

Sukkot the Biblical Thanksgiving

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael October 6, 2012

I don't often get my inspirations while eating at McDonald's, but this time I did. Marie and I were having breakfast on the road and I was seriously contemplating the virtue of the McDonald's "steak, egg, and cheese bagel" that I was eating. It was tasty, filling, arguably nutritious, and cost only \$3.19. And then I got to thinking about how ordinary this breakfast was for me, but how extraordinary (and even life-saving) such a breakfast would be for many poor people in the Third World countries, and I was then and there inspired to write and send the following letter:

Mr. Donald Thompson, CEO
McDonald's Corporation
2111 McDonald's Drive
Oak Brook, IL 60523 USA

RE: A unique way that McDonald's and its Customers can partner to bless those in need of food.

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I am the Congregational Leader of Ohev Yisrael Messianic Jewish Congregation, and this idea came to me amidst eating one of your Steak, Egg, and Cheese Bagels while contemplating my sermon for the Sabbath that falls within the week of the biblical "Feast of Tabernacles." The "Feast" reflects on God's goodness to the Israelites in providing for them during their long trek through the desert after they left Egypt and, although I was not wandering in the desert as they were, I couldn't help but be thankful to God for providing this wonderful McDonald's sandwich for me at so low a cost, and for how blessed I was to be able to afford it. My thoughts then turned to the millions of people in the world who are in need of basic food and cannot afford it, and how McDonalds and its customers are in a unique position to partner and help. I know that you receive many ideas from many sources, but I believe that the Lord gave me this one to share with you, so I hope you give it the weight of consideration that I believe it deserves.

It is well known that McDonald's is a benevolent corporation and is already involved in charitable giving. The uniqueness of this idea is for McDonalds to partner with its patrons in a joint program of benevolence, using the steak, egg, and cheese sandwich as its basis. The reason for using this particular product is that it's taste appeals widely, it is fairly high in calories, and it contains balanced nutritional components -- all of which are important for the survival of those who may receive little other food in the course of their day.

The way it would be done would be for each of your customers, at the time of their purchase of any McDonald's meal, to have the voluntary option of paying, say, \$0.10 extra, to be

matched by McDonald's, and for that money to go toward purchasing and distributing these sandwiches to needy people in designated Third World country areas. Your patrons could even vote on where in the world they would like to see the food sent. I understand that the techniques of preservation, delivery, selection, and distribution would have to be worked out, but if God really gave me this idea to give to you, then there is a way.

I wish you and yours a blessed holiday season.

Shalom,
Michael Rudolph
Congregational Leader

I don't suppose that Mr. Thompson gets many letters that ostensibly originated with God, so I am praying that a McDonald staff person does not intercept the letter and discard it before it gets to his desk. The fact is that persons like Mr. Thompson, who are in positions of influence, have a special responsibility to be good stewards of what God has given them, to listen for God's voice, and to act on it accordingly. Who knows but that Mr. Thompson is a believer, and that he will do just that?

But what I wrote to Mr. Thompson was only a part of what I believe I received during that breakfast. The rest of what I heard (that relates to it) called my attention to an aspect of *Sukkot* that God wants me to emphasize this morning – that *Sukkot* is the biblical "Thanksgiving" – not one day as the American Thanksgiving, but seven. And not just for Israel, but for all the nations, and for all of us individually as well. Now that broadens the importance of *Sukkot* from being merely a seven-day season of recounting God's provisions for the ancient Israelites, to being a season of thanksgiving for everyone, and for all of God's provisions – those of the past, those of the present and those of the future. We are accustomed to thank God for His provisions of the past and perhaps we have awareness of our present blessings and be able to thank Him for those as well. But thank him for providing for us in the future? How does that work? It works by faith. We believe [Philippians 4:19](#), in which Paul said:

Moreover, my God will fill every need of yours according to his glorious wealth, in union with the Messiah Yeshua.

And we also believe Yeshua when He said to His *talmidim* in [Luke 12:22-31](#):

Because of this I tell you, don't worry about your life- what you will eat or drink; or about your body- what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. Think about the ravens! They neither plant nor harvest, they have neither storerooms nor barns, yet God feeds them. You are worth much more than the birds! Can any of you by worrying add an hour to his life? If you can't do a little thing like that, why worry about the rest? Think about the wild irises, and how they grow. They neither work nor spin thread; yet, I tell you, not even Shlomo in all his glory was clothed as beautifully as one of these. If this is how God clothes grass, which is alive in the field today and thrown in the oven tomorrow, how much more will he clothe you! What little trust you have! In other words, don't strive after what you will eat and what you will drink- don't be anxious. For all

the pagan nations in the world set their hearts on these things. Your Father knows that you need them too. Rather, seek his Kingdom; and these things will be given to you as well.

This is so important that I want to read Yeshua's same statement as it is rendered in another Scripture, Matthew 6:28-33:

And why be anxious about clothing? Think about the fields of wild irises, and how they grow. They neither work nor spin thread, yet I tell you that not even Shlomo in all his glory was clothed as beautifully as one of these. If this is how God clothes grass in the field- which is here today and gone tomorrow, thrown in an oven- won't he much more clothe you? What little trust you have! So don't be anxious, asking, 'What will we eat?', 'What will we drink?' or 'How will we be clothed?' For it is the pagans who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Notice that this last Scripture promises God's provision, but not without the condition that we first seek His Kingdom and righteousness. And that brings us to God's provision for the Israelites and *Sukkot*, where we will see shortly, that the same condition of seeking His Kingdom and righteousness applies. But first, let's review a Scripture that connects *Sukkot* with God's agricultural provision for ancient Israel; in Deuteronomy 16:13-15 we read:

You are to keep the festival of Sukkot for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing-floor and winepress. Rejoice at your festival- you, your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, the L'vi'im, and the foreigners, orphans and widows living among you. Seven days you are to keep the festival for ADONAI your God in the place ADONAI your God will choose, because ADONAI your God will bless you in all your crops and in all your work, so you are to be full of joy!

Now returning to Matthew 6:33, we remember that God's provision for us is conditioned on our seeking "*first his Kingdom and his righteousness.*" That, of course, was said by Yeshua many years after Deuteronomy was written, but a similar principle was expressed within the Mosaic Covenant in Deuteronomy 11:13-17:

So if you listen carefully to my mitzvot which I am giving you today, to love ADONAI your God and serve him with all your heart and all your being; then, [says ADONAI,] 'I will give your land its rain at the right seasons, including the early fall rains and the late spring rains; so that you can gather in your wheat, new wine and olive oil; and I will give your fields grass for your livestock; with the result that you will eat and be satisfied.' But be careful not to let yourselves be seduced, so that you turn aside, serving other gods and worshipping them. If you do, the anger of ADONAI will blaze up against you. He will shut up the sky, so that there will be no rain. The ground will not yield its produce, and you will quickly pass away from the good land ADONAI is giving you.

The above Scripture was spoken only to Israel. However, *Sukkot* is unique among the various "appointed times" in that there is Scripture that makes keeping *Sukkot* incumbent upon the

Gentile nations as well. Zechariah 14:16-19 states that the following will occur after the conclusion of a great war in which Israel will prevail:

Finally, everyone remaining from all the nations that came to attack Yerushalayim will go up every year to worship the king, ADONAI-Tzva'ot, and to keep the festival of Sukkot. If any of the families of the earth does not go up to Yerushalayim to worship the king, ADONAI-Tzva'ot, no rain will fall on them. If the family of Egypt doesn't go up, if they refuse to come, they will have no [annual] overflow [from the Nile]; moreover, there will be the plague with which ADONAI will strike the nations that don't go up to keep the festival of Sukkot. This will be Egypt's punishment and the punishment of all the nations that don't go up to keep the festival of Sukkot.

Do you see the similarity between Deuteronomy 11:13-17 and Zechariah 14:16-19? The similarity is that if any nation (including Israel) does not worship God and keep *Sukkot* in Jerusalem each year, then there will be no rain or agricultural blessing for that nation.

But I thought that *Sukkot* was merely a rollicking seven-day holiday commemorating God's provision of food and shelter for the ancient Israelites. Why then is it such a serious infraction for Israel, the Gentile nations and, by implication for us individually, to fail to keep *Sukkot*? It is because the essence of keeping *Sukkot* is being thankful to God for His provisions – not just those provisions that He gave to the ancient Israelites – but those that we received in our own recent past, those being enjoyed by us in the present and, by faith, those that we look forward to in the future. That is why I said earlier that *Sukkot* is the biblical Thanksgiving, and it is similar to the American Thanksgiving in that, if we "blow it off," it is an indication that we do not have a grateful heart toward God, and that there is therefore a serious fault in our relationship with Him.

Now every one of the other appointed times has a significant connection to Yeshua, so it is reasonable for us to ask: "What is *Sukkot's* connection to Yeshua? On first inspection it seems sparse because the only direct mention of Yeshua and *Sukkot* in the same passage of Scripture is John 7:37-43, in which Yeshua reveals His Messianic identity; the Scripture reads:

Now on the last day of the festival, Hoshana Rabbah, Yeshua stood and cried out, "If anyone is thirsty, let him keep coming to me and drinking! Whoever puts his trust in me, as the Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from his inmost being!" (Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who trusted in him were to receive later- the Spirit had not yet been given, because Yeshua had not yet been glorified.) On hearing his words, some people in the crowd said, "Surely this man is 'the prophet'"; others said, "This is the Messiah." But others said, "How can the Messiah come from the Galil? Doesn't the Tanakh say that the Messiah is from the seed of David and comes from Beit-Lechem, the village where David lived?" So the people were divided because of him.

The substance of what Yeshua revealed was certainly important, but what was the significance of His revealing it on *Sukkot*? One reason that Yeshua chose the day was so that He could speak of Himself as being the source of "living water," analogous to (but greater than) the ceremonial water that was being poured out as part of the Feast. But that is not the whole of it. The reason that Yeshua revealed Himself on *Sukkot* was that He was identifying Himself as the fulfillment

of *Sukkot's* main theme – God's provision for Israel, and the King referred to in Zechariah 14:16-19, Whom all the nations on earth would have to come to Jerusalem to worship. This is of course consistent with *Sukkot* being a season of thanksgiving for all of God's provisions, but especially for His ultimate provision – His son and our Messiah.

So here we are in the middle of the Feast of *Sukkot*, one of the most significant of the appointed times, the one that is for all believers in Yeshua be they Jew or Gentile and the one that the Gentile nations will be held accountable for keeping, and yet the majority of Christians in the world knows nothing about it. It is a good thing for them that we are not yet at the time prophesied by Zechariah, but we who are Jews and *K'rovei Yisrael* at Ohev Yisrael are responsible for keeping the Feast now, and understanding that Yeshua is its fulfillment. We keep the Feast of *Sukkot* by reflecting on all the provisions of God for which we are thankful, and especially for God's greatest provision, Messiah Yeshua. We also try to keep the Feast according to the Law of Moses by complying, as closely as we can, with the instructions given in Leviticus 23:33-43 which I will now read to you despite it being a bit lengthy:

ADONAI said to Moshe, "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the feast of Sukkot for seven days to ADONAI. On the first day there is to be a holy convocation; do not do any kind of ordinary work. For seven days you are to bring an offering made by fire to ADONAI; on the eighth day you are to have a holy convocation and bring an offering made by fire to ADONAI; it is a day of public assembly; do not do any kind of ordinary work. These are the designated times of ADONAI that you are to proclaim as holy convocations and bring an offering made by fire to ADONAI- a burnt offering, a grain offering, a sacrifice and drink offerings, each on its own day- besides the Shabbats of ADONAI, your gifts, all your vows and all your voluntary offerings that you give to ADONAI. But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered the produce of the land, you are to observe the festival of ADONAI seven days; the first day is to be a complete rest and the eighth day is to be a complete rest. On the first day you are to take choice fruit, palm fronds, thick branches and river-willows, and celebrate in the presence of ADONAI your God for seven days. You are to observe it as a feast to ADONAI seven days in the year; it is a permanent regulation, generation after generation; keep it in the seventh month. You are to live in sukkot for seven days; every citizen of Isra'el is to live in a sukkah, so that generation after generation of you will know that I made the people of Isra'el live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am ADONAI your God."

Sukkot means booths or temporary dwellings, and the holiday of *Sukkot* lasts for seven days beginning on the fifteenth day of the seventh month which is *Tishri* on the Jewish calendar. During the week of *Sukkot* we eat, pray, and sometimes even sleep in *sukkot* that we build ourselves, in remembrance of when the ancient Israelites did the same in the Sinai desert. We keep the first day of *Sukkot* as a Sabbath, do no customary work on it, and we hold a Holy convocation. This year, in lieu of a central convocation, Ohev members met in their individual *sukkot*, mostly on the first night.

The materials out of which the Israelites made their *sukkot* – “the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook” (the four species, or

arba minim) are what have given rise to the tradition of waiving the *lulav* and *etrog*, which most of us have already done, and which we will do again prior to ending this service.

All of this is good and pleasing to God so long as we do not forget the main reason for *Sukkot*, which is to reflect on being thankful to God for His provisions and, as we count our blessings, to remember that Yeshua is the ultimate and most important provision for which we have to be thankful.