Book Review: Sukkot Companion by the Habura

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Book Review

Sukkot: Insights from the Past, Present, and Future (The Habura, 2022)

We once again have the privilege to review a book by The Habura, a recently-founded England-based organization that has been promoting thoughtful Torah learning since 2020. It is headed by Rabbi Joseph Dweck, Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of the United Kingdom (see www.TheHabura.com).

The Habura promotes the inclusion of Sephardic voices and ideas in Jewish discourse, coupled with an openness to the broad wisdom of the Jewish people and the world. In this regard, their ideology strongly dovetails ours at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In addition to their Zoom classes and other programs, they have been publishing holiday companion volumes (as well as other material). I reviewed their Pesah volume last April (https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-haburas-passover-volume).

Their recently published Sukkot volume contains an array of eighteen essays. The first two are by Sephardic rabbis of the 19th and 20th centuries, Rabbis Abraham Pereira Mendes (1825-1893, Jamaica, England, and the United States) and Hayim David Halevi (1923-1998, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv).

The rest of the book is divided between contemporary rabbis and scholars, and younger upcoming scholars who participate in the learning of The Habura.

The essays span a variety of topics pertaining to Sukkot in the areas of Jewish thought, faith, halakha, and custom. They generally are well-written and well-researched, and often present enlightening ideas. In this brief review, I will summarize three essays that I found most edifying.

Rabbi Joseph Dweck explores the unusual commandment to rejoice on Sukkot (Deuteronomy 16:14). It is curious that other faith traditions viewed the changing of the seasons to autumn (in the northern hemisphere) as cause for bleaker holiday reactions. Roman Catholics observe All Soul's Day, which appears in Mexico as the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). This holiday translates to the more widespread Halloween. The Angel of Death is even nicknamed "The Grim Reaper," reflecting the incoming gloom of winter that follows the harvest season. How does Sukkot become such a profoundly joyous time?

A central theme of Sukkot is the fleetingness of the physical world. This realistic perspective enables us to experience joy while recognizing that it is temporary. Sigmund Freud wrote an essay entitled "On Transience," in which he asserted that life's transience helps us appreciate the preciousness and beauty of each experience.

Rabbi Dweck believes that Freud has identified the root of our joy on Sukkot and concludes, "When we can come to this understanding about the world, we can truly come to embrace and accept life on its own terms—and in doing that, we can truly know happiness."

Pursuing a different angle into the theme of joy on Sukkot, Gershon Engel explains that nowadays, we indeed emphasize our dependence on God rather than relying on the permanence of our homes (e.g., Rabbi Yitzhak Aboab, *Menorat HaMa'or* III, 4:6). Of course, the biblical Sukkot revolved around the harvest. This holiday was uniquely joyous in ancient Israel, as the harvests were in and farmers did not need to rush home as they would after Pesah and Shavuot.

By transferring the meaning of Sukkot from agriculture to more universal religious themes, Jews were able to preserve a sense of joy on Sukkot even after the termination of the agrarian life that had characterized our people for much of our existence.

Engel quotes Benjamin Disraeli in his classic work *Tancred*, who expressed awe in the Jews for retaining their sense of joy on Sukkot while in the exile:

> The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persists in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!

Addressing the halakhic question of wearing *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed* the intermediate weekdays) of Pesah and Sukkot, Yehuda J.W. Leikin observes that the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds both appear to suggest that wearing *tefillin* on the middle days of Pesah and Sukkot is normative.

The three halakhic pillars behind Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*—Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif), Rambam, and Rabbenu Asher (Rosh), all agree that wearing *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed* is the proper observance. While several other leading medieval rabbinic authorities, including Rabbi Shelomo ibn Aderet (Rashba) and Rabbi Avraham ben David (Ra'avad), maintain that *tefillin* should not be worn, Rabbi Karo generally follows his three pillars of rabbinic ruling.

In this case, however, Rabbi Karo forbids the wearing of *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed*, and rules prohibitively because the *Zohar* strongly opposes the wearing of *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed* (*Bet Yosef*, *Orah Hayyim* 31:2). Rabbi Karo reports that in Spain, the original practice was to wear *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed* until they discovered the *Zohar*'s prohibition. In contrast, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rama) maintains that Ashkenazim should wear *tefillin*, following the ruling of Rabbenu Asher (Rosh).

Thus, the Sephardic practice to refrain from wearing *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed* reflects an unusual move from classical halakhic sources to *kabbalah*. Leikin concludes that Rabbi Yosef Karo may have been inclined to accept the kabbalistic ruling in this instance, since there also were great halakhists who also opposed wearing *tefillin* on *hol ha-mo'ed*.

There are many other fine essays in this Sukkot companion, and we look forward to future volumes from The Habura.

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I had the privilege of giving a three-part series for the Habura in February-March, 2022. You may view these lectures on our YouTube channel:

Tanakh and Superstition:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PD68xZ4J4M8&t=5s

Torah and Archaeology:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN1XAtia_x0&t=24s

Torah and Literalism:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K__jp8V9sXY&t=4s

I also am scheduled to give two talks to the Habura on April 17 and 19, 2023.

The Institute looks forward to further partnering with The Habura in the future and building our shared vision together.