Sukkot, Gentiles, and the Messianic Kingdom

Toby Janicki
Sukkot, Gentiles, and the Messianic Kingdom

By Toby Janicki
Sukkot, Gentiles, and the Messianic Kingdom

In Jewish thought the Festival of Sukkot is the most joyful of all holidays. The sages call it Z’man Simchateinu (“The Time of Our Rejoicing”). In Jewish communities throughout the world, people feel a sense of happiness and freedom as the high holidays come to an end and everyone heads outside to their sukkahs for celebrations. Dwelling in a temporary hut reminds us of the futility of our earthly pursuits and our need to trust in HaShem for everything.

Sukkot is also considered the most universal holiday on the entire Jewish calendar. Scores of Messianic Gentiles and Christians also celebrate the festival across the globe.

All this is a foretaste of the Messianic Kingdom, when there will be peace on earth, Israel’s enemies will be defeated, and Jew and Gentile will dwell together serving the one true God. Sukkot is a prophetic shadow of
the coming kingdom of heaven. In this article we will explore the universal aspects of the Festival of Sukkot and see further how it foreshadows the Messianic Kingdom.

**The Commandment of the Sukkah**

The commandments of Sukkot take up the biggest section in the list of festival instructions in Leviticus 23. While we could spend time on each of the mitzvot mentioned there that specifically deal with Sukkot, the keynote commandment is the injunction to dwell in a booth (*sukkah*, סוכה):

> You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 23:42–43)

It is curious that what is considered the most universal of all the holy days contains such Jewish-specific language when it comes to its most central commandment. The Torah instructs that “all native Israelites shall dwell in booths.” Young’s literal translation says “all who are natives in Israel,” and the New American Standard Bible says “native-born in Israel.” The Hebrew for “native Israelites” is *ez’rach beYisrael* (אזרחים בישראל). Whom exactly does this include, and whom does it exclude?

Baruch A. Levine translates *ez’rach* as “citizens” and writes,
It has been suggested that *ez’rach* was originally a botanical term for a plant or tree that is well-rooted in the soil. We read in Psalm 37:35 “well-rooted like a robust native tree” (*ke’ez’rach ra’anan*). If this derivation is correct, an *ez’rach* is one whose lineage has “roots” in the land, one who belongs to the group that possesses the land. However, the term *ez’rach* is never applied to the prior inhabitants of Canaan.¹

Therefore, this phrase, “native-born in Israel,” refers specifically to Jewish citizens.

The sages would agree with Levine’s suggestion, but a problem arises as to whether this means that the convert (*ger tzedek*, גֵּר צֶדֶק) is excluded from this mitzvah. In several places in the Torah, the *ger* (sojourner) is contrasted with the *ez’rach*. Additionally, Leviticus 23:42 is the only place in which the term *ez’rach* appears, and the Torah does not go on to say that this law also applies to the *ger*.² This evidence seems to imply that the convert is not obligated to the commandment of the sukkah.

However, the sages unanimously rule that the convert is obligated to dwell in the sukkah. There are several ways in which they arrive at this conclusion:

- Ibn Ezra argues that the *ger* in these contexts does not refer to the convert but simply to the resident alien; hence the fact that the *ger* is not mentioned in Leviticus 23 does not exclude the proselyte from Sukkot.
- Rashi feels that the clarifying clause “in Israel” (*beYisrael*) is superfluous if it refers only to native born Israelites and therefore is added by the Torah to include converts.
- Rashbam interprets this as “even the *ez’rach* should dwell in a booth.” He views *ez’rach* as referring to the upper class, who might feel that they are above this requirement that seems so primitive. Rabbi David Tzi Hoffman adds that it is the *ez’rach* who owns property and land.³

In turn, the universal interpretation in Judaism today is that the commandment to dwell in a sukkah applies to those who are legally Jewish persons, which includes converts. It’s not that the non-Jew could not dwell in a sukkah if he so desired, but he is not specifically commanded to do so. This is the only mitzvah in which the Torah uses such Israel-centric language.
Sukkah of David

Once again, it is strange that such a universal holiday includes such a Jewish-specific commandment. However, in a passage from Amos 9 that James, the brother of the Master, uses as a proof text for Gentiles remaining non-Jews after coming to faith in Messiah, a sukkah is mentioned:

James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent [sukkah] of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.'” (Acts 15:13–18, quoting Amos 9:11–12)

The rebuilding of the sukkah of David represents the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in the Messianic Kingdom. It is in that day that the Gentiles will be called by God’s name and will be included in the kingdom. This connects the Festival of Sukkot to the Messianic Era and alludes to the day when, according to Zechariah 14, all nations will go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival that, as Rashi points out, includes the obligation to dwell in the sukkah.

The Fifth Species

Another commandment central to the Festival of Sukkot and one that indirectly points to the nations is the waving of the palm branch (lulav, הלול) and citron fruit (etrog, אתרוג):

You shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. (Leviticus 23:40)

The sages interpreted this as referring to four species that were to be waved before God every day of the seven-day festival. The four species were palm (lulav), myrtle (hadas), willow (aravah), and citron (etrog). The first three, all branches, are grouped together and collectively referred to as
the *lulav*. This was a kind of offering unto the LORD and was to enhance the joy of the holiday.

What is curious, though, is that Nehemiah, in his account of the Festival of Sukkot, mentions a fifth species:

On the second day the heads of fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, “Go out to the hills and bring *branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees* to make booths, as it is written.” … And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. (Nehemiah 8:13–17, emphasis added)

Along with the myrtle, palm, and willow branches, Nehemiah mentions “branches of olive, wild olive.” Why would Nehemiah add to the list of Leviticus 23? This description of the pilgrims returning from captivity and the Torah being read in Jerusalem is reminiscent of prophecies about the Messianic Era in which the nations will come up to Jerusalem as the Torah goes forth from Zion. As we shall see, especially in Zechariah 14,
Sukkot is a prophetic picture of the coming Messianic Kingdom in which all nations shall go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. The mention of wild and cultivated olive branches here in Nehemiah prophetically alludes to the nations being grafted into Israel and joining the Jewish people in the worship of the LORD:

If some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you … For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:17–18, 24)

Hence, the commandment of the lulav and etrog prophetically alludes to non-Jews from the nations being grafted into the commonwealth of Israel and worshiping the God of Israel in the Messianic Kingdom.

Rejoice in Your Festival

Other commandments in the Torah clearly point to the universal nature of Sukkot. The commandment to rejoice in the festival includes the sojourner:

You shall keep the Feast of Booths seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine-press. You shall rejoice in your feast, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are within your towns. For seven days you shall keep the feast to the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose, because the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you will be altogether joyful. (Deuteronomy 16:13–15)

Here the sojourner (ger) is commanded to rejoice along with the Israelites in the Festival of Sukkot. While many commentators interpret the ger here as referring to a legal covert to Judaism (ger tzedek), others see the
sojourner as referring simply to the non-Jew who lives among the Jewish people in the land of Israel (ger toshav, גֶּר תֹּשַׁב). For example, Messianic luminary Rabbi Yechiel Tzvi Lichtenstein writes,

> What then is meant by, “You shall rejoice in the holiday, you and the stranger (ger)?” The meaning of this verse is that the stranger should rejoice in the gifts given to the Jewish people so that it is known that there is joy amongst Israel. The evidence for this comes from the verse that says (Leviticus 23:42), “Every [native-born] citizen in Israel shall dwell in booths,” but not the ger.5

Therefore, while the non-Jew dwelling in Israel was not specifically commanded to dwell in the sukkah, he was to celebrate and be joyful along with Israel during the Festival of Sukkot.

**The Sacrifices**

There is a cryptic reference to the universal nature of Sukkot even in the details for the sacrifices to be made each day of the festival. Numbers 29:12–34 details the additional (mussaf, Mussaf) offerings, besides the daily sacrifice of two lambs, that are to take place during the festival. While the number of rams and lambs stayed the same for each day, Israel was to sacrifice thirteen bulls on the first day and decrease the number by one each subsequent day so that by the seventh day only seven rams were sacrificed. This brought the grand total to seventy bulls:6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Bulls</th>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Day 6</th>
<th>Day 7</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is significant about seventy? Jewish tradition teaches that based on the genealogies of Genesis 10, the nations of the world are numbered at seventy. Rabbi Eleazar stated, “To what do those seventy bullocks correspond? To the seventy nations.”7

The Mishnah states regarding the nations that at Sukkot “judgment is passed in respect of rain,” and Rashi connects this specifically to the seventy bulls:8
They offer atonement for the seventy nations of the world, in order that rain might fall throughout the world; and it is on Sukkot that the world is judged regarding rainfall. (Rashi to b.Rosh HaShanah 16a)

Once again this points to the Messianic Kingdom, in which those of the nations who do not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem will be punished with “no rain on them.” In turn the seventy bulls confirm the universal nature of the Festival of Sukkot and are further evidence that it was meant as a festival for the whole world to observe. Rabbi Chaim Richman writes,

Here we can already sense that, inherent within the very nature of the holiday, an inexorable bond—as expressed through its sacrificial requirements—links it to the earth's peoples. Sukkot was mandated by the Creator Himself to be a holiday for all the world.

**Feast of Ingathering**

If we look even deeper, we can find another indication of the universal nature of Sukkot as well as messianic allusions. The Torah gives a second name for the festival: “Feast of Ingathering.”

You shall keep the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. (Exodus 23:16)

You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end. (Exodus 34:22)

The title “Feast of Ingathering” on a literal level points to the fact that Sukkot takes place at the end of the agricultural year, since the final harvest is now completed. The Torah adds the expression “at the end of the year” and “at the year's end” to signify the transition from one agricultural year to the next.

But if we look at Sukkot as a prophetic representation of the Messianic Kingdom as well, the “Feast of Ingathering” can also refer to the end of this current age, when the harvesting of souls from the nations has been completed and a new era, the Messianic Era, begins. The Master frequently used agricultural symbolism to describe the work of spreading the gospel:
The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. (Matthew 13:37–40)

This is also a picture of the ingathering of the exiles of Israel that will take place at the beginning of the Messianic Era. In that day Messiah will gather all the Jewish people who have been scattered throughout the earth and bring them back to their land. The prophets tell us that this is one of the major jobs that Messiah must accomplish. Therefore, on a spiritual level the ingathering refers not just to the crops of Israel but to an ingathering of the exiles of Israel and the righteous from all nations in the Messianic Era.

**Up to Jerusalem**

The strongest evidence for Sukkot being a universal festival and also connected to the Messianic Era is found in the haftarah (section of the Prophets) that is read on the first day of Sukkot. Zechariah 14 paints the
scene of an end-time battle in which all the nations of the earth will go to fight against Jerusalem. The sages believe that this is the battle of Gog and Magog. HaShem comes to the rescue, defeating the enemies of Israel once and for all and inaugurating the Messianic Kingdom. Those of the nations who are left will go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Sukkot:

Everyone who survives of all the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Booths. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain; there shall be the plague with which the LORD afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. This shall be the punishment to Egypt and the punishment to all the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. (Zechariah 14:16–19)

Celebrating the festival of Sukkot will no longer be optional for the nations of the earth. Indeed, those who do not go up will be punished with drought.

Me'am Lo'ez comments:

Following the wondrous events of God’s intervention against the nations who waged war against Jerusalem … all nations who so incline their hearts to God, will survive those events. Then they will go up to Jerusalem every year to prostrate themselves before God and acknowledge Him as King of the earth. They will go up “to keep the Feast of Booths.” Every year they will commemorate the wonders performed by the Creator on the day of retribution against the nations.12

Sukkot will be celebrated as a festival commemorating the destruction of Israel’s enemies. It makes sense then that those of the nations who do not go up against Jerusalem and are spared will also celebrate Israel’s victory.

The sages debated as to what level the Gentiles would actually be obligated to the Festival of Sukkot in the Messianic Era. Ibn Ezra felt that Gentiles would be obligated only to the mitzvah of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Metzudat David saw Zechariah 14 as also requiring Gentiles to bring
a sacrifice to the Temple during the festival. Rashi ruled that the nations would be obligated not only to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem but to dwell in the Sukkah and wave the four species as well. Therefore, in the mind of Rashi, the Jewish-specific wording of Leviticus 23 about Israelites dwelling in the sukkah will be expanded in the Messianic Era to include all peoples. The Midrash specifies that it will be Messiah himself who will teach the nations how to observe these commandments:

Rabbi Tanchuma said: “The King Messiah will come for no other purpose than to teach the nations of the earth thirty precepts, such as those of the Sukkah, lulav, and Tefillin. But all the children of Israel will be taught the Torah by the Holy One Himself, blessed be He, for it is said, ‘All your children shall be taught by the LORD’ (Isaiah 54:13). Why not by the Messiah? Because it is said: ‘Of him shall the nations inquire’ (Isaiah 11:10).” (*Midrash Tehillim* 21)

**From Every Nation**

We find this prophecy from Zechariah 14 alluded to once again in the book of Revelation:  

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,
clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ... They are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. (Revelation 7:9–10, 15)

This imagery is clearly evocative of the prophetic utterances of Zechariah in which everyone from the nations will come up to Jerusalem “to keep the Feast of Booths.” Here in Revelation the nations come up to the throne of God in the Temple with “palm branches in their hands,” which are the lulav.

This imagery would have made sense only to a community of believers that was actually participating in the festivals. The communities that read Revelation in the early days of the church were most assuredly made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers who celebrated Sukkot with the anticipation that the entire world will do so in the Messianic Age. It indicates that the early believers, both Jews and Gentiles, celebrated Sukkot.14
Conclusion

The Festival of Sukkot is a prophetic picture of the coming kingdom of heaven, a time when Jew and Gentile will join together in the worship of the one true God. When the Messianic Era is inaugurated, we will all celebrate the harvest of souls from the nations and the ingathering of the exiles of Israel. Just as the sukkah and the *lulav* remind us in this present time that everything we have is a gift from God and that we are sustained only by his hand, so we will see that it is only our Father in heaven who can bring true peace on the earth and destroy the enemies of Israel once and for all.

For Jews and Gentiles celebrating the festival now, it is a firstfruits of that glorious time. As we join together during the Festival of Sukkot, this present taste of the coming Messianic Era is a reminder that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Endnotes

2 Leviticus 17:15, 19:34, 24:16.
3 For this section I have relied upon Martin I. Lockshin, *Rashbam’s Commentary on Leviticus and Numbers: An Annotated Translation* (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2001), 124, n. 35.
4 Isaiah 2:3; Micah 4:2.
6 Additionally, the total number of sacrifices is one hundred eighty-two: seventy bulls, fourteen rams, and ninety-eight lambs. Everything is divisible by seven.
7 b. *Sukkah* 55b.
8 m. *Rosh HaShanah* 1:2.
9 Zechariah 14:17.

14 Some scholars also see a connection between Sukkot and the later Feast of Encaenia (“Church Dedication”), both of which took place in the same season, lasted eight days, and were a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem (at Sukkot to the Temple and at Encaenia to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). J. Van Goudoever writes that “from the fourth century on, the Feast of Dedication is kept as a continuation of the third great Israelite feast [i.e., Sukkot]” (J. van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* [Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1961], 214; see also 210–213). There also appears to be a clear reference to Gentiles observing Sukkot in John Chrysostom’s rebuke of those who, along with the Jews, had “tents … pitched among them” (*Against the Jews* 9:2).