Praying For Rain
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

My Rabbinic Colleague and former director of the NY Bureau of Jewish Education Rabbi Manny Gold shared with me some of the research and thinking he has been doing about the customs and symbols of sukkot.

His article was so mind blowing I want to share parts of it with you in the hopes that at this time of year we not only shake our lulal but also shake up some of our long held, and perhaps erroneous assumptions about this most important of Jewish holidays.

Maybe that is the best place to start. Sukkot is THE MOST IMPORTANT JEWISH HOLIDAY.

Rabbi Gold writes, “Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were not always the High Holy Days. For hundreds of years, during and after the biblical period, the most important holiday was Sukkot.

Why was Sukkot special? And how did Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur become so important in our day? To answer those questions, we must journey backward in time, almost three thousand years, to the Temple in Jerusalem. Sukkot and the other two important harvest festivals, Pesah and Shavuot, had their origins as agricultural celebrations among the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan. When the Jewish people settled among the Canaanites after the death of Moses, they began to celebrate these festivals, gradually adapting them to their own monotheistic belief in Adonai, the Jewish God. The holidays became their way of formally asking God for new growth and productivity from the soil of their new and difficult land. Crops in Canaan were not watered by great rivers as they were in Egypt along the Nile and in Mesopotamia along the Tigris and Euphrates. In Canaan, rain was the major source of water, and rain was scarce. Without sufficient rainfall there could be no wheat or barley, no flour, and, of course, no bread! Without rain there was famine.

The First Crop

Barley was the first major crop of the agricultural year. Though not as fine or desirable as wheat, it was heartier and easier to grow in that difficult climate. Since the winters in Canaan were usually rainy but mild. the grains planted in the fall could grow slowly during the winter months. In the spring, at the beginning of Passover, the barley would begin to ripen.

Farmers would continue to harvest the crop for many weeks after Passover, and those Jews who lived close to Jerusalem would make a pilgrimage to the Temple, bringing the first cuttings of the barley crops as offerings of gratitude to God.

Three Types of Jews

Then, as now, there were at least three types of Jews. The first type came to the Temple diligently with their barley, giving thanks and praying for further blessings. For the priests these

offerings were not only a matter of religious observance but their primary source of food.

The second type of farmer decided against making a pilgrimage to the Temple with his barley offerings, thinking to himself: Why should I share this grain with anyone? I've harvested a good crop, I don't need to pray for what is already assured. So he stayed home.

The third type of farmer reasoned: I know I should bring the "first fruits" of my barley to Jerusalem to express my thanks to God, but it's a long trip. I don't feel so well, and my wife and children need me. I'll go to the Temple for the next festival. I feel thankful, but I'd better stay home and tend to the chores.

It appears, according to ancient texts, that on Passover little more than one-third of the farmers journeyed to the Temple with their barley offerings.

“First Fruits”

Seven weeks after Passover, as every farmer knew from experience, the long awaited wheat crop would begin to ripen in the region around Jerusalem. Again, one third of the farmers came to the Temple in Jerusalem with their first cuttings of the wheat crop (the “first fruits”—bikkurim), this time on the holiday of Shavuot. One third or so, the “agnostics” of their day, stayed home. The remaining third found some excuse for not fulfilling what they truly felt was their obligation.

Then came summer. The rains had ended around Passover, followed by dry, hot, cloudless months during which the grapes and olives ripened, thriving in the arid climate. Figs, dates, and pomegranates—other staples of the Israelite diet—also flourished during this season.

Now the ground became hard as brick, baked dry by the summer sun. Soon it was fall, and all the crops, grains, and fruits had been harvested. If it had been a good year, every farmer would feel the gratitude that comes with knowing there

would be enough food to tide his family over until next year's crops ripened.

Sukkot Was Different

Next came Sukkot, and again the priests of the Temple in Jerusalem waited for the people to come with their offerings of thanksgiving. But, in contrast to Pesah and Shavuot, almost everyone came to the Temple. Sukkot was different. On Pesahand Shavuot thanks were given for crops already harvested. But Sukkot was not only for giving thanks for the past agricultural year and its seven basic products (barley, wheat, olives. grapes, figs, dates, and pomegranates), but for praying that such bounty would continue. Sukkot was the time to focus on the next agricultural year, particularly the beginning of the rainy season (fall and winter), which was absolutely crucial for the growth of future crops. Everyone worried about the unknown, whether there would be enough rain or too much. So on Sukkot the special prayers for rain became the most important part of the holiday.

Torchlight Processions

The farmers came to the Temple believing that they had to pray for rain. Even the “agnostics” probably reasoned, “it may not do any good to pray for rain, but it certainly can’t hurt, and besides you never know for sure.…” So, they all came to the Temple in Jerusalem for the Sukkot holiday, the Holiday. Sukkot was a time of joy, torchlight processions, water libations on the altar, songs and prayers for the future

Sukkot, which was celebrated at the start of the rainy season, became the Holiday (He-Chag), the most important of all the Jewish holidays, because the prayers for rain, if answered, would enable the Jewish people to survive.

Rise of Rosh Hashanah

How did Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur become the High Holy Days?

In ancient times the priests of almost every people observed a special day before their major harvest festival. On that day

priests cleansed and purged their temples of all impurities, believing that such a ceremony of purification was necessary to make the harvest holiday prayers acceptable to their deities.

Priestly Holidays

Our ancestors accepted this priestly purification custom and created Yom Kippur in preparation of Sukkot. Most of the Jews living in and around Jerusalem were not involved directly in the rituals of Yom Kippur. Ten days before Yom Kippur, on the first day of a day we now call Rosh Hashanah, the priests began their cleansing ceremonies. In other words, Rosh Hashanah was the day of preparation for Yom Kippur, which was the day of preparation for Sukkot. The priests believed that something as important as Sukkot had to be prepared for, and prepare they did.

Many years later the Jewish community began to change. Jews were no longer only farmers living in an agricultural society: many became merchants and traders. For the holidays to maintain their meaning for this new community, historical

experiences, especially Exodus, were blended into each holiday observance. Pesah came to symbolize not only the barley harvest but also the exodus from Egypt. Sukkot began to symbolize not only the total harvest but also the Israelites need to live in Sukkot (booths) during their wanderings in the wilderness. Rosh Hashanah became the symbol of the creation of the world. Shavuot, however, was not given a historical connection until late in the rabbinic period, when it was connected to the Revelation on Mount Sinai.

Historical Connections

That all these historical connections are later additions is clear from the specific symbols chosen. The sukkah made of wood and branches could not have been used by the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings. They used tents of cloth or animal skins because wood was scarce. The sukkah is actually similar to the booths that farmers built on their fields during the harvest season in which they stationed guards to protect their ripened crops from animals and thieves. Also, after the harvest, when pilgrims came to the Temple for the Sukkot celebration, there were many more people in and around Jerusalem for the eight-

day festivities than there were places to stay. So they built booths, temporary dwellings, in and around Jerusalem to meet their needs.

How did Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur become so important?

After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 c.e. a transformation took place. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, originally for priests, became holidays for all the people. Instead of being dedicated to the cleansing of the Temple (which no longer existed) and the priests (who no longer functioned), these days became a special time during which all Jews cleansed their souls and hearts from the impurities of sins and faults.

Revival of Sukkot

Since no person is ever free of fault or error, and since we all need to feel that we can improve and make a new start, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur served to satisfy a basic human and Jewish need. Thus they became the High Holy Days. the most important days of the Jewish year. Pesah became the holiday

during which scattered families reunited at the Seder, expressing their togetherness, their ties to their Jewish past, and their hope for the future. Shavuot came to symbolize the Torah, the teachings of Judaism, and our recommitment to those moral and ethical principles which suffuse our tradition. But Sukkot, which was once the most important of holidays, was all but forgotten, though its symbols apply to our age in a meaningful way. Sukkot and its prayers for rain symbolize our dependence on nature. It awakens in us the fear of what could happen if we interfere with that life-sustaining system, allowing the pollution and destruction of our planet."

In this age of awareness that human being do have an impact on our planet and environments, Rabbi Gold suggests and I tend to agree that once again that Sukkot should be elevated in its importance and observance amongst the Jewish people. Imagine if the 1200 people that came here for RH and YK, came also or realistically instead for a holiday dedicated to not to the care of ourselves as RH and YK focus, but to the care for our home, our planet, for each other? How relevant would that be to our world and our Jews today?