent when the Jewish nation crossed the *Yam Suf*. The *Malbim* (*Yeshaya* 4,6) points out that the very same clouds of glory which led the Jewish People out of Egypt, later turned into a buffer zone, separating them and the Egyptian army. The clouds also absorbed all the projectiles thrown by the Egyptians, and shot them back at them with deadly accuracy. Similarly, the cloud of fire that gave light to the Jewish People melted the wheels of the Egyptian chariots that helped bring about their downfall.

In the times of *Moshiach* the prophet *Yeshaya* (4,6) reveals that the clouds of glory and fire will once again return, in a re-enactment of their original role. There again, the same cloud that will be a protective cloud of glory for the righteous will be harmful "smoke" to destroy the wicked. Similarly, the cloud of fire at night that will provide illumination to the righteous will be a destructive fire that will consume the wicked.

⁷ *Mechilta*, *Beshalach* 13

⁸ *Mechilta*, *Yisro* 20

and blood. Human beings cause a wound with a sharp metal knife and heal through salves and bandages. But *Hakodosh Boruch Hu* is not like that. Rather, using the same instrument with which He inflicts wounds, He heals as well. When *Hakodosh Baruch Hu* exiled the Jewish People, He did so only with clouds. So too, when He will gather them from exile, He will also do so only with clouds.⁹

Even in exile, the clouds of glory are still with us; they just recede to the background. Just as changing weather conditions can shift ordinary clouds into various shapes and forms, the same is true with spiritual clouds. The clouds that accompanied the Jewish nation in the desert were dominantly a medium of blessing and their negative component was just a faint shadow. In exile, it's the exact opposite; the clouds' primary role is to form a barrier between Heaven and us.

The Gemara relates that the preeminent sage, Rava, wouldn't decree a fast day on cloudy days because "the clouds would block the prayers from ascending to heaven." At first glance, his ruling appears odd. How could physical clouds have the power to block prayer, which is of a spiritual nature? However, in light of the above, his approach is perfectly understandable. Rava realized that clouds contain a metaphysical dimension as well, which, in effect, blocks the rays of spiritual light, and clouds our spiritual vision.¹⁰

⁹ *Mechilta, Beshalach 14*

¹⁰ That clouds during exile obscure our spiritual vision is also apparent from the Gemara (*Berachos 59a*) that states, "From the day the Temple was destroyed, the sky is no longer seen in its pure clarity. As it states (*Yeshaya 50,3* according to the translation of the *Malbim* and *Ibn Ezra*), "I clothe the heavens in blackness [of clouds] and make the sackcloth their garment."

A clear, pure sky serves as a conduit of higher spiritual perceptions. The sages say that the purpose of the blue thread of the *tzitzis* is to draw our attention to the sky, which in turn reminds us of *Hashem's* Heavenly abode. With the absence of a sky in its pristine state, these perceptions became muted. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that the *Arizal* writes that the tradition for manufacturing the blue thread used for *tzitzis* also became lost with the destruction of the Temple, since it can no longer serve this purpose of arousing higher forms of spiritual awareness.

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But even in the darkest moments of exile, the glorious *anannai hakavod* forever accompany us. When we see the sky covered with thick dark thunderclouds, it tends to make our mood gray and gloomy, as well. But the wise person realizes that heavy clouds herald a life-giving shower of bounty and sustenance – rain. On a spiritual level, too, while the dark clouds of *galus* appear ominous and threatening, they are actually a portent of great light and salvation.

Upon the destruction of the first Temple, when the Jewish People were banished to a strange land, the populace bitterly mourned their terrible fate. This was almost universal, except for the prophet Yechezkeil, who left Israel for Bavel in a state of elation and immense joy. Reb Tzaddok Hakohein explains that this was because Yechezkeil saw the great spiritual light that awaited them in exile, even more than when they resided peacefully in the Land of Israel.¹¹ This later became evident with the proliferation of the oral Torah which only began during the period of the exile, and more *tzaddikim* arose after the Temple's destruction than while the Jewish People were settled in the Land of Israel.¹²

SITTING IN THE SUKKA OF DIVINE PROTECTION

Now we can understand why the mitzvah of *sukka* is linked to exile and atonement for it.

Sukkos represents the trust and contentment we find in *Hashem's* protection, even in the face of the pain and discomfort it entails.¹³ The generation of the desert found that comfort in the relatively pleasurable clouds of glory, which offered the ultimate in comfort and protection. The generations of the exile, and especially the generation which undergoes the tribulations prior to the coming of *Moshiach*, are subjected to a far greater test: mainly, to find comfort in the clouds even when they are not inviting, but dark and foreboding.

The prophet Yeshaya provides an apt description of the *sukka* in the end of time.¹⁴ "And the *sukka* will be as a shade from heat in the daytime, and a protection and refuge from storm and from rain."¹⁵ How sturdy is this *sukka* – the shade of Divine protection? The *passuk* doesn't say that *Hashem's* protection will be as strong as a fortress or even a house. The *passuk* doesn't even say that *Hashem's* protection will be like a *chupa*, a canopy, which also provides a comprehensive form of cover.¹⁶ Rather, the *passuk* says that *Hashem's* protection will be a *sukka*, a minimalist structure that gives only the barest protection from the elements, and is ideally suited for animal use.¹⁷

During the periods of persecution throughout our long and bitter exile,

it outwardly appears that our source of protection is as flimsy as a thatched hut. When cataclysmic forces in the world are unleashed, as harsh as the blazing sun and fierce storms, we seek refuge in *Hashem's* protection, no matter how insubstantial it appears. The nations of the world mock us for "grabbing at straws and twigs for protection" instead of putting our trust in powerful edifices of steel, glass and concrete. But we ignore their taunts, and confidently sit under *Hashem's* shelter exclusively, and look at it as the best possible form of cover:

"Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my Beloved... In His shade I desired and I sat" (Shir Hashirim 2,3). Rav Huna said, "Just as everyone flees from this apple tree during the burning heat, because it doesn't provide adequate shade from the sun; so, too, the nations of the world fled from the shade of the Holy One Blessed Be He..., with the exception of the Jewish Nation, who specifically coveted and sat beneath Hashem's protective shelter."¹⁸

Even at the time when *Hashem* displays endearment toward the nations of the world and shows them a smiling countenance and delivers Israel into their hands, nevertheless, all of Israel's righteous ones cleaved to You and did not move away from You.... [Rather,] they gather together tightly beneath Your shade.¹⁹

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¹¹ Pri Tzaddik, Sukkos 18
¹² Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba, 4,4; Pri Tzaddik, ibid
¹³ See Kometz Mincha 2,18
¹⁴ Although the Gemara (Sukka 2b) points out that this *passuk* describes events immediately after the coming of *Moshiach*, there are other opinions there that state that this verse is equally pertinent to Sukkos prior to the coming of *Moshiach*.
¹⁵ Yeshaya 4,6
¹⁶ The word for *chupa* in Hebrew is similar to *mechapeh*, which implies a total covering. This is also why the word is used to denote a secret or a cover-up.
¹⁷ See Bereishis 33,17
¹⁸ Shir Hashirim Rabba, ibid
¹⁹ Rashi, Devarim 33,3

SUKKA, A UNIQUELY JEWISH EXPERIENCE

The Gemara relates that in the end of days, the nations of the world will ask for eternal reward, and that they too be given the chance to perform mitzvos. Hashem will say, "I have an easy mitzva and its name is *sukka*. Go and perform this mitzva." Immediately, each will go and construct a *sukka*. Hashem will then send forth a blazing hot summer sun, and each and every one will kick his *sukka* and leave it.²⁰

Two questions arise: Firstly, why were the nations given specifically the mitzva of *sukka*? There are numerous other, easy mitzvos they could have been offered. Secondly, the director of an anti-missionary organization related to this author that today, missionaries are (to our deep regret) highly knowledgeable of Talmud sources, and some even read ArtScroll Gemaras and attend *daf yomi* classes! I would imagine that after coming across this source, they would make a note in their diary, "If their Messiah comes, be sure not to kick the *sukka*," and when the time comes, post it on the Internet to warn their friends, as well.

According to the above, *sukka* is not just a physical structure of wood and branches. It is the shade of our faith in Hashem's guidance and protection. Hashem gives the nations specifically the mitzvah of *sukka*, because it is particularly this mitzvah that we have just fulfilled so outstandingly in exile and in whose merit we will be deserving of the great reward with the coming of *Moshiach*.²¹ We also lived under the glaring sun, the symbol of the harsh forces of nature, and found our strength and solace in the protective shade of *emuna*, though it seemed sparse and ineffective.

As for this secret of *sukka* – the nations will have no inkling of its significance. When a wave of wrath and fury (comparable to the scorching sun) will spread across the world, they will kick their *sukka*. This may not only mean in the literal sense, but also that they will reject Hashem as the source of their salvation. This will stand in contrast to the Jewish nation, which for countless gen-

erations of exile, withstood this trial and held to its trust and faith in Hashem in the face of the most trying circumstances. It will then be clear why only the Jewish People will be worthy of the great reward awaiting them in the post-messianic era.

This exalted level is particularly

applicable to our heroic brothers and sisters living in *Eretz Yisroel* today. Among other nations, when governments issue a warning that a particular country is unsafe, their citizens immediately leave the country and desist from visiting it until the danger passes. But who is like the nation of Israel, where we find not only are they not fleeing their homeland en masse, but they continue to stream there – both to study and to take up residence? These great men and women demonstrate in the highest possible manner, *betzilo chamadeti veyashavti* – In His shade I desired and I sat.

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The *Tashbeitz*, one of the leading rabbis in Algeria in the 1500s, records a remarkable observation in one of his responsa:

"I have support and proof that the original sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem continues to exist to this day, since it is customary in our day for [Jews] to continue to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivals, from Egypt and other neighboring lands. At this time, we still find a mir-

acled continuing to transpire in Jerusalem that dates from the Temple period. The Mishna in Avos (5,7) says that one of the miracles that occurred in the Temple was that no one said to their fellow man in Jerusalem, 'The space of my accommodations is uncomfortably tight.'

Similarly, we find in the synagogue in Jerusalem, which is filled to capacity throughout the year – when the holiday comes, and it is filled with over three hundred visiting guests, they are all able to sit comfortably. There is no plausible explanation for this, other than that Jerusalem still retains its original holiness, and this is a clear sign of our future third redemption."²²

We can apply this *Tashbeitz* to our current situation, as well. Our brothers and sisters who are living in *Eretz Yisroel*, despite the many hardships it entails, not only refrain from saying, "My space is uncomfortable," but also find comfort in the protection of Hashem's shelter. This, too, is the clearest sign that the protective sanctity of the Holy Land is still intact, as well as an assurance of our future third redemption, which we pray will come speedily in our days. □

²⁰ *Avoda Zara* 3a

²¹ See *Chofetz Chaim, Macheneh Yisroel, Sha'ar Acharon*

²² *Tashbeitz* 3, 201