

Sukkot 2 5778

I want to speak briefly today about an image in today's haftarah reading. The haftarah for the second day of Sukkot describes the establishment of the Temple in Jerusalem by King Solomon, and in its description of the placement of the ark in the holy of holies, it makes a curious comment. The ark, it says, will be placed in that small room, seen thereafter only by the High Priest, with its poles still slotted through on its sides. Up until that moment, the purpose of those poles was to lift the ark and transport it from place to place, a kind of sacred luggage. Because of the sanctity of the ark, it was forbidden for anyone but the kohanim to touch it, yet the job of moving it was done by the levi'im. The poles enabled them to move the ark without touching it.

Now, having established what was considered to be a permanent resting place for the ark, from which it should never again be moved, the question of the poles' utility must be asked. If they were once used for the portage of an object that is now eternally fixed, why retain the pole or even mention them at all? A simple explanation might be that they are part and parcel of the ark, that their association with it imparted a certain level of sanctity; that is possible. At the same time, I think that the poles can be experienced symbolically. The Temple itself was the permanent version of the mobile desert sanctuary, the mishkan. During the days of wandering the wilderness, the poles had a very real function, but now, in the mikdash, the Temple, they are a reminder of our

history as a wandering people, dependent upon God to provide for our needs in order to make it to the end of the journey to the land of Canaan.

That insight can help to explain why this passage is so apt for Sukkot. I am not claiming that it is the reason the passage was assigned to this day; it is far more likely that the real reason is the haftarah's reference to the establishment of the Temple during the festival of Sukkot at its beginning. Yet, having associated that text with this day, we discover additional connections. Sukkot is the holiday that reminds us for a whole week of our dependence upon God to shelter us from a harsh and dangerous world. Like the time before the establishment of the Temple, the Jews of most of the last two thousand years have been wanderers, lacking a national home. Like our forebears of the desert generation, we leave places of danger for safety elsewhere, and must take our culture and our devotion to God with us. We carry them along like the Levites carried the ark. Perhaps the instructions about the ark poles signify the homeless nature of the Jewish people, before and after the establishment of the Temple. The poles are a reminder of the journey to get to that place, and a silent warning about getting too comfortable. Like the Sukkah, they remind us that what we view as the safety and security of our present circumstances was not always the case, and that things may not remain that way indefinitely. They teach us that even when things seem to be the most secure they can be that anything is possible, and that we should always have our luggage close at hand.