

# ISSUES

A · MESSIANIC · JEWISH · PERSPECTIVE

## A Messianic Midrash: The Miracle at Sukkot

*The Feast of Tabernacles had ended. The crowds had dispersed and those who had traveled to Jerusalem from the outlying regions were making their way home. The sukkahs were being cleared away along with well-shaken lulavs, bent and broken from the joyous celebration. Jerusalem was returning to its usual bustling pace. People were still talking about the spectacular light that had shone from the Temple and cast a glow upon the whole city. However, it was difficult for the man who sat by the entrance to the Temple courtyard to*

*understand these conversations. He had never beheld the giant candelabra shining into the night. And although he had felt its warmth and heard it crackle, he had never even seen fire. For this man had been born blind. "I was blind when the festival began and now it's over, and I am blind still," he thought. "And so it shall probably be until the end of my days; I shall sit here, begging for a few measly coins always." He nodded in the direction of the sound of someone walking into the Temple. "The Lord bless you," he said to the wind.*

*continued inside*

Continued from cover

Later that day, he heard a group of people approaching. The group paused before him and the blind man heard one of them ask, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind?” The beggar steeled himself for the answer to come. He didn’t think he could bear it if the rabbi were to say something about his parents, whom he loved and who had always shown him compassion, even though they must have been disappointed that their child was . . . well, broken.

As these thoughts went through his mind, he heard the rabbi reply, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” The beggar was astonished and then he had another thought, but he was too afraid to speak it: “This must be the man called Jesus.” He had heard rumors and rumblings about Jesus for weeks. People spoke freely about him in front of the beggar, for they must have assumed that just because he couldn’t see, there must be something wrong with his hearing. So the blind man had heard plenty. Some had called Jesus a lunatic or a liar, but many were saying that he was the Prophet who was to come, that he was the Messiah, the Anointed One.

The teacher continued, as if to answer the blind man’s unspoken question, “Who are you?” Softly he

said, “While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.”

When he had said this, the blind man heard the sound of someone spitting on the ground, and then there were hands firmly but gently rubbing what smelled and felt

like clay on his eyes. Under ordinary circumstances, the beggar was sure he would have pulled away, but he sat there, unmoving, until the man spoke again and said, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” The beggar silently got to his feet and began to stumble in the direction of the pool. When he reached it, he knelt down, drew in a breath and began dousing his eyes with water. And as he washed away the mud, it was as if he were wiping away darkness.

The first thing he saw was light, blurred by tears . . .



John, a first-century Jewish man who believed in Jesus, recorded this Sukkot miracle.<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ healing of the blind man shocked the people of that day, not only because the act itself was so amazing, but also because the timing of the act was especially significant. It is no coincidence that Jesus performed this miracle immediately after Sukkot, for he used both the healing and the holiday to make some earth-shattering statements about himself. Thousands of years later, people are still grappling with the meaning behind this miracle. A close look at the history of Sukkot, how it was celebrated in Jesus’ day and the meaning of light in the Hebrew Scriptures, will help us discover what Jesus meant when he said he was the “light of the world.”

## Sukkot—celebrating God’s presence and provision

Since the time of Adam and Eve’s drastic choice in the Garden of Eden, humanity experienced exile from God’s immediate and intimate presence. And then God called Abraham, and promised to make his descendants into a great nation, a nation through whom all other nations would be blessed (Genesis 12). The patriarchs of our faith lived as nomads,<sup>2</sup> dwelling in temporary shelters (sukkot), looking ahead to the time when God would provide a land for them and restore them to paradise, just as he had promised. Likewise, their successors, upon exodus from slavery in Egypt, lived in sukkot during forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

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Though they dwelt in these flimsy shelters for forty years, God provided constant reminders of his watchcare: the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night signified his presence with his people. God also made a holy place for himself in the midst of the people: the tabernacle, a place where the Israelites could be reconciled to him through sacrifices. Yes, we wandered for forty years—but we did not wander alone.

God instituted Sukkot so that we would remember his presence with us during that time, and so that we would rejoice in his provision:

“Say to the Israelites: ‘On the fifteenth day of the seventh month the LORD’S Feast of Tabernacles begins, and it lasts for seven days. . . . after you have gathered the crops of the land, celebrate the festival to the LORD for seven days; the first day is a day of rest, and the eighth day also is a day of rest. On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. . . . Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.’” (Leviticus 23:34; 39-43)

Yet Sukkot doesn’t just look to the past; it also offers us a glimpse of the future, when God’s promise to Abraham will be fulfilled and all nations of the earth will be blessed through the nation he first chose. There is a key passage in Scripture that talks about this time to come:

Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. (Zechariah 14:16)

According to Scripture, the joy we experience during Sukkot is just a taste of greater joy to come. “Indeed, the whole symbolism of the Feast, beginning with the completed harvest, for which it was a

thanksgiving, pointed to the future. The Rabbis themselves admitted this.”<sup>3</sup>

## Sukkot at the time of Jesus

Those living at the time of Jesus recognized the prophetic significance of Sukkot and so the ceremonies celebrated in those days had prophetic implications. One of the greatest of these rituals was the illumination of the Temple.

Over the years, the Temple became central to Sukkot. In fact, King Solomon chose the Feast of Tabernacles as the time to dedicate the first Temple. As the people celebrated, God’s shekinah glory filled the Temple. God showed his goodness and mercy by coming once again to dwell in the midst of his people, just as he had in the wilderness.

Years later, however, the ark of the covenant was captured and the glory of the Lord departed from the Temple. Yet the Temple remained the focus of the feast through splendid ceremonies such as the illumination rite.

According to the Mishnah, four 75-foot candelabra stood within the court of the women. Each candelabrum had four branches, and at the top of every branch was a huge bowl. Four young men bearing ten-gallon pitchers of oil would climb ladders to fill the golden bowls and set them alight.

Picture sixteen beautiful flames leaping toward the sky from those enormous golden lamps. Note that the Temple was on a hill, so the glorious glow was a sight for the entire city to see. The light was to remind the people of how God’s shekinah glory had once filled his Temple. And it looked forward to a time when that glory would return.

This time of returning glory was associated with the coming of the Messiah:

This festive joy, of which the origin is obscure, was no doubt connected with the hope of the earth’s great harvest-joy in the conversion of the heathen world, and so pointed to the days of the Messiah.<sup>4</sup>

It was believed that in the time of the Messiah all nations would worship God, in accordance with the prophecy in

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Zechariah and the promise God made to Abraham, that in him all nations of the earth would be blessed. The Jewish people in Jesus' time were expecting this day with great anticipation. With the illumination of the Temple, they rejoiced over greater light that was to come.

## The Light of the World

And it was into this scene that Jesus entered. Prior to his encounter with the blind man, Jesus was teaching in the court of women soon after the Temple illumination ceremony. Perhaps he was even standing right next to those magnificent candelabra when he declared to all who were gathered there, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."<sup>5</sup>

Light has always been a sign of God's revelation and his presence. From the burning bush that Moses encountered to the pillar of fire that the Israelites followed, to the shekinah glory that once rested in the Temple, the presence of light has long been equated with the presence of God.

And so light was associated with the Messiah, God's Anointed One:

But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, . . . Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation, You shall increase their gladness; they will be glad in Your presence as with the gladness of harvest . . . (Isaiah 9:1-3)

The light was meant to symbolize the presence of God. That day in the Temple, Jesus said that he *was* the presence of God, right there, in their midst. At the same time, he was declaring that he was the Messiah. He was the Light that the people had been waiting for.

A few days after Jesus spoke these stunning words in the court of the women, he gave sight to a blind man. Perhaps those who had listened to his words and were familiar with the Scriptures, were not surprised at this miracle. After all, earlier in his ministry Jesus had quoted the words of Isaiah 61 as applying to himself:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he anointed me to preach [good news]  
to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,  
And recovery of sight to the blind . . ." (Luke 4:18)

The meaning of Jesus' words and deeds was certainly not lost on the people. Some chose to accept what he said and believed he was the Messiah, and some chose to reject him, asking, "What kind of Messiah could come from Galilee?" Apparently, they chose to ignore the Isaiah prophecy mentioned above—for where does it say the Messiah, the light of the world, would come from?

## Conclusion

There are different types of blindness. There is a physical blindness that longs for physical light and there is another kind of blindness wherein a person shuts his or her eyes to things that they do not want to believe. If you look at the accounts of Jesus' life and death, you'll see that he came to take care of both kinds of blindness.

The religious leadership of Jesus' day refused to believe in the Sukkot miracle.

. . . They summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know [Jesus] is a sinner." He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" . . . Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." The man answered, ". . . Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." (John 9:24-33 NIV)

What the religious leadership had missed, a blind beggar found. "His day of ingathering had dawned."<sup>6</sup> For him, the joy of the Feast of Tabernacles was a personal reality, for he had been in the presence of the light of the world. ■

1. John 9:1-11 (All Scriptures NASB, except where noted.)
2. "Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house and made booths for his livestock; therefore the place is named Succoth" (Genesis 33:17).
3. Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1976, p. 149.
4. Ibid. 165
5. John 8:12
6. McQuaid, Elwood. *The Outpouring*. (New Jersey: Friends of Israel 1990), p. 11

# Living Water

## Living Water

Jesus used the symbols of Sukkot to make some unique claims about himself. We read about one of these symbols, light, in the lead article. Jesus also used water, another main element of Sukkot, to show that he was the fulfillment of the feast.

In Jesus' day, special observances and traditions were developed to mark the seventh day of Sukkot, known as Hoshana Rabba, "the Great Day." The most notable of these was the Simchat Beit Hashoevah, or water-drawing ceremony, which went as follows:

Imagine a whole parade of worshipers and flutists led by the Temple priest to the pool of Siloam. The priest had two golden pitchers, one of which was for wine. He filled the other with water from the pool. As the musicians played, a choir of Levites chanted Psalm 118: "Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them. I shall give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous will enter through it. I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, and You have become my salvation." (v. 19-21) Psalm 118 is a prophetic psalm, which contains the words: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone. This was the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." (v. 22,23)

After the Scriptures were chanted, the whole procession headed back to the Temple and a silver trumpet sounded three times. The priest approached the altar, where two beautiful golden basins were waiting. He poured wine into one basin as a drink offering to the Lord. And he poured water from the pool of Siloam into the other. The whole ceremony, with the parade and the flutes and the singing was so wonderful that one ancient rabbi wrote: "Anyone who has not seen this water ceremony has never seen rejoicing in his life."

The ceremony was to thank God for his bounty, and to ask him to provide rain for the crops in the coming year. It is said that this ceremony developed from a reading of Isaiah 12:3-4, which says of a future time:

Therefore you will joyously draw water  
From the springs of salvation.  
And in that day you will say,  
"Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name.  
Make known His deeds among the peoples;  
Make them remember that His name is  
exalted."

So on the last day, that great day of the feast, it is recorded that Jesus stood up and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).<sup>1</sup> This was astonishing; nobody had ever dared speak like this. Jesus was saying that he was the wellspring of salvation of whom the prophet Isaiah wrote. He was the Messiah, the Lord's anointed one. It is no wonder that Jesus chose the day of the water-pouring ceremony to invite everyone to come to him. If only the people would believe in him, he would quench their spiritual thirst.

And how did people respond? "Some of the people therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, 'This certainly is the Prophet.' Others were saying, 'This is the [Messiah].' Still others were saying, 'Surely the [Messiah] is not going to come from Galilee, is he?'" (John 7:40, 41) The crowd was divided among those who believed Jesus' claims and those who didn't. And in the middle stood Jesus, who knew that ultimately he was the very corner stone that the builders were about to reject.

1. See also Isaiah 44:3; 55:1; 58:11.



# In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

"This can't really be happening, can it?"  
"I don't understand!"

"Is this a joke? How can this be, it's crazy, I tell you!"

The people of Vaysechvoos had seen some strange things before, but this, this could definitely be called the strangest happening yet, and right around the holiday, no less! What could it mean?

Everybody had been busy for days, preparing for Sukkot. Besides their own family's sukkahs, almost all of the townspeople had participated in the construction of the booth at the shul, laboring carefully to make sure it was large enough to hold several families at once and decorated "just so." The result was one of the finest sukkahs anyone could remember. Each person looked forward to the evenings when they would take supper in it and sing songs of joy with their neighbors.

But the first night of Sukkot, when several families arrived at the shul, they found the sukkah missing! The situation seemed preposterous, for whoever heard of such a thing happening?

"We've been robbed!" Malke, wife of Feivel the carpenter, gasped.

"Now, dear," said her husband, "I ask you, who would want to steal a sukkah?"

"Well, how else do you explain it? Sukkahs don't just get up and walk away!"

Fortunately, it didn't take long to locate the missing booth. In fact, it was leaning against the south side of the shul, perfectly intact, just as they had left it . . . but not *where*

they left it. For the people had built the sukkah along the north wall of the shul—at least, they thought they had.

"Maybe this *is* where we left it after all?" asked Rivkah, wife of Mendel the tanner.

But no, everyone was pretty sure the sukkah was positioned on the north wall. However, things being as they now were, they decided to leave the sukkah on the south wall and eat together in it, just as they would have if the sukkah hadn't moved.

The next day, though, conversations were completely centered on the odd occurrence. Many thought that someone must be up to some mischief, so naturally the

most mischievous people in the shtetl were questioned. But nobody would own up to having moved the shelter and nobody even appeared particularly suspect. Besides, who would want to move the sukkah? And how could they even do such a thing, when surely such an effort would require the making of much noise, and the rabbi lived only a few feet from the shul and was a notoriously light sleeper and his wife was an even lighter sleeper . . . no, it just

didn't make any sense that someone would have or could have moved the sukkah.

Leave well enough alone. That was the general consensus. But at the end of the day, when more families came to the sukkah to celebrate together, they saw that the southern wall of the shul was bare. There was nothing by it but grass! It was soon discovered that the sukkah had moved again, this time to the eastern wall.





Naturally, the townspeople became speculative. "It's a miracle!" some whispered to each other. "But what can it mean?"

Several eagerly offered explanations. Feivel the carpenter said, "Well, you know, perhaps the Almighty is trying to teach us that we should build our homes on firm foundations."

The people listened to his opinion, but few thought there was much to it.

Mendel the tanner said, "I have a theory."

"So, nu? What's your theory?" asked Malke, Feivel's wife.

"Maybe, just maybe, the Almighty is saying that we spend our whole lives chasing after things, but really, we should slow down, for the things we chase are futile."

This seemed only slightly more credible than Feivel's explanation.

"It could be that the Almighty is mad at me," said Leah, one of the young girls in the shtetl.

"Now why would that be, Leah?" asked her mother.

"Well," the girl said timidly, her face turning bright red, "when we were decorating the sukkah, I took a piece of the fruit and ate it. . . I'm sorry, Mama! I didn't know the sukkah would move because of it!"

Her mother and others reassured the frightened little girl that surely, it was not for this reason that the sukkah had moved.

The Sage finally spoke up, putting a stop to the speculating, theorizing and hypothesizing. He reminded the people that Sukkot was a season of joy, a time to put

aside their daily troubles and thank the Almighty for bringing them through another year.

"And after all, if the Almighty-Blessed-be-His-Name wants to move our sukkah, he must have his reasons."

The people nodded in agreement. And each day of the feast, the sukkah continued to move to a different place. But the people of Vaysechvoos took it all in stride. There were worse things, after all, than a moving sukkah. And so they all engaged in the usual Sukkot festivities; they ate meals together in booths and were joyful. In fact, it could be said that the mystery of the moving sukkah only added to the joy—for, as some said,

a miracle was a miracle, whether they understood it or not. Every day, the people would venture out and ask each other, "So, where has it gone to now?" It became something to look forward to.

On the fifth night of Sukkot, as Feivel's family sat together in their own sukkah, his youngest daughter Chavelah suddenly said, "Papa, this is the best Sukkot ever!"

"Why's that, Chavelah?"

"Well, because the Almighty keeps moving the sukkah, and even though we don't know exactly why, it's just good to know he's so close to us during this holiday." She smiled and took a bite of bread.

And so while it could easily be said that the year of the moving Sukkah was indeed strange, it still remains one of the most special feasts ever celebrated in Vaysechvoos.



# JOY AT SUKKOT

by Susan Perlman

## Elusive joy

For those who wait  
And know not what they wait for  
A promise, a path, a person?

## Unfulfilled joy

For those who dream  
And know not what to dream for  
Success, satisfaction, a savior?

## Unbridled joy

For those who submit  
And know to whom they humbly submit  
The Anointed One, Y'shua our Simcha



*Sammy Katz*

