SUKKOT: The Clouds That Protect Israel

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"…so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am HaShem, your God" (Leviticus 23:43).

This coming Friday night, September 25, we begin the celebration of Sukkot, the festival that recalls our forty-year crossing of the desert, from Egypt to the Promised Land: Israel. This year the first day falls on Shabbat.

The Torah says plainly that we celebrate Sukkot in order to remember "that God settled us in sukkot" when He took us out of Egypt.

But what were those sukkot? What were they made of?

HUTS

According to Ribbi Akiba, the sukkot were simply huts, cabins with a roof of branches. They did not keep out the weather the way a real roof does, but they gave shade, which in the desert is no small thing. On this reading, when we build the Sukka and live in it, we relive the journey through the desert.

There are at least two objections to this literal reading.

When the Torah describes where the Jews lived in the desert, it uses the Hebrew word ohel, tents, probably made of animal skins. It never mentions huts or cabins.

The second objection is sharper. Why does the Torah say that

God settled the Israelites in huts? The huts Ribbi Akiba has in mind would have been built by the people themselves, not by God.

CLOUDS OF GLORY

Ribbi Eliezer disagrees with Ribbi Akiba and holds that in this verse “sukkot” does not mean huts at all. Whatever the dwellings in the desert were made of, wood or skins, what we are meant to remember is that during those forty years the Jewish people were protected by God. Ribbi Eliezer called that Divine Protection “clouds of glory.” Seven clouds with which HaShem protected Israel: four around the camp, one above, one below, and a seventh out in front, three days ahead, showing them the way.

Why were protective clouds necessary? Because crossing a desert is dangerous. Water and food are not enough.

There are at least four serious challenges in crossing a desert:

Weather: Scorching heat by day, cold at night, unpredictable winds and sandstorms. Remember what happened to the army of Cambyses in Egypt. In 525 BCE, Cambyses sent fifty thousand soldiers to destroy the Temple of Amon at Siwa. After seven days in the desert they vanished, most likely buried under a sandstorm. Is it not remarkable that in forty years in the desert not one weather event touched the Jews?

Attacks: Deserts have bandits and thieves. In the case of the Jewish people, after the war with Amalek no further attack was recorded.

Animals: Deserts are full of poisonous snakes and scorpions. It is easy to step on one and be bitten.

Direction: Moshe asked his father in law Yitro to come along, since he knew the desert well. Yitro refused. The seventh

cloud, the *amud esh ve'anan*, the pillar of fire and cloud, guided the people like a modern GPS.

INVISIBLE CLOUDS

Now we can understand Ribbi Eliezer better. The Hebrew word for cloud, 'anan, is not to be taken here as the white clouds of the sky. "Cloud" is used metaphorically, for a Divine mechanism that protected the Jewish people. Those invisible clouds, shielding them from every side, can be compared today to firewalls that block an attack before it lands. The cloud above protected from the weather, the one below from the venomous animals. And the seventh, the pillar, led the people and showed them the way.

Our Sages weighed the two opinions and ruled in favor of Ribbi Eliezer.

When we walk into the Sukka we should remember that HaShem protected our ancestors from every danger of the desert.

SEVEN CLOUDS, SEVERAL LAYERS

In our own day the Clouds of Glory are easier to picture than ever. Medinat Israel lives under several layers of protection, and each one covers what the previous one cannot reach: Iron Dome for short range rockets, David's Sling for medium range, Arrow for long range ballistic missiles. Seven clouds, each with its own job.

On December 28, 2025, a new layer was added. The Ministry of Defense delivered to the army the first laser interception system, Iron Beam, or as I prefer to call it, the Laser Sukka. Its Hebrew name is Or Eitan, after Captain Eitan Oster z"l, a commander in the Egoz unit, twenty two years old, killed in Lebanon in October 2024. It is a laser of roughly a hundred kilowatts that brings down drones, rockets and mortar shells, and every shot costs a tiny fraction of an interceptor missile.

It is not yet fully operational. Eight months after delivery, the final adjustments and the integration with Iron Dome were still under way. But it is no longer a distant promise. It exists, it was delivered, and it carries the name of a twenty two year old soldier who died defending his people. In Israel, divine protection works alongside human ingenuity and human sacrifice.

A NEW CLOUD OF PROTECTION

This past July Israel presented a system that resembles none of the others. It is called HYPNOSIS, it was developed by Israel Aerospace Industries, and what sets it apart is that it fires nothing.

Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow shoot things down. They intercept the incoming projectile and destroy it in the air. HYPNOSIS does not destroy. It confuses.

Mobile stations are placed around whatever needs protecting, all linked to a single command center. Together they generate an invisible electromagnetic cloud. Inside that cloud the enemy drone stops receiving the satellite signal that guides it. Or something subtler happens: it receives a false signal and comes to believe it is flying somewhere it is not. It loses its bearings and falls. Hence the name.

There is no interceptor, no explosion, no cost per shot. Until now, bringing down a thousand dollar drone took a hundred thousand dollar missile. One HYPNOSIS station can disorient dozens of drones at once, all at the same price. In testing it neutralized, on its own and with no human operator, several aircraft converging on a single target from different directions.

The image is worth sitting with. The clouds in the desert were not clouds of water. They were, according to Ribbi Eliezer, an invisible protective mechanism that surrounded the people on every side. Today Israel has an invisible cloud that surrounds

on every side whatever it wants to protect.

And there is one more thing. When the Egyptians chased Israel to the sea, the Torah does not say that HaShem destroyed them on the spot. It says the cloud came between the two camps, and that HaShem confused the camp of Egypt:

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“And He confused the camp of Egypt” (Shemot 14:24). He took the wheels off their chariots and made them drive heavily. The first weapon of the exodus from Egypt was not a weapon. It was a cloud that made the enemy lose its way.

Three thousand three hundred years later, the same principle is back on the battlefield.

May HaShem go on protecting Israel from our many enemies, as He protected our ancestors in the desert.