



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 18, 2016
Sukkot Day 2

Is Judaism Plural or Singular?



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Is there room for pluralism in Judaism?

Judaism is a monotheistic religion, we believe in one G-d. But do Jews believe differently or all the same? Are we meant to be clones?

Why is the festival, which we are now celebrating, referred to in the plural (Sukkot) and not in the singular (Sukkah)?

Does your sukkah look like my sukkah? Should I be envious of your sukkah? Should you be envious of mine?

A pure story of a pure Jew kissing the *schach* of his sukkah in loving celebration of this holy mitzvah conveys the unique connection that every single Jew, regardless of association or affiliation has to G-d and G-d's Torah.

The answer to our sermon's title is not a spoiler, it is a refresher:

Judaism is singular. Jews are plural.

IS JUDAISM PLURAL OR SINGULAR?

1. Our Tradition (Joke)

Chag Same'ach! Happy Sukkot!

A Jewish congregation was arguing over whether one should stand or sit during the *Nishmat*, the section of prayer leading up to *Barchu*. Half of the congregation said one should sit, the other half insisted one should stand. Every time *Nishmat* was recited they shouted at each other, "Sit down!" and "Stand up!" The fighting became so bad that the congregation was split in two, each half barely speaking to the other, each contending that they knew best the tradition of their synagogue.

Finally, the rabbi decided to visit a 100-year-old member of the synagogue who had retired to Miami Beach. The rabbi, accompanied by a delegation from each of the arguing sides with him, hopped on a flight down to Miami to pay a visit to the oldest member of the shul.

"Dear honored sir, please tell us," said the rabbi, "what is our tradition, do we stand during *Nishmat*?"

"No," said the old man. "That is not our tradition."

"Well, then," said the rabbi, "it is our tradition to sit during *Nishmat*!"

"No," the old man, "that is not our tradition."

"But we need to know what to do," said the rabbi, "because our congregation members are fighting among each other."

"That is our tradition."

2. Two Jews, Three Opinions

We all know that when you have two Jews, you have three opinions. Today, it seems as if those opinions are multiplying, and not always fruitfully.

You know the one about the two last remaining Jews in Afghanistan, Ishaq Levin and Zablun Simintov, who were in a perpetual feud, each one thinking that he is the leader of the Jewish community in Afghanistan.

Of course, we have a long history of arguing with each other going back to the Babylonian times. But the arguments recorded in the Babylonian Talmud had a holy purpose, and were driven by the humble search for truth, not victory. They debated in order to clarify the exact meaning in Torah verses to establish all the different points and nuances in Torah law.

These arguments became the basis for the Code of Jewish Law and how we live today as Jews – quite literally. Specifically regarding Sukkot, these arguments eventually decided the shape and size and materials of the sukkah we sit in to the nature and definitions of the four kinds – the *lulav*/palm, *etrog*/citron, *hadassim*/myrtles, and *aravot*/willows.

The arguments of the Talmud bring us closer together, because they were driven not by egos, but by a common cause. When arguments, however, are a result of self-interest or other ulterior motives, then they break us apart.

Just look around at the different Jewish groups and communities today. It's sad to see how one family can be so divisive, with one group so critical and condescending to another.

Is then conformity the only solution? Do we all have to think the same way in order for us to be united?

Which leads us to the question: Is there room for pluralism in Judaism? Is Judaism meant to be plural or singular?

Sukkot provides us with the fascinating answer.

3. Sukkot or Sukkah?

The verse that commands us to observe the Festival of Sukkot, reads:

Speak to the children of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, is the Festival of Sukkot, a seven day period dedicated to the Lord.¹

Why is the Festival of Sukkot named in plural and not singular – why is it Sukkot and not Sukkah?

Passover and Shavuot, the two other festivals that together with Sukkot comprise the *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals, are also referred to in the Torah in the plural. Passover is called *Chag HaMatzot* referring to the consumption of matzahs during this time, and Shavuot is called *Chag HaShavuot*, meaning the Festival of Weeks as it falls at the end of seven weeks of Counting of the Omer. But these plural designations have obvious reasons. Sukkot does not – we are obligated to build one sukkah for each family.

4. Are We Clones?

Jews are known to answer a question with a question. (Yet another example of our feisty individuality).

Perhaps we may answer both of our questions – why Sukkot plural, not Sukkah singular, and is Judaism plural or singular – by asking another, third question:

Why indeed were we created as individuals, with no two people looking alike, thinking alike,² each with our own unique personality?

Applying this question to Sukkot, we can ask: Should we all be sitting in exactly the same type of sukkah? What should my attitude be to someone who has a different sukkah than my own?

The answer is both simple and profound (deceptively simple, is the way we can put it): G-d did not want clones. G-d created an extremely diverse universe, so that each one of us can contribute our unique personality and voice to the chorus of cosmic harmony.

¹ Leviticus 23:34; cf. 42-43.

² Sanhedrin 38a.

Beauty is not one color or shade. Beauty is not one sound or note. Beauty is harmony within diversity. Many different colors and shades, many different sounds and notes, each with its own inflection, all together creating a magnificent harmony.

That is why Sukkot is in the plural: To emphasize the appreciation of our diversity, and how we each contribute to a greater universe while in our own unique way.

Every one of is necessary, and every one of us needs to learn from the other.

But how can we achieve this balance? Indeed, if we could master the formula, wouldn't this be the secret to peace – peace between spouses, peace between parent and children, peace between community members, peace between communities, and yes, world peace as well.

The answer lies in the secret of the Sukkah.

5. The Talmud on the Chuppah

An intriguing Talmud helps illuminate the point. And helps us understand the plural vs. the singular, how to make our differences bring us closer together instead of farther apart.

The Talmud³ states that the Holy One will designate seven sheltering canopies for the righteous *tzaddikim* in the World to Come. The Talmud bases its assertion on the following passage from the Book of Isaiah:

*And the Lord shall create over every dwelling of Mount Zion and over all those summoned therein, a cloud by day and smoke, with a glow of flaming fire at night, for, in addition to all the honor, there will be a shelter.*⁴

The Talmud then states that every *tzaddik* will receive his sheltering canopy in commensuration to his level of righteousness. And that each one will burn with shame and envy when he sees the other's unique and greater canopy.

³ Bava Batra 75a.

⁴ Isaiah 4:5.

The 19th century Chassidic Master, Bnei Yissachar,⁵ says that this is why Sukkot is plural and not singular, because every righteous person has his own unique sukkah and the plurality of the many different sukkot of the many different Jews embodies the holiday of Sukkot much more than the singularity of only one sukkah.

6. Sukkah: The Humble Shelter

Sitting in a sukkah helps us reach this level of appreciating the uniqueness of every individual sukkah – Sukkot in the plural – harmony within diversity.

A sukkah is like a canopy. It surrounds and shelters us from all sides. In the terms of Kabbalah and Chassidus a sukkah is *makif* (or *sovev*) – it surrounds us with its transcendent energy.⁶

Simply put, the surrounding canopy of the sukkah evokes in us a sense of awe and humility – we stand enveloped and wrapped in a presence greater than ourselves. Perhaps we can say that the shelter of the sukkah's canopy shelters us from our own egos, allowing us to experience a higher presence, higher consciousness.

This humility, in turn, allows us to express our individual position (and even in a form of argument) in a healthy and uniting way that is not self-absorbed and offensive to others. And it also allows us to appreciate the opinion and position of another even if it different and contrary to our own position.

The surrounding canopy of the sukkah allows us to celebrate Sukkot, in the plural, in a transcendent manner that respects and celebrates our diversity as an expression of our unity.

⁵ Bnei Yissachar II, Maamorei Chodesh Tishrei, #9, Shemot Hachag.

⁶ See Tanya chapter 48.

7. Seven Canopies

The Talmud also help us understand what our diversity looks like by breaking it down into seven categories – seven canopies.

The Talmud derives that every tzaddik will receive his own sheltering canopy (and some as many as seven canopies) from the seven different descriptive synonyms in the Isaiah verse which names: 1) a cloud 2) smoke, 3) glow 4) flame 5) fire 6) honor and 7) shelter.⁷

Perhaps, with some poetic license, we may say that these “pluralistic” descriptions of canopies also apply to sukkot and reflect seven different types of Jews and their unique service to their Creator.

1) *Cloud*

The sukkah, like a cloud, embraces all within it. But a cloud is cloudy and not clear, just as the Jew may not be clear on every nuance of the festival. But, nevertheless, the Jew makes it his job and responsibility to be all-embracing, to be far reaching, and to include all in his cloud’s softness.

2) *Smoke*

When the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, the mountain was covered in smoke.⁸ Smoke embodies many mystical properties.⁹ In its simplest form, smoke is mystery and mysteriousness. But while smoke conceals, it is also a product of a burning fire. The Jew can be mystical and mysterious, like smoke, but inside burning with love of G-d and, like smoke, always rising upward.

3) *Glow*

There are Jews that simply shine. We all have come across such people, people who just emanate a glow, a radiance, a shine.

⁷The following verse reads, And a Sukkah shall be for shade by day from the heat, and for a shelter and for a covert from stream and from rain. The Rashbam to Bava Batra 75a replaces “honor” with “Sukkah” as the seventh canopy.

⁸Exodus 19:18.

⁹See Ohr Hatorah Exodus III, Yitro, p. 816ff and citations there.

4) *Flame*

The Jew who is like a flame is very powerful and dynamic. But if left unharnessed, this flaming Jew could also be aggressive and overwhelming.

5) *Fire*

There are Jews that light up dark places. You meet this type of Jew, or walk into this sukkah, and no matter how dark and depressing the situation, suddenly there is a fire in the darkness and the night is immediately illuminated.

6) *Honor*

In Hebrew "honor" is *kavod*, which has the same root as *kaved*, meaning "heavy." To honor one's parents, for example, is a type of heavy – as in serious – responsibility that results from understanding the gravity and importance of this mitzvah. There are Jews who are honorable, and when you meet them, they impress you immediately with their profundity and depth.

7) *Shelter*

Today, too many are consumed with their own comfort and forget to provide shelter for others. And then there are Jews – and may we all be blessed to know many of them – who never forget. They provide emotional protection, intellectual canopies, and spiritual sanctuaries for those in need.

8. Seven Elements

Every Jew is obligated to build his sukkah with his own unique spirit (obviously, the physical sukkah has to follow the guidelines of Jewish law). Some Jews build sukkot that are like clouds, all embracing and far reaching. Other Jews build sukkot that are like smoke, mystical and spiritual. Other Jews build sukkot that glow, that are like flames, and that light up the night. Still others build sukkot that bring honor to G-d and humanity. And then there are those who build sukkot that shelter the world and its inhabitants.

Ideally, each and every one of us has all seven elements within ourselves. Pluralism is realizing that certain Jews have developed some of these elements more than others. And encouraging ourselves, and one another, to develop them all, embrace all the possibilities, and never sell ourselves, or our fellow Jews, short.

This is why the Talmud says that each *tzaddik*, as he sits in his sukkah, under his canopy, will burn with healthy shame and envy seeing the sukkah of his fellow. Not because he is jealous, but because surrounded and sheltered by the canopy of his sukkah he stands humble and in appreciation of the unique value of the other's sukkah and perspective, and burns with holy humility to be part of that unique canopy as well.

9. Unique Expression (Story)

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi began to disseminate his teachings in White Russia and Lithuania (circa 1772), many young men flocked to him and became his ardent followers, despite the prevailing opposition to the Chassidic Movement. They found that Chassidism injected a new vitality and joy in serving G-d that was lacking in "establishment" Judaism. Among the newly "converted" Chassidim were the two sons of one of the leading Torah scholars of the time.

One day, they approached Rabbi Schneur Zalman with a dilemma that had been occupying their minds for some time: should they try to win over their father to the Chassidic approach to serving G-d, or is he perhaps too set in his ways to change at this point in his life.

"Does he perform mitzvot with joy?" asked Rabbi Schneur Zalman.

"Every year," related one of the sons in reply, "when we finish building our sukkah, father climbs onto a bench and kisses the *schach*."

"In that case," said the founder of Chabad, "he is fine the way he is."¹⁰

¹⁰<https://www.meaningfullife.com/sukkot-stories/>.

10. Plural vs. Singular (Conclusion)

So, now back to our original question: Is Judaism plural or singular?

The answer is quite humbling: Judaism is singular; Jews are plural.

Every healthy system consists of diverse elements, all working toward one unified goal. Take the human body. Or nature. Trillions of cells, millions of species, billions of creatures, yet they all are synchronized to work as one unit, each complementing and dependent on the other.

Unity is not one entity; neither is it divisive chaos. True unity is harmony within diversity. Think of an exquisite piece of art, or a beautiful symphony. They consist of many different colors, shades and details; many different musical notes, distinguished by their tone, cadence and timbre. But they all come together in one harmonic flow.

Thus, two different people can play the same song, but with a very different sound and feeling.

Torah – which is the divine blueprint for existence – has its divine structure and system. It has its axioms and principles, and its thirteen methodologies of interpretation. But within that structure there is room for much diversity. Not just room; the Torah insists that based on the Torah's methodology Torah scholars use their distinct minds (no two people think alike) to interpret and apply Torah, resulting in the different arguments we find in the Talmud. And then the Torah provides us with a formula how to resolve the debates and come to a halachik/legal consensus.

But the condition is that this be done within the framework of Torah's principles, and above all – with humility, standing under the divine canopy, feeling the awe of heaven. This guides the discussion and the arguments to be for the "sake of heaven," seeking out the truth, and not driven by self-interest and subjective prejudices.

If a person stands up today and announces that, in his opinion, a sukkah is a beach off the coast of Eilat and that every Jew is obligated to lounge on that beach for seven days, we would think that this definition of a sukkah is ludicrous. Why? Because it has no foundation in Torah and zero precedence in Judaism. The same is true if someone concludes that a *pri etz hadar*, a beautiful fruit is not an *etrog*/citron, but a cantaloupe.

Cantaloupes are beautiful, but they are not the beautiful fruit the Torah had in mind for us to shake together with the *lulav*. Or if someone decides that the Shabbat is not on Saturday but on Tuesday, that person won't be ridiculed, but pitied.

Thus we see that Judaism is certainly not plural in the sense that anyone could decide what is and isn't Judaism.

However, every single Jew is different. Within the context and framework of Torah principles there are many ways to interpret the laws. Your sukkah may be built of wood, mine of plexiglas, somebody else's of cloth. Your *schach* may be composed of palm fronds, mine of evergreen branches, another person's of bamboo matting. Your *etrog* may be green and small, mine yellow and large, or one long and narrow, another short and plump, and another person's something in between.

We Jews do not subjectively define what is and isn't a sukkah, what is and isn't an *etrog*. That has been decided by the Creator and conveyed in the Torah, as discussed, articulated, and codified by our holy sages. But we Jews do very much subjectively define how we build, celebrate and bless our sukkot.

And our unique personalities especially define, in a very distinct way, how we infuse vitality and joy into our own Sukkah, reflecting our own individuality and singularity.

In simple terms this means that when we each sit in our own Sukkah, we welcome all our family members and guests to express their unique voice – have each person share their unique story or thought, sing their unique song, present their unique feeling about what Sukkot means for them.

When we remember that the Torah and the mitzvot of Sukkot were given to every single Jew regardless of affiliation or lack thereof, we realize that it's not a question what we do, but how we do it – how we each build our individual sukkot, and how we can look at another's righteous sukkah, be appreciative of its beauty, and learn from it.

Sukkot – in the plural – teaches us to appreciate both our own unique canopy and also the canopy of every individual, for each one of us contributes an exclusive and indispensable musical note to the cosmic symphony.

And together we play one glorious masterpiece, made up of so many different notes, but all in one harmony. To the point that all Jews are worthy of sitting in one Sukkah¹¹ – each with his and her own unique Sukkah canopy – but together as one.

Chag Same'ach.

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¹¹Sukkah 27b.