

# Sukkot and Emerging Adulthood

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## Introduction

Sukkot is a meaningful holiday full of rich symbolism. Additionally, Sukkot is a unique holiday in that it is one part of two groups of Jewish holidays. In *Pachad Yitzchak*, Yom Kippur 8:8, Rav Yitzchak Hutner points out that Sukkot is both the last leg of the *Shalosh Regalim* (Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot) and the Tishrei holiday cycle, and in both of these roles, Sukkot has the characteristic of being a time of transition. In the first role, as part of the *Shalosh Regalim*, Sukkot is connected to leaving Egypt, and it celebrates the time Bnei Yisrael wandered in the desert prior to entering the Land of Israel and being a full-fledged nation. In the second role, following Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Sukkot serves as the bridge that an individual undergoes between the *teshuva* (repentance) process of the Yamim Noraim and the mundane world of the every day. While both of these roles portray Sukkot in a different light, they both contain a similar theme—that of developing our national and individual identity as members of G-d’s nation.

## Emerging Adulthood

The qualities of the transition of Sukkot bring to mind the time of life most associated with transition, which is late adolescence and what is being termed today as “emerging adulthood.” By examining some of the necessary elements involved in progressing through this stage of transition, and its parallels with the holiday of Sukkot, we can gain interesting insights that are relevant for all stages of life. In the last decade, there has been growing research on this population and how adolescence and adulthood have changed. In the late 1990s, Jeffrey Arnett coined the term “emerging adulthood” to refer to the young adult population, aged 18-28, and he has made the case that, in many ways, the developmental and behavioral tasks that were traditionally associated with adolescence now continue well into early adulthood, and that the ways of defining adulthood are different than they were even 30 years ago. Whereas adulthood used to be defined as being financially independent and having a family of one’s own, now adulthood is defined more in terms of being able to make independent decisions, knowing one’s values, and taking responsibility for one’s actions (Arnett, 2000). In his famous theory of development, Erik Erikson stated that identity formation was the main task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), and research indicates that for many people, this task is now becoming the

focus of the next stage of life, that of emerging adulthood, thus making “identity exploration a defining feature of this stage.”

## Identity Formation in Emerging Adulthood

Having a coherent and strong sense of identity has been shown to be associated with many positive outcomes, including general wellbeing, a higher sense of self efficacy, less depression and anxiety, and general happiness with one’s life (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, Ritchie, 2013). There are two factors, among others, that are borne out in the research as being crucial in the formation of a solid and coherent self-identity; those are meaning-making, which is connected to commitment, and creating and maintaining attachments with loved ones.

## Meaning Making and Identity

One model of measuring identity is termed narrative identity, and it focuses on the way in which a person tells the story of his life. This model posits that identity is slowly formed when a person experiences events, and especially turning-point events, and then reflects on them, actively makes meaning out of them and then makes a commitment as a result (McAdams, 1993).

Several studies have looked at storytelling and how one talks about an experience as a step in forming an identity. Two types of stories emerge: self-explanation and entertainment. Self-explanation stories contain meaning, lesson-learning and the attainment of insight, as opposed to entertainment stories that revolve around a factual description of the events of the story without much, if any, analysis of those events. In one study, researchers examined the ways in which students who went on a trip to volunteer with orphans recounted their trip, and then the researchers measured their level of volunteer behavior later on. They found that the volunteers who talked about their experiences using themes of personal growth, understanding about themselves, and changes they have seen in themselves, as opposed to just relating positive experiences or more limited lessons about what they saw, were more likely to continue to volunteer in the future. Such reflective statements included, "I now know the kind of person I am, that I am stronger than I thought" or "I now see that I really feel fulfilled when I help people and I understand more about how I dealt with things in the past and how I want to deal with them now." In sum, when a person reports being changed or transformed and connects this change or transformation with their own characteristics, it indicates that new goals are being drawn and strong commitments to action and values are being made (Cox & McAdams, 2012).

In another study about storytelling, the focus was on turning points. Turning points are events that are highly emotional, often have some difficult component, and can involve achievement, relationships, or mortality (examples include graduation or a first job, beginning or ending of a relationship and the birth or loss of a loved one). Emerging adults were asked to talk about turning points in their lives and were measured for how much insight about themselves and transformation was discussed. The study found that emerging adults derive more meaning from events involving relationships than those revolving around achievements. It also found specifically that turning a negative experience into a positive one was associated with meaning and that people with a more optimistic view and belief in their abilities found it easier to make

meaning of events (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Individuals with higher meaning-making in their stories were associated with a more stable sense of identity. In sum, these studies and many others indicate that meaning-making is connected to a stronger sense of identity as seen in making commitments and having a strong sense of self.

## Identity and Attachment

In addition to meaning-making, another element that contributes to strong identity formation throughout life and even during emerging adulthood, is the area of attachment. Attachment refers to the connection that one has with caregivers and loved ones and how he can utilize these connections during times of stress. Emerging adults with a secure attachment state of mind view attachments positively and are able to rely on loved ones while beginning to find independence. Secure attachment state of mind is associated with countless positive outcomes, including being able to cope with difficult tasks, having better and more intimate relationships, stronger self-esteem and less depression and anxiety (Scharf, Maysleess, Kivenson-Barron, 2004). How is secure attachment achieved? It often is associated with authoritative parenting, as opposed to authoritarian or permissive parenting (Marsiglia, Walczyk, Buboltz, Griffith-Ross, 2007). Homes with authoritative parenting are typified by warmth, discussion of values, explanation of reason for rules and tolerance for individuality. During the transition of adolescence and young adulthood, parents in these homes are able to walk the perennial tightrope that balances love and limits, rules and flexibility, and supportive understanding with high expectations. They can no longer be involved in every decision and have to allow internalization of parental values without external coercion. Since young people who are exposed to this type of parenting or mentoring feel strongly supported, they are more able to explore the world around them. As such, parenting and teaching in this way affords young people the opportunity to make choices and build their own identity. [Research indicates that authoritative parenting and secure attachments are correlated to a more coherent sense of self in emerging adulthood.]

In sum, research shows that meaning-making and attachments play a large role in identity formation, as Erik Erikson summarized: “Parents must not only have certain ways of guiding by prohibition and permission; they must also be able to represent to the child a deep, and almost somatic conviction that there is a meaning to what they are doing (Erikson, 1950).” I would like to suggest that this is a model we can find taking place in Sukkot in its two roles as well.

## Identity and Sukkot: Meaning-Making

When viewed as part of the holidays of Tishrei, Sukkot serves as a stamp to end the Tishrei holidays and the process of repentance that have taken place during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, **and parallels the meaning-making aspect of identity formation.** The teshuva process is a perfect **turning-point event** because it is emotional; it is about relationships and has the inherent potential to turn positive into negative. The extent to which the repentance process will have a meaningful impact on our lives, on our identity as Jews, will depend on our willingness and ability to **narrate or tell a story** of the teshuva we just performed on ourselves in a meaningful and transformative way. Sukkot is the holiday of unbridled joy because we have recommitted ourselves to our internal values and beliefs and we have a clean slate, a new chance.

This is not a new version of oneself, but a clean and polished one, one that needs to be connected to our past and our future. Will we ask the questions about what we learned about ourselves, what caused us to want to change, and how we hope to maintain this change. Will we engage in immediate commitments to further solidify our gains? Living in the sukkah allows us the space and the time to reflect and to work hard to internalize for ourselves the meaning and solidify our commitment of our repentance process.

In fact, in *Orot HaTeshuva*, 14:30, Rav Kook states that Sukkot serves to solidify the gains made during the Ten Days of Repentance by putting the newly attained goals and spiritual heights into everyday practice. The holiday of Sukkot deepens the **meaning**, and therefore the impact, of the process of repentance in many ways. For example, the very act of running immediately after Yom Kippur to build a sukkah embodies the idea that one's values are only solidified if they are turned into action, and the immediacy of the action is a **sign** of that commitment. (Additionally, the sukkah itself represents living in a new, spiritual home, and makes the statement that in life, as well as in prayer, one is newly committed to G-d.) Last Lastly, one can say that Sukkot serves as a unique space between the total immersion in holiness of a Yom Kippur and the more mundane activities of everyday life. This time of transition allows for reflection and internal dialogue in which one can build upon what was just experienced during the *Aseret Ymei Teshuva*. As such, as the last leg of the Tishrei holidays, Sukkot emphasizes our internalization, commitment and meaning-making of the process of repentance, to identify ourselves as *avdei Hashem*, servants of G-d.

## Identity and Sukkot: Attachment

On the other hand, when viewed as part of the *Shalosh Regalim*, Sukkot is connected to Yetziat Mitzrayim and the development of Bnei Yisrael as a nation and can be seen as **highlighting the attachment aspect of identity**. The verses in Vayikra (23:42-43) expresses this idea, stating, "You shall dwell in sukkot (huts) for seven days ... in order that future generations may know that I made the Bnei Yisrael live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt." In relation to leaving Egypt, Sukkot is a time of transition figuratively and literally. It is the physical time of transition from slavery to independence, from living in Egypt to eventually living in the Land of Israel. It is also the time of transition developmentally, in the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and G-d. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, on the above verses, pointed out that the Bnei Yisrael were required to transition themselves from the total dependence on G-d while witnessing overt miracles, to an internalized understanding that their reliance on G-d must be complete even while not witnessing overt miracles. When G-d removes these overt miracles, man has more free choice in regard to his belief and actions, and, therefore, his faith in G-d and fidelity to his mitzvot require more active decision-making and a greater commitment. As such, the holiday of Sukkot is a time of transition and change in **attachment** of Bnei Yisrael to G-d. **Just like emerging adults need the support and love to form attachments and the distance and limits to internalize their own values, so, too, the Bnei Yisrael needed that from G-d.**

Further, we know that the sukkah represents the Clouds of Glory, according to R. Eliezer (*Sukkah* 11b). The Clouds of Glory are emphasized for their protective nature during the time of transition for the Bnei Yisrael in the desert. The *Kli Yakar* (Vayikra 23:43) beautifully

describes the Clouds as the sign to the Bnei Yisrael of the constant protection of G-d and His presence in our midst. The Clouds of Glory represent our dependence on G-d during our time of transition in the desert. The image of the sukkot as being the Clouds of Glory has many parallels to authoritative parenting. The Cloud is a constant presence, yet it is not overpowering. It is not obvious all the time, but it is always there. It moves and ebbs and flows, but it is neither rigid nor fixed. The Clouds of Glory provide protection, but they also hover from a distance. We also know that the Cloud turned to a pillar of fire at night. Why? When the day turned into night, then the Cloud, the loving gentle presence, turned into a bright, strong guiding light. Just as Bnei Yisrael needed the light of G-d at night to make them feel safe when things really were frightening or the uncertainty was overwhelming, so too people need the strong guidance and support of loved ones, at difficult times, to become even more visible and clear.

In sum, there is much that we can learn from Sukkot and from the research on emerging adults and adolescents that can teach us new ways of interacting with young adults and can help us to deepen our own spiritual identity. In dealing with emerging adults in our lives, we can try to provide support, but encourage independence, as they attempt to slowly transfer external voices of guidance and instruction to internal voices, just as the Shechina traveled from overt miracles to the Cloud of Glory and eventually to the Mishkan in the hearts of the people. Parents and teachers can allow for opinions to be shared, but set limits when necessary, and encourage loved ones to view events in their lives as part of their own narrative and story. In terms of our spiritual development, we can all benefit from focusing both on our dependence and connection with G-d through building *emunah*, and on ways to increase meaning in our lives. We can aim to view events as possible turning points, situations that can influence values and priorities. Finally, we can talk about events in terms of lessons and insights we gained, and encourage meaningful questions and thoughtful storytelling from all those around us. With these insights we can hopefully enter the new year with renewed inspiration and understanding.

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