

Hoshanot, Water and Joy

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Hoshanot, Nisuch HaMayim, Simchat Beit HaShoevah and Hoshana Rabbah — For the Home

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Today the last day of Sukkot gathers everything the festival has been carrying all week. This morning, shuls everywhere circled the bimah seven times with lulav and etrog, and then each person took a small bundle of willows and struck it on the ground. Tonight Shemini Atzeret begins, and tomorrow morning, in Musaf, we ask for rain.

Four things stand behind this day: the hoshanot, the circuits with the willow; nisuch hamayim, the water poured on the altar; Simchat Beit HaShoevah, the joy of the water-drawing; and Hoshana Rabbah itself. Each has its own sources and its own reasons. Together they form one picture, and one thread runs through all of them: the single person and the whole people, the "I" and the "all".

I. Hoshanot: the willow and the circle

In the Mikdash

The Mishnah describes the mitzvah of the aravah as it was done in the Temple. There was a place below Yerushalayim called Motza. They went down there and cut tall willow branches, brought them up, and stood them along the sides of the altar with their tops bending over it. The shofar sounded: tekiah, teruah, tekiah. "Every day they circled the altar once and said, Ana Hashem hoshi'a na, ana Hashem hatzlicha na — Please, Hashem, save now; please, Hashem, bring success now. Rabbi Yehudah says: Ani vaho hoshi'a na. And on that day [the seventh] they circled the altar seven times." When they left, they said, "Beauty is yours, O altar; beauty is yours, O altar" (Mishnah Sukkah 4:5).

So there are two layers. One is the willow standing around the altar. The other is the people walking around it, calling out hoshi'a na. From that cry the willows themselves came to be called hoshanot.

A law from Sinai, a custom of the prophets

The aravah is not written explicitly in the Torah as a separate mitzvah. The Gemara reports in the name of Rabbi Yochanan that "ten saplings, the aravah, and the water libation are halacha leMoshe miSinai", law given orally to Moshe at Sinai (Sukkah 34a; 44a). That refers to the aravah in the Mikdash.

What about the aravah we take today, outside the Temple? The Gemara records a dispute: one sage calls it yesod nevi'im, an enactment of the prophets, and the other calls it minhag nevi'im, a custom of the prophets (Sukkah 44a). The practical difference shows in the next page: when a willow was brought before great sages, they took it and struck it, chavit chavit, and said no blessing, "for he holds it is a custom of the prophets" (Sukkah 44b). That is why we make no

blessing over the hoshanot to this day. The Gemara also explains why, in Temple times, the aravah of the seventh day overrode Shabbat: to make known that it comes from the Torah (Sukkah 43b).

The circuits today

The Shulchan Aruch records the practice that grew from all this. A Sefer Torah is brought up to the bimah, and the congregation circles it once each day, and seven times on the seventh day, "in remembrance of the Mikdash, where they circled the altar" (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 660:1). Each circuit has its own hoshanot poems. The laws of the hoshanot and of Hoshana Rabbah follow in the next chapters (Orach Chaim 660–664).

The bimah stands where the altar once stood in our imagination, and the whole congregation walks around it together. No one circles alone. That is the first picture of the "all".

II. Nisuch HaMayim: the water on the altar

How it was done

"How was the water libation done? A golden flask holding three log was filled from the Shiloach. When they reached the Water Gate, they sounded tekiah, teruah, tekiah. The priest went up the ramp and turned to his left, where there were two silver bowls" (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). The bowls were pierced, one with a wider opening for the wine and one with a narrower opening for the water, so that both would drain together (Sukkah 48b). The water was poured on all seven days of Sukkot, and not on the eighth (Mishnah Sukkah 4:1). Today, Hoshana Rabbah, was therefore the last morning of the water.

The Rambam summarizes: "All seven days of the festival they pour water on the altar, and this is halacha leMoshe miSinai. It was poured at the time of the wine libation of the morning tamid" (paraphrasing Rambam, Hilchot Temidin uMusafin 10:6). He then sets out the flask, the bowls and the procedure (there, 10:7).

Why water?

The Gemara gives the reason in G-d's own voice: "Why did the Torah say, pour water on the festival? The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Pour water before Me on the festival, so that your rains of the year will be blessed" (Rosh Hashanah 16a). That fits the Mishnah's teaching that "on the festival [of Sukkot] the world is judged for water" (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2). We stand in judgment for rain, and we answer with water: a small offering of the very thing we need.

By night as well

The Gemara, discussing when we begin to mention rain in our prayers, compares it to the water libation, which may be done "even at night" (Taanit 2b). The Yerushalmi rules explicitly that if the libation was poured at night, it is valid (Yerushalmi Sukkah 4:7), and the Rambam brings that down as well (Hilchot Temidin uMusafin 10:7).

The Lubavitcher Rebbe built a teaching on this detail (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 2, Sukkot). Wine has taste; it stands for the service of G-d that we understand and feel. Water has no taste; it stands for kabbalat ol, accepting the yoke of Heaven simply because He asked. Understanding belongs to the "day", when things are clear. Kabbalat ol holds even at "night", when we do not see and do not understand. That is why the water can be poured even in the dark.

The man who poured on his feet

The Mishnah adds a story. The people would call out to the priest who poured, "Raise your hand!", because "once someone poured it on his feet, and all the people pelted him with their etrogim" (Mishnah Sukkah 4:9). The Gemara identifies him as a Sadducee (Sukkah 48b). The Sadducees rejected the Oral Torah, and the water libation rests entirely on the Oral Torah, on a law from Sinai that no verse spells out. The whole people answered him together, each with the etrog in his hand.

III. Simchat Beit HaShoevah: the joy of the water-drawing

"Whoever has not seen..."

"Whoever has not seen the joy of the Beit HaShoevah has never seen joy in his life" (Mishnah Sukkah 5:1). The Mishnah describes it: on the night after the first day of the festival, they went down to the Women's Court and made a great arrangement there. Golden candelabra stood with four bowls at their tops, and young priests climbed ladders to fill them with oil. The wicks were made from the worn-out garments of the priests, "and there was no courtyard in Yerushalayim that was not lit by the light of the Beit HaShoevah" (Mishnah Sukkah 5:2-3).

"Pious men and men of deeds danced before them with flaming torches in their hands, and sang songs and praises. And the Levites, with harps and lyres and cymbals and trumpets and instruments without number, stood on the fifteen steps that went down from the Court of Israel to the Women's Court, corresponding to the fifteen Songs of Ascents in Tehillim" (Mishnah Sukkah 5:4). At dawn they went out to draw the water, and at the eastern gate they turned to face the Sanctuary and said: "Our fathers in this place stood with their backs to the Sanctuary of Hashem and their faces to the east, and bowed to the sun. But we, our eyes are to G-d" (there).

Drawing the holy spirit

Why was it called the "house of drawing"? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi answers: "Because from there they drew ruach hakodesh, the holy spirit, as it says, 'Joyfully shall you draw water from the wells of salvation'" (Yerushalmi Sukkah 5:1; Yeshayahu 12:3). The Midrash says the same in the name of Rabbi Hoshaya (Bereishit Rabbah 70:8). The Yerushalmi adds that Yonah ben Amittai came up for the festival, entered the Simchat Beit HaShoevah, and the holy spirit rested on him, "to teach you that the holy spirit rests only on a joyful heart" (Yerushalmi Sukkah 5:1).

Who danced, and how

The Gemara gives portraits of the dancers. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel juggled eight flaming torches without letting them touch (Sukkah 53a). Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya said, "When we rejoiced at the Beit HaShoevah, we saw no sleep in our eyes", and then listed a day that ran from the morning offering through prayer, study and food, and back to the celebration at night (there).

And Hillel the Elder, when he rejoiced at the Beit HaShoevah, used to say: "If I am here, everyone is here; and if I am not here, who is here?" (Sukkah 53a). The commentators read this in more than one way. One reading is that Hillel was speaking on G-d's behalf: as long as the Presence rests in His house, everything is here. Another reading is that each person must know that his own presence matters, and at the same moment that he is only one of "everyone". We will come back to this.

The Rambam: joy in a mitzvah

The Rambam turns this into law. On Sukkot there was "an extra day of joy" in the Mikdash (Hilchot Lulav 8:12). It was not the common people who danced, but "the greatest of the Sages of Israel, the heads of the yeshivot and of the Sanhedrin, the pious, the elders and the men of deeds"; and "the whole people, men and women, came to see and to hear" (there, 8:14). Then comes his famous sentence: "The joy that a person rejoices in doing a mitzvah and in love of G-d who commanded it is a great service. Whoever holds himself back from this joy deserves punishment, as it says, 'because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and with a good heart'" (there, 8:15, citing Devarim 28:47). He adds that one who stands on his dignity in such a place is a sinner and a fool, and that true greatness is to rejoice before Hashem, as David danced before the ark (there).

Today

Without the Temple we cannot draw the water or pour it, but we can rejoice in its memory. In Chabad communities, following the Lubavitcher Rebbe's encouragement over many years, Simchat Beit HaShoevah is celebrated every night of Sukkot, often outdoors with music and dancing in the streets, so that as many Jews as possible can join. Other communities hold their own celebrations, many in yeshivot and shuls, on the nights of Chol HaMoed.

IV. Hoshana Rabbah

Seven circuits and the willow

Everything we have seen comes together today. As in the Mikdash, the congregation circles seven times (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 660:1). The prayers are lengthened, in some respects like a Yom Tov (Orach Chaim 664:1). After the circuits each person takes the hoshanot, a separate bundle of willows, and strikes it on the ground or on a vessel two or three times. The Rema notes the custom of first shaking it and then striking it (Orach Chaim 664:4). Many take a bundle of five branches.

The final sealing

The Zohar calls this day the end of the judgment that began on Rosh Hashanah: "On the seventh day of the festival is the completion of the judgment of the world, and the decrees (pitkin) go out from the King's house" (Zohar III, 31b). It connects this to the willows, the circuits and the rains of blessing. From this teaching comes the custom of wishing one another pitka tava, a good note, which is the Yiddish a gut kvitl. The Rishonim also describe Hoshana Rabbah as the last day of the season of judgment. And a well-known later tradition holds that the notes are not finally delivered until Shemini Atzeret.

The night of Hoshana Rabbah

For this reason many stay awake on the night of Hoshana Rabbah. They read the book of Devarim and the whole of Tehillim, following a set order known as the Tikkun Leil Hoshana Rabbah. Later halachic authorities record the custom of learning through the night. The custom has kabbalistic roots, and the details vary by community. It is the last vigil of the season.

What happens to the willows

After use, the hoshanot are not thrown into the street. The Rema writes: "They are accustomed to put away the hoshanot for baking matzot, in order to do a mitzvah with them" (Orach Chaim 664:9). So the willows that were struck on Hoshana Rabbah would feed the fire of the matzah oven. Many also keep them to burn with the chametz on Erev Pesach, a widespread custom with the same intent: one mitzvah hands its last use to the next.

V. The arc of Tishrei

Hoshana Rabbah only makes sense as the end of a long road.

Elul is the month when, in the Alter Rebbe's parable, the King is in the field (Likkutei Torah, Re'eh). He is approachable and receives everyone with a pleasant face. It is a month of preparation, of shofar every morning and of turning back.

On Rosh Hashanah "all who come into the world pass before Him" (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2), and we crown Him King with the shofar. On Yom Kippur, after the days of return, the judgment is sealed, and we come out of Ne'ilah cleansed.

Then, only four days later, comes Sukkot, zman simchateinu, the season of our joy. The movement is deliberate: from awe to joy, from standing before the King to dwelling in His shade. The same Mishnah that speaks of Rosh Hashanah says that "on the festival [of Sukkot] the world is judged for water" (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2). So even the joy carries a judgment, gentler and quieter: the judgment of rain, of whether the coming year will be fed.

That is why the season ends with water. We poured it for seven days. We danced around it. Today we struck the willows that grow by the water, and the decrees go out. And tomorrow, on Shemini Atzeret morning, the chazzan stands before Musaf for Tefillat Geshem, the prayer for rain. From then on we say mashiv haruach umorid hageshem in every Amidah until Pesach (Mishnah Taanit 1:1–2). What began in Elul as a cry ends as a request, quiet, confident and shared by everyone: please give us rain.

VI. The individual and the Klal

A thread has run through every section. It is worth gathering it at the end, because these four practices teach it more clearly than almost anything else in the year.

The willow in the bundle

The Midrash reads the four species as four kinds of Jews. The etrog has taste and fragrance: Jews with both Torah and good deeds. The lulav has taste but no fragrance, and the hadas fragrance but no taste. The aravah has neither taste nor fragrance: "people who have neither Torah nor good deeds. What does the Holy One, blessed be He, do with them? To destroy them is impossible. Rather, He says: let them all be bound together as one bundle, and they will atone for one another" (Vayikra Rabbah 30:12). The Midrash goes on to say that when they are bound together, G-d is exalted.

So the willow, the plainest of the four, without taste or smell, is the one we hold up alone on Hoshana Rabbah. It is the one the prophets made into its own custom and the one that stood around the altar. The Jew with nothing to show is not discarded. He is bound into the bundle, and on this one day his branch gets its own place.

Water for the whole world

The water libation was never only for Israel. During Sukkot seventy bulls were offered over the seven days, and the Gemara says they correspond to the seventy nations of the world (Sukkah 55b). Rashi explains that they were brought to atone for the nations, so that rain would fall throughout the world. The water we poured was for everyone's rain. The single offering of the eighth day, one bull, stands for the one people, in the Gemara's parable of a king who asks his close friend, after the great feast, for a small meal together (there). Tomorrow is that small meal.

Hillel's "I" and "all"

"If I am here, everyone is here." Hillel holds both sides at once. Each person matters: if you are not there, something is missing. And no one is alone: "I" is always part of "everyone". The joy of the Beit HaShoevah was led by the greatest sages, but "the whole people, men and women, came to see and to hear".

The circle and the note

On Hoshana Rabbah both sides appear in a single morning. The circuits are communal: the whole congregation walks together around one Torah, nobody first and nobody last. The kvitl, the note sealed above, is the most private thing there is: each person's year, written alone. We circle together, and each of us is judged as himself. Neither cancels the other.

Water is the same for everyone

The water has no taste, and that is its gift. Understanding varies from person to person; some taste much, some little. Kabbalat ol, simply accepting the yoke because G-d asked, is the same for the greatest sage and for the simplest Jew. That is why, in the Rebbe's teaching, the joy of the water has no limit (Likkutei Sichot, vol. 2): it does not depend on how much we understand. At the water, everyone stands at the same height.

So tonight, as Shemini Atzeret begins, and tomorrow morning, when the chazzan asks for rain, we can carry this home. Each of us is a whole world. Each of us is one branch in a bundle. And the rain we ask for is for all of us together.

Chag sameach.

Sources

- Mishnah Sukkah 4:1, 4:5, 4:9, 5:1–4
- Sukkah 34a; 43b; 44a–b; 48b; 53a; 55b
- Rosh Hashanah 16a; Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2
- Taanit 2b; Mishnah Taanit 1:1–2
- Yerushalmi Sukkah 4:7; 5:1
- Bereishit Rabbah 70:8; Vayikra Rabbah 30:12
- Yeshayahu 12:3; Devarim 28:47
- Rambam, Hilchot Temidin uMusafin 10:6–7; Hilchot Lulav 8:12–15
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 660:1; 664:1, 4, 9 (with the Rema)
- Zohar III, 31b
- Likkutei Torah, Re'eh (the King in the field)
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Likkutei Sichot, vol. 2, Sukkot (water and wine)

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