

Sukkat Shalom; Joshua and Ezra

- Nisson Shulman.

The Navi tells us that there was never a Sukkot like Ezra's since the time of Yehoshua. Can that be possible? An explanation.

SUKKAH OF PEACE

In the book of Ezra we read about the Sukkoth observed when the people returned under Ezra and Nehemiah. Of course it was a joyous celebration. But the Bible in the book of Nehemiah (8:17) makes the following startling statement: that Sukkoth was not observed since the time of Joshua! "And all the people that had returned from the captivity made booths and dwelt in them; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great joy."

Is that possible? After all, in between there were many joyous Sukkoth! The Sukkoth of the dedication of the Holy Temple at the time of Solomon, for instance, was so joyous that it was celebrated for fourteen days. The Mishnah describes the Sukkoth at the time of the Holy Temple with the Aravot and all the Jews in their homeland, as awesome in its beauty. How can the book of Ezra declare that Sukkoth was not observed between Joshua and Ezra?

The answer becomes clear when we study lessons of Sukkoth.

Two important lessons of the holiday relate to our question. Both are derived from the passage "So that your generations know that you lived in Sukkoth when you went out of Egypt."

The first lesson is that God protects us and enables us to survive in history. Even without our land, even homeless and in exile, we survived. The experience of desert wandering with the "clouds of God's glory" protecting us was the symbol for all time. God did not just free us and leave us. He watched over us then, as he would through the ages. Every Sukkoth is an expression of thanksgiving for this.

There were, indeed, many Sukkoth between the time of Joshua and Ezra, as many as there were years, not only in Israel, but in Babylon as well. For as long as Jews live and remain Jews, we thank God for His ever watchful providence, and in Galut even more than in Israel, because the greater miracle of Jewish survival is in Galut, that we live despite the Galut. When the passage declared that there was no Sukkoth since the time of Joshua, it did not refer to this lesson but to another lesson of Sukkoth.

For the Sukkah also teaches us to appreciate the gift of freedom. It emphasises the contrast between slavery and freedom by remembering the time of the Exodus, and also by demonstrating that ease and luxury are transitory. The contrast between slavery and freedom is starkly clear, and must be felt.

The passage in Ezra emphasizes that a free man cannot truly understand this contrast unless he

actually experiences it. Truly to appreciate freedom, one must be a liberated slave, or at least a person redeemed from exile. Only a generation that had been enslaved and then freed can really sense what freedom truly means in all its blessing and in all its glory.

In this respect the Sukkoth of Joshua and of Ezra were different from all the others. Just as the Sukkah of Joshua was that of a freed people, just redeemed from Egypt 40 years before, now newly come into its inheritance, so too the Sukkah of Ezra and Nehemiah was of a people scarce seventy years before exiled and enslaved, and now returned to the Promised Land. Both generations tasted the greatest bitterness the human spirit can experience, as well as the greatest joy with which the nation can be blessed. Joshua's generation was the first into the Promised Land, and Ezra's was the first to return to the promised land. Insofar as this lesson of Sukkoth is concerned, these were the only two generations until that time to experience the joy of entry into Zion.

In fact, put yourself in the place of a Jew who just entered the Promised Land under such circumstances. To him or her, the Sukkah had been for many years a reality, since it stood for our life in exile, or wandering in the desert. The Lulav, the Arava, was a dream, a promise of what was to come, or a memory to the Babylonian Jews of years gone past. Now it was all reversed! The Sukkah was a memory of wandering and exile, but the lulav and the Arava was real! You could go into your own back yard and pick these fruits, symbols of Israel's plenty and beauty.

These were the only two generations which actually saw and felt the change, the sudden reversal of the meaning of the Sukkah symbols. So no Sukkot was celebrated like Ezra's, since the time of Joshua.

Those were the only two generations.... until ours! We too had that contrasting experience. We experienced the depths of destruction, worse tragedy than at any time during the last two thousand years, and we also experienced the same kind of joy Joshua and Ezra and their people felt when they entered the Promised Land. We, too, can say "From the time of Joshua son of Nun and from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, no Sukkah was ever experienced like ours today.

One thing is sure; that every Jew the world over on this Sukkoth must pray that the time will soon come when God's Tabernacle of peace will truly and securely descend upon, and envelope our people. And then we shall experience a Sukkah that is even greater than any which had gone before, greater than that of Joshua, even that of Ezra, and greater than that we experience today.