

1. Structure:

- Find their own merit
- Question the merit of the Jews
 - End up disqualifying God as witness due to uniqueness of Jews
- Testify for Jews
- Ask for another chance

2. Why the Sukkah?

The last scene (III) completes the role-reversal. Again God initiates the action (A, B, C) and the nations respond (A', B'), as they did at the outset. First the nations came and recounted what they had done, to no avail; now they go and try to do what they neglected, but of course their efforts prove futile. In his infinite mercy, God proposes a "simple" precept to the nations, the commandment of the sukka, ordering them "to go and do it." Clearly the sukka stands for the entire Torah by synecdoche. By observing this one "simple" commandment, the nations can prove their merit and claim a share of the eschatological reward. Of all the commandments that the homilist could have selected as the test for the nations, the choice of the sukka can hardly be serendipitous. Indeed, the sukka represents the complete opposite of the accomplishments of which the nations boasted. Bridges, marketplaces, bath-houses, and cities were the glory of antiquity. Marketplaces with columned promenades and paved streets; bridges that ingenious Roman engineers extended to dazzling spans;³ bath-houses with marble pools and mosaics, adorned with beautiful statues; cities with amphitheatres, fora, and porticoes—these magnificent structures separated the splendor of Roman civilization from the barbarian world.⁵⁴ The sukka, on the other hand, is a simple hut, stark, fragile, and commonplace. Isaiah compares the downtrodden state of Israel to the abandoned "sukka in a vineyard," and Amos the breached Davidic kingdom to "a fallen sukka."⁵⁵ Unlike a bridge, bath-house, or marketplace, a sukka can be easily erected and quickly destroyed. It has no aesthetic value. The sukka is the functional as well as the structural opposite of the nations' building enterprises. A sukka does not provide a forum for commercial interactions, like a market, nor facilitate transportation, like a bridge, nor provide facilities for ablutions, like a bath-house. Nor does a sukka allow its builders to harbor prostitutes, collect tolls, levy forced labor, or pamper themselves with hot and cold baths, steamrooms, and saunas. A sukka simply provides a little shelter from the sun or rain. And the festival sukka does not even do that. For during the festival, when one is commanded to dwell in the sukka, he is not out in the fields with no alternative shelter, but within a step of his house, a far more insulated shelter from heat and rain. This incongruity between the majestic structures of the nations and the flimsy sukka creates the irony that lies at the heart of the homily.⁵⁶ Those who build such edifices should certainly be able to follow God's instructions without difficulty. To observe the commandment of dwelling in a sukka is easy. Nothing more is required than to sit in it and be. Hence the homilist dubs the sukka a "simple precept."⁵⁷ It demands no travel, no labor, no effort; one need not do anything. Compared with the effort required to build bridges, conquer cities, wage war, or administer marketplaces, simply to sit in the sukka is effortless. While the nations "straightaway" are able to construct a sukka, they prove unable to dwell there. To test their newfound religious zeal, God causes the sun to blaze upon them. Faced with this discomfort the nations not only exit abruptly, but also kick their sukkot in disgust. For the festival sukka is completely otherworldly, functioning only as a means to fulfill the commandment of God. It conveys no self-aggrandizement, no this-worldly pleasure, no tangible benefit. Ironically those who construct the much more impressive markets and bridges cannot observe the simple precept of the sukka. The contrast between the sukka and the other edifices is the difference between otherworldly dedication and this-worldly success, between worship of God and self-satisfaction, between vanity and Torah, between Israel and the nations.

3. Link of Sukkot to Mashiach

The theme of eschatological competition between Israel and the nations supports the link to Sukkot. Consider the following midrash found among the collection of homilies designated for Sukkot in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana 27:2.

Delights in your right hand are victory?⁶ (Ps 16:11)... R. Avin said: [It is a parable] like two who appear before the judge, and we do not know which one is the victor. When one of them carries off the palm (bayyin), then we know that he is the victor. So, too, when Israel and the heavenly counterparts (sare) of the nations enter before the Holy One on Rosh Hashana, bringing charges (meqatregin) against each other, we do not know which ones are victors. But when Israel depart from the presence of the Holy One with their lulavs and their etrogs in their hands, we know that Israel are the victors.^{6'}

R. Avin, like our homilist, pictures a heavenly trial between Israel and the nations, who enter before God the judge on Rosh Hashana. God releases the verdict of the heavenly trial on Sukkot, revealing his true judgment, whatever the illusory situation on earth. In this world the nations appear to have prevailed over Israel, but in the heavenly spheres the opposite is the case. R. Avin compares the lulav with the bais (= bayyin), the later Greek term for "palm,"⁶² and interprets the ritual waving of the lulav as a victory parade

In a late version the eschatological sukka protects the righteous from the fires of judgment day. R. Levi said, "Whoever fulfils the commandment of sukka in this world, God says, 'Since he observed the commandment of sukka in this world, I will protect him from the fire of the Day to Come.'" R. Yannai and Resh Laqish said, "Behold the Day to Come, burning like an oven" (Mal 3:19).⁷¹

The nations also figure in another Sukkot midrash, the famous tradition that connects the seventy bullocks sacrificed during the eight days of the festival with the seventy nations.

[A] R. Alexandrai said: It is like a king who held a celebration. For the seven days of the feast the king's son was busy with the guests. After the seven days of feasting the king said to his son, "My son. I know that for the seven days of the feast you were busy with the guests. Now you and I will rejoice together, and I will not trouble you much, just one chicken and one litra of meat." Thus for the seven days of feasting Israel is busy with the sacrifices for the nations.

[B] as R. Pinhas said: "All those seventy bulls that Israel used to sacrifice on Sukkot correspond (keneged) to the seventy nations, since the world will never be empty of them."

[C] What is the reason? They answer my love with accusation, and I must stand judgment (Ps 109:4).⁷⁵ We are confident of the judgment.

[D] When the seven days of the festival are over, the Holy One says to Israel, "My sons. I know that for the seven days of the festival you were busy with the sacrifices of the nations. Now I and you will rejoice together, and I will not trouble you except with one bull and one ram."⁷⁶

4. Conclusions

These motifs—the trial involving the nations and Israel, the two sides pressing charges in court, the eschatological reward and punishment, and of course the sukka—are consistent with motifs attached to Sukkot by other sources, and suggest that the homily should be understood within this wider context. Because of this thematic overlap, later Jewish tradition connected the homily to Sukkot. As noted above, in the Safed manuscript of Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, this homily begins the "alternative portion," apparently intended as a homily for the second day of Sukkot in the diaspora.⁸⁰ So too a late medieval midrash entitled "A Homily for Sukkot" contains our homily.⁸¹ Liturgical poets from Qalir onward paraphrase the homily in their piyyutim for Sukkot,⁸² and medieval jurists make the connection as well.⁸³ Jewish tradition understood the liturgical designation for Sukkot, "the time of our rejoicing," which echoes the Deuteronomic promise "you shall have nothing but joy" (Deut 16:15) in eschatological terms. The festival of Sukkot celebrated the future triumph in judgment, victory over the nations, and eternal reward of "rejoicing" in the world to come. In addition to these thematic connections, to understand Sukkot as the context for the homily brings its moralizing and humorous character into sharper relief. The message of the importance of punctiliously observing the commandment to dwell in the sukka could hardly be missed by the audience. Although the homilist focuses on the nations' failure rather than Israel's observance, the implications are clear. Eternal reward in the world to come is no small incentive. If the goal was to promote dwelling in the sukka within the community, the homily seems an effective means. Yet the homilist artfully balances the eschatological promise with thisworldly realism. Dwelling in the sukka was not always the most pleasant experience. If autumn in Palestine can be delightfully refreshing, it can also be rainy, windy, and cold or oppressively hot. Sometimes it is uncomfortable to sit in the sukka. No one likes to eat the festival meal with teeth chattering or pouring sweat. Sensitive to these possibilities, the Mishna exempts one from remaining in the sukka if it begins to rain, and other traditions provide dispensation for similar discomforts. A baraita in the Palestinian Talmud rules: "Just as they clear out the sukka on account of rain, so too because of extreme heat or mosquitoes."⁸⁴ The discomfort of the nations in the hot sun was an experience familiar to Jews. They knew well that the "simple commandment" was not so simple after all. The audience probably recalled times when they had wished to kick their sukkot in disgust and retreat to more comfortable surroundings. We might expect a sympathetic chuckle, a smile of understanding as they mused at the predicament of the unfortunate nations. God laughs with triumphal mocking, but those who annually experienced the ups and downs of sukka life, and might be returning to their sukkot after the homily, probably laughed more gently at the tongue-in-cheek humor. The humorous element should not obscure the overall message of reward for Israel and dismissal of the nations. There lingers an air of triumphalism, of particularism, and of superiority. Sukkot follows soon after Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment and the Day of Atonement, when God seals the fate of human beings for the coming year. Besides the individual judgment based on personal merit and sin, these traditions point to a larger judgment, that of entire peoples, of Israel and the nations. Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana 27:2 explicitly links Sukkot to the judgment of Rosh Hashana, and it seems that our homily should be understood in this light as well. The sukka, metonymically representing observance of Torah, separates Israel from the nations. In the final reckoning, all pleas will be futile: only those who observe the Torah will have a share in the world to come.