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From the Chabura
By: Adam Friedmann

Jewish Universalism: Boundaries or Bridges?

On the first day of Yom Tov, we read the haftorah from the end of *Zecharia*. This passage describes a terrifying war that will occur in Israel at the end of days. After this war, the nations of the world will recognize Hashem, and make a yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem on Sukkot. Those nations who fail to do this, are punished. Nations that rely on rain to water their crops will have it withheld. Nations like Egypt, who don't rely on rain, will be punished with disease. (*Zecharia* 14:16-19) Rashi (to verse 16 s.v., *et chag hasukkot*) links this passage to an aggada at the beginning of *masechet Avoda Zara* (3a). In that story, which is also set at the end of days, Klal Yisrael is revealed as worthy of reward from Hashem and all of their enemies are judged. The other nations ask for a mitzva to do so that they too can receive reward. Hashem tells them to build *sukkot*, but then makes it unbearably hot outside. The other nations leave their sukkot, kicking them on the way out. Thus Klal Yisrael remains the only nation worthy of reward.

The passage in Zecharia coupled with the aggada present a narrow view of Jewish universalism. Bnei Yisrael are revealed as the moral champions of history. The other nations are forced to recognize Hashem and "bend the knee" by making yearly pilgrimages. Beyond this, there's little indication that anything else has changed in these other nations.

Other passages in the *nevi'im* present a very different picture. For example, consider this passage from *Micha* which is also repeated in *Yeshayahu* (2:1-4):

> In the days to come, the mountain of Hashem's House shall stand firm above the mountains; and it shall tower above the hills. The peoples shall gaze on it with joy, and the many nations shall go and shall say: "Come, Let us go up to the Mount of Hashem, to the House of the G-d of Jacob; that we may be instructed in Hashem's ways, and that we may walk in holy paths." For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of Hashem from Jerusalem. Thus [Hashem] will judge among the many peoples, and arbitrate for the multitude of nations, however distant; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war. (*Micha* 4:1-3)

This passage presents a much broader view of universalism. In this version, the nations of the world accept the message of Judaism. They seek out Hashem and the Torah. Ultimately, this process transforms the entire world, as war is obliterated. Hints of this kind of vision even exist earlier in *Zecharia* (2:15) who says that in the future the nations of the world will attach themselves to Hashem and become Hashem's "nation".

There are many possible ways to harmonize these two visions of universalism. Perhaps they represent two stages of history. Perhaps they are two different possible outcomes, depending on humanity's choices. The actionable question for us today is: which one do we anticipate and hope for? Do we dream of a world where the line between the "righteous Jews" and the "evil gentiles" remains clear cut and our historical enemies finally face judgment? Or do we dream of a world where knowledge of Hashem spreads beyond our small corner and the Torah transforms the behavior of all of humanity?

One interesting source on this question is found in *Torat Kohanim* (*Kedoshim* 2:4). This is the source for Rabbi Akiva's famous maxim that the verse"love your fellow as yourself" is a great principle of the Torah (*klal gadol ba Torah*). Less famous is Ben Azai's response that the Torah contains an even greater principle: "This is the record of Adam's lineage" (*ze sefer tolddot ha'Adam*) (*Bereshit* 5:1). This *pasuk* is stating a fact, it's not a mitzva. What does it mean for it to be a "principle of the Torah"? Rabbi Yehuda Amital (*Leolam Yehe Adam*, 98-99) explains that when the Midrash says "principle" it means "value". Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azai are debating about the fundamental values expressed by the Torah. Rabbi Akiva identifies love and care for fellow Jews as a critical value. Ben Azai notes that the Torah orients our concern to a broader base that includes all of humanity. The two positions aren't necessarily at odds. Our relationships with other Jews are more intimate than the ones with humanity overall. However, this source does indicate that concern for the betterment of all of humanity is a "great principle of the Torah".

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook (*Lenevuchei Hador*, 36) makes a pragmatic argument for seeking a broader vision of universality. He notes that it's always easier to draw boundaries between Jews and gentiles by negating gentile society as barbaric or evil. The problem with this approach is that it falls apart when gentile society produces things that are manifestly moral and beneficial. It's therefore wiser to take the harder path of understanding that ultimately all the nations of the world will progress morally. The struggle then is to understand Klal Yisrael's unique role.

Sukkot is a time to contemplate Klal Yisrael's role in the world. The Midrash Rabba (*Bamidbar, Pinchas* 21:24) explains that the seventy bull offerings on Sukkot are offered on behalf of the other nations. This is done even while these nations despise us. It's easy to give in to cynicism and dismiss the other nations as irredeemable or evil. But the ideal seems to be to hope and work for a day when the ideals of the Torah spread throughout the world.

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life
By: Dovid Campbell

Sukkah 5:8 — The Final Lesson of Tractate Sukkah

The mishnah at the very end of tractate *Sukkah* appears, at first glance, to have little to do with Sukkot. It describes how the priestly family of Bilga was permanently penalized—their ring for holding sacrificial animals was sealed, their storage niche in the Temple wall was closed, and they were forced to receive their share of the sacred showbread in a place of lesser honor. The reason, explains Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura, was a shocking act of betrayal: Miriam bat Bilga, a daughter of that priestly family, had married a Greek officer and ultimately joined in the desecration of the Temple. Striking the altar with her sandal, she cried out bitterly, "Wolf, wolf! How long will you consume Israel's wealth without coming to their aid in their time of need?"

The Sages did not view her words as emerging in a vacuum. "If she had not heard her father mocking the service," they explained, "she would not have spoken so." The punishment was not only for Miriam, but for her entire family. Her father's casual complaints about the effort or cost of Temple service had, over time, taken root in the next generation—and blossomed into outright rebellion.

This closing mishnah thus delivers a profound warning about spiritual tone. Even an offhand expression of resentment about the expense, exertion, or inconvenience of mitzvah observance can plant seeds of cynicism that our children may one day harvest. Sacred labor performed with a sigh can, in the long arc of time, hollow out the altar itself.

It seems fitting that this lesson concludes *Sukkah*, the tractate of *zeman simchateinu*, the season of our joy. Few commandments require as much physical preparation as Sukkot—constructing a sukkah, acquiring the four species, and braving the elements. It is precisely here that the Mishnah reminds us: joy in the mitzvah is not a luxury, it is its lifeblood.

The story also links Sukkot to the next major holiday on the Jewish calendar—Chanukkah. In the time of the Greeks, the Jews of Bilga's generation faced a test far greater than inconvenience: would they still rejoice in the mitzvot when the price was persecution, danger, and loss? The example of Bilga suggests that the ability to withstand this trial was not a simple matter of religiosity or pedigree, but of genuine spiritual connection forged in childhood. The joy of Sukkot is the secret to overcoming the challenge of Chanukkah.
Thus the tractate closes not with ritual detail, but with moral resonance. And it is therefore unsurprising that Maimonides chooses to conclude his laws of Sukkot in a similar vein: "The joy that a person experiences in the fulfillment of the commandments, and in the love of the God who commanded them, is a very great service. And all who restrain themselves from this joy are worthy of punishment."

Intention and Inquiry: The Mitzvah Mindset of Sukkot
By: Dovid Campbell

Tzitzit. Tefillin. Sukkah.
These three commandments share a surprising halakhic feature: according to R' Yaakov ben Asher's *Tur*, they each require *kavanat ha-ta'am* – contemplation of their underlying rationale while performing them.

But why only these three? R' Yoel Sirkis, in his *Beit Hadash*, proposed that each is introduced by a verse explicitly stating it is "for the sake of" something beyond the act itself: *tzitzit* "for the sake of remembering the commandments," *tefillin* "that the Torah be in your mouth," and *sukkah* "so that your generations will know." For R' Sirkis, these verses signal a unique halakhic demand to reflect on meaning.

Later authorities, such as the *Peri Megadim* and R' Tzvi Elimelekh Spira of Dinov, expanded the idea. R' Spira argued that since many verses present explicit or implicit rationales for the mitzvot, the obligation of *kavvanat ha-ta'am* cannot be limited to three. In his *Derech Pikudecha*, he turned this insight into a vast program: every commandment, wherever the Torah hints at purpose, calls for mindful reflection.

Yet R' Yosef Karo, in his *Beit Yosef* on the same halacha in *hilchot tzitzit*, wrote only two words: "*Pashut hu*—It is obvious." For him, no textual derivation was needed. The Vilna Gaon, explaining R' Karo, cited *Nedarim* 62a ("Do things for the sake of their performance") and Isaiah 29:13's warning against rote worship. Together they imply a universal rule: every mitzvah must be done with awareness of its underlying meaning.

Later *poskim* made this explicit. R' Yechiel Michel Epstein wrote that even those who hold mitzvot do not technically require intention still hold that one must "know the fundamental point of the commandment and its essence" (O.C. 25:8). And R' Shaul David Botschko adds that two intentions are always needed according to the *Shulchan Aruch*: to fulfill God's will and to grasp the mitzvah's unique purpose. Their words confirm the Beit Yosef's broad, commonsense view—supported by the Vilna Gaon—that reflective performance is a universal halakhic expectation, not an optional enhancement.

But how should we navigate the often ambiguous or enigmatic rationales for certain commandments? R' Hayyim Tyrer's *Sha'ar Ha-Tefillah* gives this issue a personal turn. Each person, he writes, must contemplate a mitzvah's meaning "according to his own capacity" and guided by the teachings of our sages. Whatever sincere insight he then reaches can certainly be considered a true *kavanah*, especially when we consider that the *taamei ha-mitzvot* are innumerable. Where R' Sirkis sought textual precision, R' Tyrer finds spiritual openness: the Torah itself invites our searching.

Nowhere is this more vivid than Sukkot. Of the three mitzvot that inspired this debate, only sukkah envelops us entirely. We sit within its walls "so that our generations may know," translating abstract reflection into lived experience. The sukkah thus becomes the paradigm of mindful observance—a dwelling where inquiry and devotion meet, and where every mitzvah can become an act of both obedience and understanding.