



Shabbat Table Talk

Sukkot, First Day, 03 October 2009

Torah Portion: Lev. 22:26-23:44; Num. 29.12 -16

Haftarah: Zech. 14:1-21

Readings for Sun., Oct. 4: Gen. 2:18-24, Ps 128:1-6; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mk 10:2-16

Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be the festival of booths to the LORD (Lv. 23:34). You shall live in booths for seven days... so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God (Lev. 23. 42-43).

Booths, “tabernacles” or “temporary huts” are a distinguishing feature of the Festival of Sukkot. Israelites, and Jews in the Diaspora move out of their permanent homes to sleep and eat in these fragile huts. What were these booths?

The sages of the Talmud and later Bible commentaries differ on the question of whether the sukkot referred to in the Bible were actual booths as we know them. Rabbi Akiva was of the opinion that they were set up by the Israelites as a protection against the sun when they camped. But Rabbi Eliezer was of the opinion that the sukkah was not a structure made by human hands (perhaps because of a lack of vegetation in the desert for building) but rather referred to the “clouds of glory,” the Divine Presence that protected and guided the Israelites in the desert.

A Booth (a *sukka*) understood as a “cloud of glory” is an intriguing concept and points to a profound understanding of why the Israelites are commanded to live in booths for seven days each year until the end of time. We’ve seen these “clouds of glory” in the Bible story. The “Cloud” covered the tent by day and took on the appearance of Fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, the Israelites would set out and where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp (Num. 9).

The “cloud of glory” is Fire and Water, which are also symbols of the Abiding Presence. The Mishnah describes how the city of Jerusalem during Sukkot was lit up at night by golden candlesticks that contained wicks made from the worn out drawers and cinchures of the priests and so high that ladders were required in order to light them. When lighted, Jerusalem was bathed in a golden glow that hovered over and penetrated into the darkest places of the city so that “there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light of the *Beth ha-Sho-evah* (M.Sukkah 5). The *Beth ha-Sho-evah*, the drawing of the Water ritual was a ritual to “imbibe” the Holy Spirit. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said the ceremony was called the procession for drawing water “because thence, out of the Temple in Jerusalem, the children of Israel drew and imbibed the Holy Spirit” (Pesikta Rabbati).

The Mishnah records that those who have not seen the joy of the Beth ha-Sho-evah have never seen joy. The Talmud relates that Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel, the dignified president of the Sanhedrin in the first century of the common era, would juggle eight burning torches at a time, “throwing them in the air and catching them as they came down.”

Christian can hardly read all the references connecting the Holy Spirit to the Beth ha-Sho-evah ceremony and to the city of Jerusalem without thinking of Jesus being among the crowds in Jerusalem for the sukkot festival and participating in the water drawing ceremony. We know from the command in Deuteronomy 16.16 that Sukkot was one of the festivals in which Israelites were commanded to go up to Jerusalem to see the face of God. And John’s gospel specifically states that Jesus was at the Pool of Siloam during Sukkot (John 7). Jesus may even have encountered Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel juggling the burning torches but he surely met his father, Gamaliel the Elder, who was a leading Pharisee in the first half of the first century C.E., at whose feet the apostle Paul studied Torah in Jerusalem and who stood up for the Apostles when they were examined by the Sanhedrin.

When we consider the presence of the Spirit at Sukkot we must not automatically interpret the *Ruah HaKodesh*, the Holy Spirit, as the Third Person of the Trinity. The Holy

Spirit existed apart from any definition of the triune God. Jesus did not know about the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine was not yet formulated when John's Gospel was written. The late Jacques Dupuis, Catholic theologian, counsels us to recognize that "the Spirit of God was and is universally present and active before and after the event of Jesus Christ...The Spirit blows where it wills." Of note, the same, Simeon ben Gamaliel, mentioned above, was said to be able to see with the Holy Spirit (T. Pesachim 1:27 (cf. Leviticus Rabbah 37:3)).

Referring back now to the sukka as a "cloud of glory." The "cloud of glory," is the Divine Presence recognized as a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night and flowing water. These are all liquid images of the Spirit, images impervious to becoming fixed and stationary. As such they caution us against accepting fixed images of God. Even our doctrines of the faith, if frozen for a time, must be allowed to melt. The author of Exodus 3.14 reminds us that God's name is more a verb than a noun; hence the prohibition in Judaism and now in Catholicism to pronounce the divine name of YHWH.

"Speak to the people of Israel, saying: You shall live in booths for seven days." Enter into the "cloud of glory." Enter into the Divine Presence. How? Invite guests into the sukka and God enters with them. "Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being (Buber). A custom developed of inviting into the sukka not only the living but the deceased biblical ancestors beginning with Abraham and extending today to include the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, etc., and to address each one as a Thou: "May it be your will, Lord my God and God of my ancestors, to send Your Presence to dwell in our midst and to spread over us the sukkah of your peace, to encircle us with the majesty of your pure and holy radiance...I invite to my meal the exalted guests—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca (and so forth). These heavenly visitors are called ushpizin, which is the Aramaic word for "guests". Presuming that the invited guest has arrived the exalted guest is then directly addressed, "Abraham, my exalted guest, may it please you to have all the exalted guests join me and you—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph...Sarah, Miriam, etc.)

We will hear and we will do (Deut. 5:27: I once read that when we say, "Thy Kingdom come," we should do something immediately to actualize our words. May I be excused then if I make some suggestions of what *to do* rather than *to discuss!*

[1] Barring an invitation to join some Jewish friends in their Sukka, claim your own "cloud of glory" space. Among your invited guests of friends, invite biblical characters among whom are Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, etc. Don't forget to invite Jesus. At the opening of the meal address each one directly. "All real living is meeting" (Buber). [2] See the film *ushpizin*, an inspiring film, the plot of which takes place during Sukkot and/or listen to Leonard Cohen's song, *Joan of Arc*, where Joan, burning at the stake for heresy, cries out to God, "So, Fire, make your body cold/I'm giving you mine to hold." [3] Meet with a person against whom you hold a grudge. Let go of all judgments and preconceptions. "The present exists only insofar as encounter and relation exist." (Buber). [4] Yes, a question, are your dogmatic beliefs frozen or flowing?

Bibliography: Munk, *The World of Prayer* (New York, 1963); Donin, *Sukkot* (Jerusalem, 1974); Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance* (New York, 1938); Encyclopedia Judaica, vol. 15 (Jerusalem, 1972); Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (New York, 1949).

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