



NEOT KEDUMIM NEWS

September 2009

Rosh Hashana 5770

THE BIBLICAL LANDSCAPE RESERVE IN ISRAEL

In Memory of Nogah Hareuveni



When was the world created?

In what month was the world created?

This intriguing question was debated by R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua in the Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashana 11a).

R. Eliezer maintains that the world was created in the month of Tishrei—the time of Rosh Hashana. He brings his proof-text from the Torah, from the third day of Creation: “Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it. And it was so” (Genesis 1:11). “When does the earth start sprouting plants?” asks R. Eliezer rhetorically. He answers: With the first rains—which (we hope) come around Tishrei. It is with the fall rains, the first in six months, that we start seeing new green shoots sprouting from the earth—always a beautiful and refreshing sight after the long, parched summer. At the same time,

the fruit trees come to the end of their cycle, and the pomegranates, figs, and dates are heavy with ripe, sweet fruit.

But R. Yehoshua makes a case for the month of Nissan, in the spring. His proof-text is the very next verse, the response to God’s command to the earth: “The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it” (Genesis 1:12). In the spring, says R. Yehoshua, we can see the earth fulfilling the divine command. The fields are green and covered with wildflowers that have grown during the winter rainy season. Emerging from their winter dormancy, the fruit trees start blooming and the baby fruit forms. The landscape is alive with the bright red pomegranate flowers and the tiny green figs.

Were the fruit trees created with

fully formed, ripe fruit, or at the beginning of their life cycle? Were the wild plants created just sprouting from the earth, or fully grown and blooming? While we have no answers to the questions that underlie this talmudic debate, it is clear that the two mishnaic sages, who lived in Eretz Israel in the first century, were keenly aware of the times of renewal in nature. Because Israel has such definite and dramatic seasons—the dry summer and the rainy winter—there is something wonderful and even miraculous about the new growth at each seasonal transition. The new green sprouts in the fall and the coming to life of the fruit trees in the spring can indeed, with a little imagination, evoke the wonders of Creation.

Shana tova!

May the coming year bring life, renewal, and blessing.



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Sukkot: Rejoice in Your Festival

Sukkot is the holiday of the ingathering of the harvest—*hag ha-asif* (Exodus 23:16). “Ingathering” is a peculiarly Israeli phenomenon. Strictly speaking, it refers not to the picking of the pomegranates, figs, and grapes, but to bringing the produce inside to protect it from the coming rains. “Ingathering” belongs to places that have a specific rainy season. No problem to leave the fruit drying on the roof during the summer. No problem to leave the winnowed grain out in the threshing floor. No chance that it will rain. But as Sukkot approaches, and we very much hope that it will rain, everything has to be covered, brought in, protected.



Etrog (citron)

The Time of Our Joy

Sukkot is known as *he-hag*—the holiday. More than any other festival, Sukkot means rejoicing. The liturgy calls Sukkot *zman simchateinu*—the time of our joy. Amazingly, none of the biblical references to Passover, the seminal holiday of liberation, contains the word *simcha*—joy.

Even more amazingly, the Hebrew root meaning “joy” appears only once in the entire book of Exodus, in a reference to Moses meeting his brother Aaron (4:14). References to the holiday of Shavuot contain only one expression of joy: “You shall observe the Feast of Shavuot [weeks] for the Lord your God... You shall rejoice before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 16:10-11). But there are no less than three directives to rejoice on Sukkot: “You shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days” (Leviticus 23:40). “You shall rejoice in your festival” (Deut. 16:14). “You will have nothing but joy” (Deut. 16:15). The blessing is sweeping in its totality—for those seven days, only joy, no sadness.

Why this striking disparity among the holidays? A 13th-century midrash* collection offers an explanation by citing the agricultural underpinning of the holidays: “On Passover the grain is being judged, and no one knows whether there will be grain this year or not.” On Shavuot, the grain is ripe, but “the fruit of the trees is being judged. But on Sukkot, when both the grain and the fruit of the trees have been brought in, there are three expressions of rejoicing.”**

In the language of the midrash, on both Passover and Shavuot a vital crop is still “being judged”—maybe there will be a harvest, maybe not. On Passover, the grain, and in particular the wheat that was the main food in ancient Israel, is entering the precarious final stage of its ripening. On Shavuot, the fruit, and in particular the grapes that were

a vital part of the diet, are still on the vine. But on Sukkot, marking the end of the agricultural year, both the grain and the fruit have ripened and been harvested and only need to be brought in and stored. The anxiety that accompanied the Israelite farmer throughout the year has been resolved, and rejoicing can be full and wholehearted and complete.



Lulav

And yet

And yet—can rejoicing ever be total? In an uncertain world, can we ever be completely free of questions and doubts about the future? Israel’s agricultural cycle, and the Sukkot rituals that celebrate it, express this tension between rejoicing and uncertainty. Sukkot is replete—overflowing in fact—with rituals and prayers that focus on water. At the very moment when we gather in the harvest and rejoice, we are waiting with great expectation and anxiety for the first rains. There has been

no rain for six months, everything is parched, and if the rains don’t come soon, the following year will bring no harvest in which to rejoice.

This deep concern about the rain found expression in religious life, then and now. In ancient Israel, water was poured on the Temple altar every day of the festival—according to the Talmud, an expression of



Myrtle

hope that the rains be poured on us (Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashana 16a). Willows, the water plant *par excellence*, were placed around



Willow

the altar and, as they wilted, bent their heads over the altar as if in supplication. The Four Species were seen by the Talmud as “making intercession” for water (Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 2b). Today, we start to say *משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם*, invoking God’s causing “the wind to blow and the rain to fall,” on Shemini Atzeret, the concluding day of Sukkot. On the same day, we recite a special prayer for rain.

Maybe it is precisely this inescapable anxiety about the coming rains—about the future—that underlies the insistence on rejoicing on Sukkot. The future is a question mark. But now, at this moment, we have reason to rejoice in our harvest. Even as we plead for the coming rains, which in Israel mean survival, we focus on the harvest that is before us. Rejoice in the blessings that we have right now, in the present, at the same time as we pray for continued life and blessing in the future.

* homiletic exegesis of the Biblical text

** Yalkut Shimoni, Emor 23, 654



Ripe dates ready to be gathered in at Sukkot

Neot Kedumim - The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel

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Sukkot at Neot Kedumim

For those of you who will be in Israel—don't miss Sukkot at Neot Kedumim!

Hands-on activities for the whole family, comfortable stroller-accessible trails, kosher sukkot for eating, and—a unique, life-size exhibit of sukkot discussed in the Mishna. Here are a few of over 20 interactive examples.

A sukka on the deck of a ship

Even if the sukka may not withstand strong sea winds, it is kosher because it is meant to be a temporary structure anyway.



A sukka on the back of a camel

Kosher for the intermediary days of Sukkot, but not for the festival days or the Sabbath when climbing on an animal is forbidden.



A sukka in a treetop

Kosher for the intermediary days of Sukkot, but not for the festival days or the Sabbath, when climbing a tree is forbidden.



A sukka on the roof of another sukka

The upper sukka is valid, but the lower one is not. The floor of the upper sukka forms a “ceiling” for the lower one, and a sukka cannot be built inside a house with a ceiling.

A cone-shaped sukka

If the two walls of the sukka meet at the top to form a triangle, the sukka is not kosher because there is no roof and no *sekhakh* (required roof covering). Dissenting opinions approve this sukka.



A sukka higher than 20 cubits (about 10 meters)



A sukka must be a temporary structure, in accordance with the Biblical commandment that specifies “seven days.” If the sukka is over 20 cubits, it becomes a permanent structure.

A sukka lower than 10 handbreadths (about 80 cm)

A person cannot “live” in such a small sukka, and it is therefore unfit for use on the holiday.



A sukka inside a haystack

Hollowing out a haystack does not create a kosher sukka, as the plant material for the roof of the sukka must be cut specifically for that purpose and it is forbidden to use pre-existing material.



For details on the Sukkot program at Neot Kedumim: Tel. 08-977-0770, www.n-k.org.il

COMMON ROOTS

This space is devoted to exploring the connections between the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature, and their shared roots in Israel's nature.

The Feast of Tabernacles and the Holy Spirit

“On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let him who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, ‘Streams of living water will flow from within him.’ Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive...” (John 7:37-39)

Jesus was speaking during the holiday of Sukkot, The Feast of Tabernacles. He had gone up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast, one of the three pilgrimage festivals.

On each of the seven days of the holiday, water was drawn from the Shiloah (Siloam) spring near Jerusalem, brought to the Temple



Every drop of winter rain was stored in cisterns

in a golden pitcher, and poured over the altar. This was the only time during the year that water as well as wine was poured over the altar. This water libation was done even on the Sabbath, with the water prepared in advance, and was performed with great sincerity.

Israel is the land “watered by the rains of heaven” (Deuteronomy 11:11). The utter dependence on the precarious winter rains, which come during only half the year at most, is expressed throughout the Bible, where rain consistently appears as the greatest of blessings. The second paragraph of the *Shma*, the central prayer in Jewish tradition, says: “If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late” (Deut. 11:13-

14). The “early rain” on which life depended in ancient Israel begins around the time of Sukkot, in October (though sometimes these first rains don't fall till November or even later). Water and rain are thus central to Sukkot in thought, prayer, and ritual.

Jesus was speaking on the “last and greatest day of the Feast.” This day was known as Hoshana Rabba—the day of the great Hosanna. On this day, the water rituals that pervaded the seven days of the holiday came to a culmination. With great fanfare, the people walked seven times around the altar, which was surrounded by water-loving willows, and sounded the shofar.

If drink for the thirsty and “living water” were always powerful images for the inhabitants of an arid land, these words resonated even more strongly at that moment. If we read Jesus' words in the context of this particular season and this particular holiday with its prayers and hopes and rituals, the words echo with great power today as well.



New AFNK Board Members

It is with great pleasure that we announce that JoAnn Magnuson and Rev. Dr. William H. Harter have joined the American Friends of Neot Kedumim board. Both Ms. Magnuson and Rev. Harter have been leaders in Christian-Jewish relations for decades. Their experience, their dedication, their knowledge, and their skills are models for us all. We look forward to working together fruitfully for the benefit of Neot Kedumim.

JoAnn Magnuson has agreed to serve as a special liaison to Christian communities. We are most grateful for her taking on this volunteer position—a new one for AFNK. With JoAnn's leadership and communications skills, we look forward with excitement to expanding and deepening our contacts with our Christian friends. Stay tuned!

Sincerely,
Susan Aberbach, Chairperson, AFNK



JoAnn Magnuson has been involved in Jewish-Christian relations for over 30 years. She has studied with Holocaust educators at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and has written material on the history of anti-Semitism and the importance of Holocaust education. Since 1977, she has led over 60 tours to Israel and in recent years has headed the US Protestant delegations to the March of the Living in Poland.

In Israel, JoAnn has, since 1984, always included Neot Kedumim on her travel itineraries. Her Christian pilgrims always appreciate the hands-on experience of the plants of the Bible in their natural habitat and enjoy getting off the bus and walking the land.

JoAnn is very committed to helping Christians learn about the land of Israel and to developing a connection with the Biblical roots of their own faith. She is currently working with other Christians in the Twin Cities area to create a Jewish-Christian study center where information on the history, geography, and human background of the Bible, as well as the facts about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, can be made accessible to Christian audiences.

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Rev. Dr. William H. Harter



The Rev. Dr. William H. Harter, Presbyterian Church USA minister, is retired after 41 years of service in New York's Catskills Mountains and in Chambersburg, Pa., where he served for 31 years.

Rev. Harter has a PhD in New Testament with emphasis on Judaism and Christian Origins from Union Theological Seminary in New York. He has also studied in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University, Hebrew Union College, the Swedish Theological Institute, and the Albright Institute. Rev. Harter is a founding member and National Secretary-Treasurer of the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel, a founding committee member

of the Office on Christian-Jewish Relations of the National Council of Churches, and a founding member and National Co-Convener of Presbyterians Concerned for Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Relations. Rev. Harter has made 42 trips to Israel and Bible lands and directed 33 tours to Israel. He received the Isaiah Award from the American Jewish Committee in 2006 for his work on behalf of the state of Israel, Jewish peoplehood, and Jewish-Christian relations.

He and his late wife, the Rev. Linda B. Harter, of blessed memory, who was also a Presbyterian Church USA minister, served their churches together as a clergy couple for 38 years until her death in January 2006. They were blessed with five children (all of whom have visited Israel) and nine grandchildren.

AFNK News

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American Friends of Neot Kedumim is a US 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Our sole mission is the support of Neot Kedumim-The Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel.