

To Dwell or Not to Dwell in Booths During the Feast of Sukkot

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Over the years, we have endured controversy after controversy regarding how to interpret various texts of Scripture. One that surfaces every now and then is how to interpret the following instruction pertaining to the Feast of Tabernacles, aka Sukkot:

Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths. (Lev. 23:42)

This is pretty plain: If you were born in Israel, you must dwell in booths for seven days. Conversely, if you were *not* born in Israel, this requirement does *not* apply to you. Here's how this same verse reads in the English translation of the Greek Septuagint:

Seven days ye shall dwell in tabernacles: every native in Israel shall dwell in tents,

If you're a native Israelite, then you are commanded to dwell in booths/tents for seven days in the place where Yahweh chooses to place His name. If you are *not* a native Israelite, this requirement does *not* pertain to you.

In spite of this plain command, there are those who insist that *all* peoples are commanded to dwell in booths for the seven days comprising the Feast of Tabernacles. In this study, I am addressing this teaching.

June and I recently attended a Sabbath meeting wherein the upcoming Feast of Tabernacles was discussed, including whether or not we here in the USA are required to dwell in booths or tents. I explained that June and I have spent many Sukkot feasts in our tent, but not always, and not in the past few years due to various circumstances. I added that the command to dwell in booths only applies to those who are native to the land of Israel. This comment was met with sharp disagreement from a woman who claims that the term "all that are Israelites born," as found in Leviticus 23:42, applies to *all* peoples, even if they were born in some other land. I certainly respect her commitment to dwell in booths because there is clearly nothing wrong with dwelling in booths or tents during the Feast of Sukkot.

This being said, a point I have often made is that in this day and age, no one can keep Sukkot the way it was commanded to be kept. First, the command for Sukkot is for all males to go to the place where



Yahweh places His name. That is where Sukkot is to be observed and celebrated, and that place is *Jerusalem, Israel*. Assuming that we are native Israelites and that we could go to the temple in Jerusalem to observe the Feast of Sukkot, we would *then* be required to dwell in booths.

But that is not the case in this day and age. Please don't get me wrong—if you wish to build a booth (sukkah) and dwell in it as a remembrance of how our ancestors lived during their years of wandering in the Wilderness, I think that's great! We've done it many times and in several states. But we've never told anyone they're *required* to do such a thing because in places other than Israel, the best we can do is *commemorate* Yahweh's feasts. We address commemorating Yahweh's feasts in our study "[Is It a Sin to Stay Home During Yahweh's Feasts?](#)"

So when Yahweh's Word says, "all that are Israelites born" in Leviticus 23:42, that's *exactly* what it means. Yet those who insist that *all* peoples are required to dwell in booths during the Feast of Sukkot subvert the instruction. In other words, what they *won't* tell you is, "Yahweh's Word doesn't mean what it says."

First-century Jewish historian Josephus understood that only those who dwell in the land of Israel are required to attend the annual festivals (Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost and Sukkot). He wrote:

Let those that live as remote as the bounds of the land which the Hebrews shall possess, come to that city where the temple shall be, and this three times in a year, that they may give thanks to the Almighty for his former benefits, and may entreat him for those they shall want hereafter.¹

It is noteworthy that there is no record of the Jews having ever celebrated any of the annual festivals during their exile in Babylon. They certainly had opportunities, such as after Esther's and her fellow Jews' deliverance from the nefarious Haman, as well as the fame of Daniel's great wisdom. But there is only silence. Only when they returned to Jerusalem did they resume celebrating Yahweh's festivals. We could assume that they at least did without leavened products during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, but Scripture doesn't say one way or the other. The same goes for dwelling in booths during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Even in the New Testament, we read of feast celebrations in Jerusalem, but nowhere else. One may interpret the "days of unleavened bread" as evidence that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was celebrated in Philippi (Acts 20:6), but one may *also* argue that "days of unleavened bread" was only given as a time reference. We aren't told either way. Personally, I am persuaded that the believers in Philippi obediently consumed unleavened bread during those days, but certainly no sacrifices would have been offered there. Significantly, within the instructions for observing the Feast of Unleavened Bread, we do *not* read, "All that are Israelites born shall eat unleavened bread." That's because, contrary to the instruction pertaining to dwelling in booths, the command to abstain from leavened products is not limited to those who were born in the land of Israel: it applies to all who choose to obey Yahweh—*all* the children of Israel.

Jewish Rabbis Admit the Torah Command as Given Only Applies to Natives Born in the Land

After having composed this study, I decided to check our copy of *The Chumash*² to see what the "Jewish sages" had to say about dwelling in booths. To my surprise and amazement, they acknowledge that the

¹ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book IV, ch. viii, §7.

² According to the Artscroll website, *The Chumash* commentary "draws on the spectrum of biblical commentaries, from the Talmud, Midrash, and the classic Rabbinic commentators, and includes insights of contemporary greats."

command as given in Leviticus 23:42 applies to those born in Israel (i.e., “natives”), but they extend the command to converts who were not born there. Here’s the commentary:

42. הָאִזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל — *Native in Israel*. *Native* refers to born Jews; *in Israel* adds proselytes (*Rashi*; *Sifra*).

Rashi cites the exegesis of the Sages that the commandment to dwell in a succah applies to converts, **as well as** to native Jews. Unexplained, however, is why the commandment of succah should require such an exegesis any more than hundreds of other commandments that are as binding on converts as on all other Jews. The reason may be found in the very next verse, which states that the succah serves as a reminder that God protected our ancestors in the Wilderness. If so, one might have conjectured that such a reminder is not incumbent on converts, whose ancestors were not in the Wilderness. By specifically including converts in this commandment, the Torah stresses their equality with the rest of their adopted nation (*R’Yaakov Kamenetsky*).³

I have three concerns about the above commentary. First, how does the author justify stating, “*in Israel adds proselytes*”? That is a completely contradictory statement, as in *contradictory to the command*. To add proselytes, notably those who were *not* born in Israel negates the commandment, which is that it pertains specifically to those who are “native in Israel” in contradistinction to those who are not. It applies *specifically* to those who were born in the land (which is what “native” means)!

Secondly, for the author to state “converts, as well as native Jews” proves that he recognizes a distinction between those who are converts and those who are native. Clearly, converts are not necessarily native Jews. If the Torah commandment were to issue such a statement—that the command pertains to “those who are homeborn and the stranger who dwells within your gates,” then the Jewish commentator’s statement would be valid. As it is, this is a clear case of “adding to the Word” that which is not in the original text.

Finally, the Jewish commentator proceeds to treat the text as though converts are “specifically” included, even though no such verbiage is found in the text. The statement “By specifically including converts in this commandment” is a complete and utter distortion of the command because non-native converts are most certainly **not** included in the commandment. His commentary amounts to a blatant subversion of Torah.

A Torah-Observant Messianic Jew’s Perspective

The woman who protested my claim that the command to dwell in booths during Sukkot only applies to those who are native to the land of Israel, sought to end all arguments by stating, “I’m Jewish!” Of course, her bloodline has nothing to do with what the Word says, so her answer amounted to that of a copout. Nevertheless, I’m aware of a Messianic Torah-observant preacher who also claims to be Jewish, and he agrees with me that the command of Leviticus 23:42 *only* applies to those who are native born in Israel. His name is Steve Berkson of Messianic Torah Observant Israel, based in Cleveland, Tennessee. For the record, I have several disagreements with Berkson, including his desire to be called “Rabbi,” but I *do* agree with his interpretation of Leviticus 23:42. In his weekly Torah study, which was live-streamed on May 17, 2024,

³ From *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*, by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Mesorah Publications, Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 1997, rabbinic commentary on Leviticus 23:42, p. 689.

during the closing Q&A session he was asked if the instruction of Leviticus 23:42 is relevant for believers today. Here's an excerpt taken from the YouTube video:

From [online viewer] “Chosen to Bear Good Fruit”: “Rabbi, in Leviticus 23:42 it says ‘all native born in Yisrael.’ Can you expound on this, and is this still relevant, and if not, why not? Thank you.”

Steve Berkson’s response: “Okay, [quoting the verse] ‘dwell in booths for seven days, all who are native Israelites dwell in booths so that your generations know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Israel.’ Okay, all right, some of the instructions—*many* of the instructions—like all legal things in every nation—have jurisdiction and parameters linked to it. So these instructions, just like the ones that we started in chapter 23 and verse 10 when it said, ‘and when you come into the land,’ which means this is not something you do when you’re outside the land, but when you come into the land, and you gather the harvest, right?”

The verse that you’re reading here in the end of the chapter is talking about the cohesive nation in the land will do these things, all right? Now, we rehearse some of these things outside the land, but these things can only truly be done in the land; but not just in the land, like, “Oh, I’ll just go on a vacation—I’ll go to Jerusalem!” No, it has to be the nation together, and the government is this [pointing to his Bible]—the Covenant—the judicial system is this, the religious system is this, the temple exists—all these things have to be in place for all these things to be what it says to do, so yes, in Leviticus 23:42, when it says all native born in Israel, yes. It would mean that if we were all there, okay? If we were living there, if the temple was there, if the government was set up, if the judicial system was set up, and all those things—all those parameters are in place.⁴

To be sure, I do not agree with everything Steve Berkson said in his response. For example, when he states that we “rehearse some of these things,” someone might ask, “Then shouldn’t we rehearse dwelling in booths?” It’s for this reason that I prefer the term “commemorating.” Yes, we can rehearse some of the requirements for observing Sukkot, and that could include dwelling in booths or tents, but this doesn’t mean it’s required of us, especially since that’s not what the command says.

I need to repeat my previous statement that if you wish to build a booth (*sukkah*) and dwell in it as a remembrance of how our ancestors lived during their years of wandering in the Wilderness, I think that’s great! But to subvert the commandment and impose such a practice as binding on those where are *not* native to Israel is, in and of itself, a violation of Torah (Deut. 4:2).



⁴ From Steve Berkson, Messianic Torah Observant Israel (MTOI), “[Emor | Leviticus 21:1 -24:23 | MTOI Weekly Torah Study](#),” commentary beginning at the 2:25:40 mark, May 17, 2024.