

Seventy Bullocks, Seventy Nations

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The Offerings of Sukkot and a Hall That Emptied

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On the first day of Sukkot the Temple altar received thirteen bullocks. On the second day, twelve. On the third, eleven, and so on down, one fewer each day, until the seventh day brought seven. Add them up and the total is seventy (Bamidbar 29).

The Sages asked what the number meant, and Rabbi Elazar answered with a sentence that still startles me every year. “These seventy bullocks, what are they for? For the seventy nations” (Sukkah 55b). Israel, in its own festival of joy, in the one week of the year when it dwells most openly under G-d’s shade, brought offerings on behalf of the whole family of humanity. Rabbi Yochanan added a line of sorrow: woe to the nations, who lost something and do not know what they lost. While the Temple stood, the altar atoned for them. Now who atones for them?

I have been thinking about that sentence since Thursday.

A hall that emptied

On Thursday, 24 September, the Prime Minister of Israel rose to address the General Assembly of the United Nations. As he began, many delegations stood and walked out; delegations from nearly seventy countries walked out or left their seats empty, according to Anadolu. Whatever the precise figure, the image is plain enough: a speaker at the rostrum, and rows of empty chairs.

It is not the first time. Walkouts have become a kind of ritual in that hall, a liturgy of refusal performed each autumn. I do not want to answer it with mockery. The nations of the world are not a cartoon, and the people who stood up and left are not villains in a children’s story. They are delegates of governments, acting on behalf of their capitals.

But I cannot help setting the scene beside the altar of Sukkot. In the same season, in the same weeks of Tishrei, Israel once poured out seventy offerings for the nations, and the nations did not know. The Sages imagined that ignorance as a loss, not an insult. The nations lost something and did not know what they lost. The empty seats in New York are, in their own way, a picture of that sentence.

The one who stayed to speak

The speech itself included a moment that many will remember. Prime Minister Netanyahu held up a pager and said: “You remember the beepers? Remember these things? Well, I can tell you this: Hezbollah certainly remembers them.” It was a line meant for an audience that had chosen, in part, not to be there.

What followed the speech interests me more. Afterwards, in New York, he met together with three presidents from Latin America: Santiago Peña of Paraguay, José Raúl Mulino of Panama, and Rodrigo Paz of Bolivia. According to the Prime Minister’s Office, and as the presidencies of

Paraguay and Panama have confirmed, he invited them to join the Isaac Accords. Days earlier, Colombia cut its diplomatic ties with Iran, effective 19 September, while keeping consular ties in place.

I do not know what will come of those conversations. Diplomacy is slow, and invitations are not yet agreements. But the picture is worth pausing over. A hall emptied, and some leaders stayed to talk. Some nations turned their backs, and some came to the table.

That is how the seventy bullocks work, too. The count goes down each day. Thirteen, twelve, eleven. Rashi, drawing on the tradition, reads the shrinking count as an ominous sign for the nations, and adds at once that while the Temple stood, these very offerings protected them. The offering never stops. Even on the seventh day, seven bullocks are brought. The altar does not close its account with the world because the world has stepped out of the room.

A covenant that includes the world

There is a temptation, in a week like this, to read the walkout as proof that Israel must stand alone, and to read the handshakes as proof that it need not. Both readings are too small. The Torah does not ask Israel to measure its calling by the number of chairs occupied in a hall.

The prophet Zechariah saw a day when the families of the earth would go up to Jerusalem year by year to bow before the King and to keep the festival of Sukkot (Zechariah 14:16). Of all the festivals, it is Sukkot that the prophet chose as the festival of the nations. Yeshayahu called the Temple “a house of prayer for all peoples” (Yeshayahu 56:7). The covenant with Avraham began with a promise that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

This is not naïveté. The same Torah that gives us seventy bullocks for the nations gives us, on the eighth day, a single bullock for Israel alone. Shemini Atzeret is the intimate day, the day when the King, as the Sages put it, asks His children to stay with Him a little longer after the guests have gone home. The tradition keeps both at once: a people with a mission to the whole world, and a people with a private bond that no one else shares. When the world is in the room, we bring seventy. When the world leaves, the one bullock of the eighth day is still ours to bring.

What we bring when they are not listening

So what does Sukkot ask of us this week?

First, that we not confuse the reaction of a hall with the verdict of Heaven. The empty chairs tell us something about politics. They do not tell us who we are.

Second, that we keep bringing the offering anyway. Today there is no altar in Jerusalem, but the seventy bullocks live on in our prayers and in our conduct. Our prayers for peace, for the welfare of the nations, and for a world that knows its Creator are not canceled because some delegates walked out. Rabbi Yochanan’s lament was not a curse on the nations. It was grief on their behalf.

Third, that we honor those who stay to talk. Paraguay, Panama and Bolivia, whatever becomes of the invitation, sent their presidents to the table. That, too, belongs in the reckoning of the week. Gratitude is a Jewish discipline, and it should not be reserved for the moments when the whole world applauds.

We sit this week in huts with open roofs, looking up through the schach at a sky we share with everyone. The stars over Asunción and Panama City and La Paz are the same stars we see through the branches in Jerusalem. The seventy bullocks were brought in the name of all who live beneath that sky, those who are listening and those who have not yet learned to.

May the day come, as the prophet promised, when the halls of the world fill again, not to walk out, but to go up.

Sources

- Bamidbar 29:12–34 (the offerings of Sukkot; thirteen bullocks down to seven, seventy in all)
- Sukkah 55b (Rabbi Elazar: the seventy bullocks for the seventy nations; Rabbi Yochanan: “woe to the nations, who lost and do not know what they lost”)
- Zechariah 14:16 (the nations going up to keep Sukkot)
- Yeshayahu 56:7 (“a house of prayer for all peoples”)
- Rashi on Bamidbar 29:18 (the decreasing count and the protection of the nations)
- Bereishit 12:3 (all the families of the earth blessed through Avraham)
- Bamidbar 29:35–36 (Shemini Atzeret and its single bullock); Rashi on Vayikra 23:36 (“stay one day more with Me”)

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