



In a famous passage towards the end of *Hilkhot Lulav* (8:12), Maimonides distinguishes between the obligation of *simcha* (rejoicing) on Sukkot and on the other festivals: "Although there is a *mitzva* to rejoice on all the festivals, during the festival of Sukkot extra rejoicing took place in the Temple, as it says (Vayikra 23:4), 'You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days'." Sukkot differs from the other festive occasions on the Jewish calendar in that it featured special celebrations held in the Temple on each night of the holiday. Maimonides derives this obligation from the Torah's emphasis on rejoicing "before the Lord" in the context of Sukkot, suggesting that special festivities should be observed in the Temple ("before the Lord") on this festival.

Although Maimonides provides us here with the Biblical source for this unique obligation, he does not inform us of the reason for this *simcha yeteira*, "extra rejoicing." Why was Sukkot singled out from the other festivals in this regard?

It is commonly assumed that the unique joy of Sukkot results from the atonement we have just earned several days earlier, on Yom Kippur, and we thus celebrate on Sukkot our renewed relationship with the Almighty. We might, however, consider an additional possibility in light of Maimonides' comments in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:43) in explaining why we observe Sukkot specifically during the autumn season:

The reason why it is kept in the autumn is stated in the Law: "When you have gathered in your labors from the field" (Shemot 23:16); that is to say, when you rest and are free from pressing labors. Aristotle, in the ninth book of his *Ethics*, mentions this as a general custom among the nations. He says: "In ancient times the sacrifices and assemblies of the people took place after the ingathering of the corn and the fruit, as if the sacrifices were offered on account of the harvest."

The autumn season, when the harvest is completed, marks the culmination of a long, arduous agricultural process, and the onset of the rainy season when farmers would break from their work. The custom therefore naturally evolved to observe a festive celebration during this season to express joy over the successful crop and as a release of tension after the many months of toil and exertion.

It is possible that the *simcha yeteira* that was held in the Temple during Sukkot served to place this natural, instinctive celebration within a religious context. Maimonides emphasizes that these festivities occurred only in the Temple, and adds:

It was not conducted by the masses and anybody who wished; it was rather the leading scholars of Israel, heads of academies and Sanhedrin, pious men, elders and distinguished men who would dance, clap, play music and rejoice in the Temple during the days of the Sukkot festival.

This celebration was led not by farmers, but by leading Rabbis and elders. The harvest festivities that were prevalent in other societies is observed by *Benei Yisrael* as an inspiring, spiritual event, as the nation assembles in the *Mikdash* under the leadership of its religious heads to celebrate with the Almighty, as it were. The end of the agricultural year is to be welcomed as an opportunity for the nation to enhance their relationship with God, rather than engage in frivolous celebrations to release the accumulated stress of the harvest season. The Torah therefore ordained that the widespread practice of celebrating the end of the harvest be conducted within the sacred confines of the Temple, under the guidance and leadership of the nation's religious authorities.

This approach to the *simcha yeteira* touches upon a broader theme of the festival of Sukkot. As the *Meshekh Chokhma* observes (Vayikra 23:43), the *mitzva* of *sukka*, unlike virtually all other commandments, encompasses the totality of one's existence. For the week of Sukkot, a person is to conduct all his affairs – especially the elementary needs of eating and sleeping – within the context of a *mitzva*. In direct contrast to the self-denial we practice on Yom Kippur, on Sukkot we are to specifically engage and indulge in physical enjoyment – but specifically in an aura of sanctity, as a religious act. In fact, Maimonides rules (Hilkhot Sukka 6:6) that one who ensures not to eat or drink even small amounts outside the *sukka* (despite the fact that *Halakha* requires a *sukka* only for substantial amounts) "is praiseworthy." Rav Moshe Leib Shachor, in his work *Avnei Shoham* (Parashat Emor), explains that the ideal performance of the *mitzva* of *sukka* involves sustaining oneself exclusively with "*mitzva* food" throughout the festival. For an entire week, the individual's entire nutritional intake occurs within the framework of a *mitzva*, as part of the service of God. In this sense, Sukkot represents the ideal of living a life of spiritual meaning even as one engages in otherwise mundane pursuits, thereby elevating his existence into one that is devoted entirely to *avodat Hashem*.