

Talmud for Today: A Series of Talmudic Readings for the Holidays

Sukkot: Reaching for the Heavens

The Symbolic Meaning of the Minimum Height of a Sukkah

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The opening Mishnah of tractate Sukkah details the maximum and minimum heights for building a valid sukkah. Amidst its extended analysis of these legal technicalities, the Talmud at various points highlights the symbolic meanings underlying the details of measurements and materials. The short section analyzed here stands out in this regard for its poetic cadence and inspiring brilliance as it infuses the dry letter of the law with profound spiritual significance. At the heart of this Talmudic section (*sugya*), which bridges the gap between halakha and aggada, is the conception of sukkah as sacred space wherein its dwellers can glimpse the Divine Presence.

Earlier sources from Tannaitic literature already connect the sukkah's symbolism with the Sanctuary and God's providential presence. For example, the Mishnah prescribes eating meals in the Sukkah in parallel with the sacrifices offered during the Sukkot pilgrimage in the Temple.¹ Rabbi Akiva explains the sukkah as a remembrance of the clouds of glory leading the Israelites in the desert.² Even earlier, the Dead Sea Scrolls describe the elders sitting in the sukkah in the Temple courtyard during the sacrificial offerings.³ Sukkot was the primary pilgrimage holiday making it the most fitting festival to connect to the symbolism of the Sanctuary. Especially after the destruction of the Temple, the Sukkah could be promoted as a small replacement for the function of the Sanctuary as a locus of God's presence.

This Bavli sugya builds upon earlier sources and conceptions to create a literarily structured and almost poetic meditation on the possibility of human connection with the divine realm. Let us allow the text to first speak for itself by beginning with the first Mishnah and proceeding to the Babylonian Talmud.

Mishnah Sukkah 1:1⁴

<i>Maximum height</i>	A sukkah that is more than twenty armlengths tall is invalid. But Rabbi Yehuda rules it valid.	סוכה שהיא גבוהה מעשרים אמה פסולה ור' יהודה מכשיר
<i>Minimum height</i>	If it is less than ten handbreadths tall,	ושאינה גבוהה עשרה טפחים
<i>Minimum walls</i>	or if it lacks three walls,	ושאין לה שלוש דפנות
<i>Minimum roofing</i>	or if its sun is greater than its shade, it is invalid.	ושחממתה מרובה מצילתה פסולה:

sukkah a booth or hut. Leviticus 23:42-43 commands living in this temporary dwelling during the fall festival as a historic remembrance: *You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God.*

twenty armlengths approximately 32 feet. A person sitting in a sukkah with such a high roof would not have the covering within their natural range of vision and so would not be continually aware of being present in the sukkah (see Bavli Sukkah 2a-b, which also includes other explanations). The Yerushalmi (Sukkah 41d, 1:1 and Eruvin 18b, 1:1) suggests that this maximum height derives from the height of the Temple which was also 20 armlengths high (Mishnah Middot 4:1). The latter derivation further supports the connection between the Sukkah and the Sanctuary encoded in the Bavli sugya analyzed below.

ten handbreadths approximately 30 inches, each handbreadth spanning the width of a fist. This is the standard height for a partition in various realms of halakha. The Talmuds derive this measurement as the minimum height of a sukkah from a comparison with the ark of the covenant, as we will see below.

three walls The Talmuds (Yerushalmi Sukkah 1:1, 52a; Bavli Sukkah 6b) derive the requirement for three walls from the three mentions of the word *sukkah* in Leviticus 23:42-43. Although not mentioned in the Talmud, it may also be relevant that the Mishkan had only three solid walls and an open entrance on the fourth side (Exodus 26:18-29).

sun is greater than its shade A sukkah is a hut that by definition must provide shade. The Talmuds (Yerushalmi Sukkah 52a, 1:1; Bavli Sukkah 2a-b, 6b) quote Isaiah 4:6: *It will*

be a hut (sukkah) for shade from heat by day. Roofing that allows in more sun than shade cannot be called a protective covering at all.

Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 4b-5a⁵

"ושאינה גבוהה עשרה טפחים"
מנא לך?⁶

[A] איתמר רב ורבי חנינה ורבי יוחנן—ורב חביבה מתני⁷ בכל סדר מועד כל כי האי זווא⁸ חלופי רבי יוחנן ומעייל רבי יונתן—ארון תשעה וכפרת טפח הרי כאן עשרה. וכתוב ונועדתי לך שם⁹ (שמות כה, כב).

[B] ותניא רבי יוסי אומר מעולם לא ירדה שכינה למטה ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום שנאמר השמים שמים ליי והארץ נתן לבני אדם (תהלים קטו, טז).

[1] ולא ירדה שכינה למטה?

והכתיב וירד יי על הר סיני (שמות יט, כ)

למעלה מעשרה טפחים

והכתיב ועמדו רגליו ביום ההוא על הר הזיתים (זכריה יד, ד)?

למעלה מעשרה טפחים

[2] ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום?

והכתיב ומשה עלה אל האלהים (שמות יט, ג)?

למטה מעשרה

והכתיב ויעל אליהו בסערה השמים (מלכים ב, ב, יא)?

למטה מעשרה

[3] והכתיב מאחז פני כסא פרשז עליו עננו (איוב כו, ט)? ואמ' ר' נחום¹⁰ מלמד שפרש שדי מזיו שכינתו ועננו

עליו.¹¹ מכל מקום מאחז פני כסא כתיב אלמא נקט ביה?¹²

דאישתרבב ליה כסא¹³ ונקט ביה

Question	“If it is less than ten handbreadths tall” - How do we know this?
<i>[A] Step 1 of the answer that ark and cover reach 10 handbreadths</i>	[A] It was said: Rav, Rabbi Hanina, and Rabbi Yohanan said—Rav Haviva taught that in the entire order of Festivals, whenever this pairing occurs, switch Rabbi Yohanan and insert Rabbi Yonatan—The ark is nine handbreadths and the ark-covering is one handbreadth, together making ten. And it is written, I will meet with you there (Exodus 25:22).
<i>[B] Step 2 of the answer that the boundary above the cover separates two realms</i>	[B] Furthermore, it was taught: Rabbi Yose says, the Divine Presence never descended below, and Moses and Elijah never ascended upon high, as Scripture states, The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man (Psalms 115:16).
<i>[1] Two challenges to [B] that God never descended</i>	<p>[1] Did the Divine Presence never descend below? But it is written, The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:20)? That was above ten handbreadths. But it is written, On that day, He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4)? That was above ten handbreadths.</p>
<i>[2] Two challenges to [B] that humans never ascended</i>	<p>[2] Did Moses and Elijah never ascend upon high? But it is written, Moses went up to God (Exodus 19:3)? That was below ten handbreadths. But it is written, Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11)? That was below ten handbreadths.</p>
<i>[3] One last challenge to [B], the closest a human ever came to Divine contact</i>	<p>[3] But it is written, He encloses the face of His throne, spreading His cloud over it (Job 26:9). And Rabbi Nahum said: This teaches that the Almighty spread of the glory of his Divine Presence and His cloud over him. In any case, it is written, He enclosed the face of His throne – therefore he held it? The throne was extended down to him and he held on to it.</p>

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insert Rabbi Yonatan—The ark is nine handbreadths and the ark-covering is one handbreadth, together making ten. And it is written, *I will meet with you there* (Exodus 25:22).

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But it is written, *The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai* (Exodus 19:20)?

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But it is written, *On that day, He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives* (Zechariah 14:4)?

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But it is written, *Moses went up to God* (Exodus 19:3)?

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But it is written, *Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind* (2 Kings 2:11)?

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[3] But it is written, *He encloses the face of His throne, spreading His cloud over it* (Job 26:9). And Rabbi Nahum said: This teaches that the Almighty spread of the glory of his Divine Presence and His cloud over him. In any case, it is written, *He enclosed the face of His throne* – therefore he held it?

The throne was extended down to him and he held on to it.

Rav, short for Rav Abba, was a first generation (early third century CE) Amora who taught in the Babylonian city Sura. Rabbi Hanina bar Hama lived around the same time and taught in Sepphoris. Rabbi Yohanan bar Nafha was a central figure in Tiberias whose long life allowed him to overlap the above sages and continue to teach into the second generation.

Rav Haviva was a sixth generation Amora in the fifth century CE and could not have been present together with the earlier Amoraim in this list. Rather, his mention here introduces a parenthetical remark that any traditions by the previously mentioned three sages should include Rabbi Yonatan instead of Rabbi Yohanan. Rabbi Yonatan ben Eleazar was a first generation Amora in the Land of Israel who focused on teaching *aggadah*.¹⁴

ark is nine handbreadths ¹⁵ Exodus 25:10 prescribes that the ark extend one and a half armlengths high. Each armlength (19 inches) consists of six handbreadths, making a total of nine handbreadths for the height of the ark.

ark-covering is one handbreadth Exodus 25:17 prescribes the width and depth of the ark-cover but not its height. Bavli Sukkah 5a-b, immediately following the current discussion, offers various derivations for this measurement. While that analysis considers the possibility that the ark-covering could be as thin as a sheet of metal, it ultimately concludes that it must have a face (Leviticus 16:14) like the face of the cherubs and of humans. The Talmud there (5b) points out that the cherubs, which are attached to the top of the ark-covering, are described as protecting (*sokhekhim*) over the ark (Exodus 25:20) and thus serve a parallel function to the *sekhakh* of the sukkah covering.¹⁶

meet with you The verse, which is more fully quoted in some manuscripts, reads: *I will meet with you there and I will speak to you from above the cover from between the two cherubim that are on top of the ark of the pact—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.* This demonstrates that the point of contact between God and Moses was just above the ark-cover.

Furthermore Rabbi Yose's tradition adds that not only is the ten-handbreadth height the point of divine communication, it is an absolute boundary between the upper and lower realms. Therefore, the height of ten handbreadths represents the boundary between domains and the roof of the sukkah separates the human realm in the sukkah from the Divine Presence above it. The view of Rabbi Yose also appears in Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael (Source #3).

Divine Presence *Shekhinah* is a nominal form derived from the verb meaning to dwell. The Bible describes God dwelling within the sanctuary, Zion, and the people of Israel (Exodus 25:8, 29:45, Numbers 5:3, Isaiah 8:18); The desert sanctuary is therefore called the *mishkan* (dwelling place). The term *shekhinah* is coined by the rabbis in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 6:5, Avot 3:2, 6) to refer to God's anthropomorphized indwelling and intimate relationship with human beings.¹⁷

heavens belong to the Lord The verse from Psalms paraphrases Genesis 1:28 where God grants dominion to humans over the earth. The Talmud learns that the world is divided into two separate realms: God in heaven and humans on earth. Neither may breach the border. This spatial analogy symbolizes the fundamental existential difference between mere mortals and the transcendent ineffability of the Divine, perhaps polemicizing against the Christian belief of incarnation. This verse teaches the same lesson in other midrashim cited at Source #3 and #4.

The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai While Exodus 19:20 says that God descended to the top of the mountain, the Bavli limits that descent to above the ten-handbreadth borderline, thus conforming to Psalms 115:16. Compare this response to that in Sources #3, #4, and #5 below.

The verses just before Exodus 19:20 describe God's descent in a fire causing a giant cloud of smoke. The Bible often depicts God's presence in the form of fire, smoke, and clouds,¹⁸

objects that exist but are massless, ethereal and uncontainable. Fire provides light and warmth but is also dangerous and powerful. Clouds provide shade and rain but also conceal and hide, thus paradoxically revealing the presence of God's hiddenness. The discussion of this midrash revolves around the ambiguity as to whether the fire and clouds themselves contain or manifest God's physical presence, or whether they merely accompany God's non-visible presence.

He will set His feet on the Mount of Olives Zechariah 14, the *Haftarah* reading for the first day of Sukkot (Bavli Megilah 31a), culminates with a prediction of an international pilgrimage to celebrate Sukkot. The chapter begins with God rising in battle against the nations of the world, standing as a warrior upon the Mount of Olives.¹⁹ God's descent upon the mountain causes it to split in two (verse 4), reminiscent of the quaking of Mount Sinai. This verse as well as Exodus 19:20 appear in Avot d'Rabbi Natan A 34 in a list of ten descents of the Divine Presence. See below Source #5.

Moses and Elijah The thesis that Moses and Elijah never ascended to heaven has a Tannaitic Source in the name of Rabbi Yose at Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, baHodesh 4, see Source #3. Other midrashim take for granted that Elijah ascended to heaven.²⁰

That was below ten handbreadths The Talmud maintains that Moses and Elijah remained below ten handbreadths from the ground even as they ascended to God on Mount Sinai and to heaven. This implausible response affirms that the Talmud presents this measurement not as a literal physical boundary but rather as a figuration of the spiritual distance between human and divine realms.

He enclosed the face of His throne Job 26 describes the unfathomable power of God in nature, leading some modern scholars to revocalize “כִּסֵּהּ - throne” as “כִּסְּהָ - full moon,” based on context. Thus, NRSV translates: *He covers the face of the full moon, and spread over it his cloud.* The Talmud, however, reads the word as throne as does the Masoretic vocalization and applies this verse to the experience of Moses at the Sinai theophany. Rabbi Nahum thus takes the cloud not as a concealing cover, but rather as a manifestation of Divine glory, which He extended down to Moses. This implies that the Divine Presence descended lower than the ten-handbreadth borderline in order to reach Moses. The implication from the second half of the verse is made explicitly in the first half of the verse if we take the subject of the verb enclosed (understood by the Talmud to mean grasped) to be not God but Moses, who took hold of God's throne.

Literary Analysis

The Mishnah legislates that the minimum height of a sukkah is ten handbreadths. This measurement is in fact the standard height throughout halakhic literature for something to be considered a valid wall or partition.²¹ Whereas the ten-handbreadth standard is

taken for granted in other legal realms,²² the Bavli's inquiry into its biblical source specifically in the context of the sukkah's height suggests a search for a deeper reason for this architectural detail.

The Bavli [A] answers the question with an early Amoraic tradition already cited in the Yerushalmi (see Source #2) that the Ark of the Covenant and its covering together made up ten handbreadths. Exodus 25:22 describes that height as the meeting place at which God prophetically communicates, between the cherubs just above the Ark covering. Significantly, Exodus 25:20 (cited in the Bavli's next response at Sukkah 5b) states: "The cherubs shall have their wings spread out shielding (*sokhekhim*) with their wings over the Ark-cover," using the same root as the word Sukkah and its roofing (*sekhakh*).²³ The teaching of Rabbi Yose [B] clinches the proof with Psalms 115:16, which describes heaven and earth as two separate realms. Since the purpose of the sukkah roof is to separate the human residents below from the heavens above, it too cannot be any lower than ten handbreadths.

We can hardly consider this a legal source considering that these verses do not speak about a sukkah, their relevance to minimum heights is far from clear, and one of these verses is from Psalms, which the Talmud does not consider a legal source.²⁴ Rather, the Talmud picks up a detail of the legal requirements of the *sukkah*, easily explained in terms of the general halakhic requirements for boundaries, and builds upon it an elaborate philosophical exposition about the spiritual significance of the sukkah. The *sukkah* reminds its dwellers of God's providence throughout the desert wanderings when the Israelites enjoyed His protective clouds of glory. The *sekhakh* and the shade it provides serve as a physical representation of that Divine Presence for those celebrating the spirit of the festival.

The discussion could end here, as does the Yerushalmi parallel. However, the citation of Rabbi Yose's application of Psalms 115:16 about the impenetrability of the two domains prompts the Bavli to deepen the analysis. Rabbi Yose's teaching helps resolve the opening question but also sets up a tension that links to the continuation of the Bavli sugya. If indeed the realms can never meet, then what hope is there to feel the divine presence in the *sukkah*. If the goal of this festival is to greet God and appreciate His providence, the *sekhakh* serves only as a barrier to that achievement.

Sections [1] and [2] challenge Rabbi Yose's statement and thereby attempt to pierce through that boundary to find some path to a Divine encounter. First, the Talmud sets forth two proofs that God did and will descend to earth, only to be rebuffed that those descents come close but ultimately stop at the border. Second, the Talmud knocks in the other direction to try and break through from below. The two greatest exemplars of humans who reached divine heights, Moses and Elijah must surely have transcended to the divine realm. But they too are put in their place, below ten handbreadths. Obviously, this spatial marker only symbolizes the spiritual divide between humble human beings and the majesty of the cosmic Creator.

We are nearly ready to give up, resigned to reside in separate domains that can never meet. However, one last attempt succeeds. For a single moment at Sinai, the Divine throne stretched down just enough for Moses to grab hold of it and experience a direct experience of God's protective glory. Reading this optimistic and nearly mystical conclusion back into the analysis of the sukkah's architecture, we learn that the *sekhakh* is not an absolute barrier but a porous one. The tiny cracks between the branches leave open the faintest hope to glimpse the Divine Presence.

The Talmud constructs the sukkah such that its *sekhakh* roofing becomes its primary defining feature.²⁵ The *sekhakh* has unique requirements that it be made of natural raw materials and must provide shade, but it also must be porous enough to allow rain and ideally a small amount of light to pass through.²⁶ Its dwellers are at once protected but also vulnerable. The *sekhakh* hides the heavens and blocks access to the upper realms but still permits a small glimpse of the light of the sun. This dialectical tension within the architecture of the *sukkah* plays out in the Talmudic dialogue.

The sense of isolation and removal from the divine realm that runs through most of the sugya would have resonated during the post-biblical age when people could only read and dream about the great miracles of the Bible and the direct communication given to the prophets. For these generations, the border between the heavenly and earthly realms surely felt closed with no possibility of passage. Nevertheless, sitting in the Sanctuary-inspired space of the sukkah and peering up at the *sekhakh* offers the slightest glimpse of the Divine providence pushing sunlight through the dark shadows, and promising rain, sustenance and life for the upcoming season.

Gershom Scholem once wrote: "In the tension between the two aims – the insistence on the purity of the monotheistic idea on the one side, and on the vitality of faith on the other – is comprised the history of Israel's religion."²⁷ This tension forms the skeleton of this short but profound sugya, which draws out the symbolic experience of the dweller in the sukkah as an annual playing out of that spiritual yearning to connect to that which is above us, even while recognizing our limitations from ever achieving the (nearly) impossible goal of grasping the Divine throne.

Compositional Analysis

The opening question as well as parts [A] and [B] have a close parallel in the Yerushalmi (Source #2). Both cite Exodus 25:22 to teach that the point just above the ark-covering is the meeting place for prophecy and both include the calculation of nine handbreadths for the ark plus one for the covering. However, there remains a significant difference. The Yerushalmi in the name of Resh Lakish derives from Exodus 20:19 only that God speaks from the realm of heaven. The Bavli instead incorporates Rabbi Yose's reading of Psalms 115:16 [B] to make a broader statement about the absolute separation between the two realms. The Bavli also does not make explicit the relevance of this point to the proof for

the limit of ten handbreadths. Rather, the Bavli editors, who likely had before them the Yerushalmi sugya or something similar to it, incorporate Rabbi Yose in order to set up a pivot to the next part of the discussion about the possibility of penetrating that barrier.

Rabbi Yose's statement derives from the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael (Source #3) where his opinion argues with another view that allows for slightly more interaction with the divine domain, which bends down to the top of the mountain. Rabbi Yose sets out an ironclad rule that the divine and human realms remain forever apart and impenetrable, the borderline symbolized by a ten-handbreadth measurement above the ground. Other contrasting sources to this Talmud (see Source #4) echo a primordial split between the upper and lower realms, however they enthusiastically admit a fundamental change in the spiritual order that occurred at the Revelation of Sinai. Avot d'Rabbi Natan A 34 (Source #5) lists ten occurrences of the Shekhina descending to the world, among them are the two verses in [1] that this sugya cites to challenge Rabbi Yose's thesis. This Talmud, in contrast, makes a great effort to defend Rabbi Yose's proposition that the two worlds never did (with one possible exception) and never could cross over in either direction.

The sugya, in its balanced structure, presents two challenges from each direction and successfully refutes each one. Just as we think we have concluded, one last challenge breaks the even balance and proves that there was indeed a single moment when, not God Himself, but His throne elongated, as in a Lorenz transformation, and managed to push through into the human dimension just enough for Moses to grab hold. This exceptional event is a one-time occurrence (unlike the fundamental change in Source #4 or the repeated descents in Source #5). It is barely even a break, just an extending from one boundary to the other for a single point of contact, similar to the intimate communication described in Source #3's anonymous opinion.

This sugya furnishes the first of three responses for the source of the minimum height of a sukkah in the continuation of the Bavli. The second response quite literally builds on the first to derive the ten handbreadths from the airspace between the ark cover and the outstretched wings of the cherubs, based on Exodus 25:20. These two responses are linked through a discussion of the height of the ark cover and the suggestion that it is one handbreadth high like the face of the cherubs. The calculation of ten handbreadths for the ark and its cover is not only a prerequisite for the calculation of the second response, but also sets up the theological foundation for the sukkah's providential symbolism. The third and final response, that these measurements are simply an oral tradition from Sinai with no textual basis, may have been the simple legal explanation that the sages assumed all along. However, the editors of the sugya wanted to first introduce the aggadic significance of the sukkah as a location to experience the divine Presence like cherub's wings protecting (*sokhekhim*) its inhabitants.

The comparison of this sugya to its sources, parallel texts, and context within the Bavli discussion all conjoin to confirm the conclusions of the literary analysis. The editors

consciously and carefully craft each line of the sugya so as to set up a tension regarding the impossibility of interaction with the divine realm, only to resolve it as a remote but real possibility. The Bavli combines the Yerushalmi discussion of ten handbreadths with the Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael as well as echoes of other midrashim about the Sinaitic theophany. It can thus incorporate the fundamental tension and question as to the extent of divine providence and human transcendence into the symbolism of the *sukkah*. The result is a magnificent, artistic mosaic made up of various sources to create a profound meditation on human striving to encounter the Divine through the ritual practices of the festival.

Sources and Parallel Texts

Source #1 – Fragment from the Cairo Genizah – Cambridge University Library T-S Misc 26.19

This response by Sherira Gaon (906-1006CE) records and explains the opening biographical note in Bavli Sukkah 4b. Fascinatingly, this response is written in the margin of a magical text listing ten criteria for deciding propitious times for given activities.

לרבנו שרירא גאון ובנו רבנו [האי נ'ע] שהשיבו למר יהודה בן יוסף נ'ע ואשר אמרו מאי טעמא מה . . . חביבא [בכולי] סדר מועד [כל כין] האי זווא חלופי ר' יוחנן מעייל ר' יונתן. הכין הוה שמייע ליה לרב חביבא והכין אגמרוי וכי דמשמע הוה מתני.

Written by our Rabbi Sherira Gaon and his son [Hayye, his soul in Eden] who responded to master Yehudah the son of Yosef, his soul in Eden: That which they said, what is the reason for ... Haviva [in the entire] Order of Festivals [anytime] this pairing appears, replace Rabbi Yohanan and insert Rabbi Yonatan. This is how Rav Haviva heard the tradition and this is how he taught it. Just as he heard it, so he repeated it.



Source #2 – Talmud Yerushalmi Sukkah 1:1, 51d (ms. Leiden)

The Talmud Yerushalmi inquires into the source that the height of ten handbreadths serves to separate vertically between domains. This sugya also appears verbatim at Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:1, 2d, where it is more germane to the context there that a raised platform within the public domain is considered a private domain if it is ten handbreadths high.²⁸ Although it seems that this derivation was first applied to the laws of domains on Shabbat in the Yerushalmi, the Bavli sugya incorporates it as an integral part of the symbolism of the Sukkah.²⁹

The first verse cited by Rabbi Abbahu demonstrates that God speaks from above the ark-covering. The second verse proves that God speaks from heaven, a principle applied not only to the original context at Sinai but to the continuing communication in the Sanctuary. Therefore, the ten-handbreadth height of the ark and its covering serve as a source for the general borderline between upper and lower domains.

The Yerushalmi does not make explicit the symbolic meaning of the sukkah as holy space. Nor does it go into detail about communicating and passing between the separate boundaries, the question at the heart of the Bavli. Nevertheless, the Yerushalmi establishes the fundamental building blocks upon which the Bavli elaborates and fleshes out the spiritual symbolism of the sukkah and the deep tensions involved in relating human and divine realms.

מניין למעלה מעשרה שהיא רשות אחרת?
רבי אבהו בשם רבי שמעון בן לקיש ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת (שמות כה, כב).
וכתיב אתם ראיתם כי מן השמים דברתי עמכם (שמות כ, יט) מה דיבור שנאמר להלן רשות אחרת
אף דיבור שנאמר כאן רשות אחרת
וארון לא תשעה טפחים הוא? דבית רבי ינאי אמרין וכפורת טפח

What is the source that above ten handbreadths is considered a separate domain?

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: *I will meet with you there and I will speak to you from above the cover* (Exodus 25:22). It is also written, *You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens* (Exodus 20:19). Just as the speech mentioned there is from a separate domain, so too the speech mentioned here is from a separate domain. But isn't the ark only nine handbreadths? The school of Rabbi Yanai say, the ark covering is one handbreadth.

Source #3 - Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishamel, Yitro, baHodesh 4

This Tannaitic midrash on Exodus 19:20 presents two opposing views about the Sinaitic theophany. The opening thesis already rejects a literal reading of God's movement: He did not descend upon the entire mountain but only to its top, and even there He did not cross the boundary to earth but spoke only from the heavens. The first view allows for the heavens themselves to arch downwards until the Divine Glory rests on the top of the mountain. That is how God could descend to the top of the mountain without leaving the realm of heaven. The second view of Rabbi Yose rejects even that bending of the upper realms. Instead, he interprets the verse to mean that God merely summoned Moses in a voice that was heard coming from the top of the mountain, as if God were at its top.

The sugya in Sukkah 4b-5a [B] cites the opinion of Rabbi Yose and defends his position through two challenges [1] and [2]. It concludes, however, with a thesis [3] similar to the first opinion of the Mekhilta here and even further allows for a possible one-time breach between the two realms. The editor of the Bavli sugya drew upon this midrash or a version similar to it as source material, adding to it and modifying it according to the needs of the message of the sugya.

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל יתרו - מסכתא דבחדש פרשה ד

וירד ה' על הר סיני. שומע אני על כלו, תלמוד לומר אל ראש ההר. יכול ממש שירד הכבוד והוצע על הר סיני, תלמוד לומר כי מן השמים דברתי עמכם. מלמד שהרכין הקדוש ברוך הוא שמים התחתונים ושמי השמים העליונים על ראש ההר, וירד הכבוד והוצע על גב הר סיני, כאדם שהוא מציע את הכר על ראש המטה, וכאדם שהוא מדבר מעל גבי הכר, שנאמר כקדוח אש המסים מים תבעה אש להודיע שמך לצריך מפניך גוים ירגזו (ישעיה סד, א). וכן הוא אומר, בעשותך נראות לו נקוה מפניך הרים נזולו (שם סד, ב). רבי יוסי אומר, הרי הוא אומר, השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם (תהלים קטו, טז), לא עלה משה ואליהו למעלה ולא ירד הכבוד למטה. אלא מלמד, שאמר המקום למשה הריני קורא לך מראש ההר ואתה עולה, שנאמר ויקרא ה' למשה.

And the Lord Came Down upon Mount Sinai. I might understand this to mean upon the entire mountain. Scripture therefore teaches: *To the top of the mount* (Exodus 19:20).

One might think that the Glory literally descended from heaven and spread out on Mount Sinai. Therefore Scripture teaches: *I spoke to you from the very heavens* (Ex. 20.19); this teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, bent down the lower heavens and the upper heavens of heaven, lowering them to the top of the mountain, and thus the Glory descended and spread out upon Mount Sinai as a person who spreads a cushion at the head of a bed and like a person who speaks while on the cushion.³⁰ As Scripture states: *As when fire kindles brushwood, and fire makes water boil, You make Your name known to Your adversaries, so that nations will tremble at Your Presence* (Isaiah 64:1). Likewise it states: *When You did wonders we did not expect, [You came down and] mountains quaked before You* (ibid., 62:2).³¹

R. Yose says: Behold, it states: *The heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth He gave over to man* (Psalms 115:16). Neither Moses nor Elijah ever went up to heaven, nor did the Glory ever come down to earth. Scripture merely teaches that God said to Moses, "Behold, I am going to call you from the top of the mountain and you will come up," as it is said: *The Lord called Moses* (v. 20).

Source #4 – Midrash on God Breaking Boundaries

The prooftexts and theme of Bavli Sukkah 4b-5a finds a parallel in a midrash about the revelation at Sinai. The midrash appears in the Amoraic work, Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, dating from the 5-6th cent. CE, as well as in the later midrashim, Exodus Rabbah and Tanhuma. However, the clearest and most complete version of the midrash is recorded by Rabbi Isaac Arama in his commentary *Akedat Yishak*.³² This midrash may have been available as source material for the aggadah in Bavli Sukkah 4b. In all versions, Psalm 115:16 proves that the world began with two separate realms of heaven and earth that may not meet. In the Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, the separation is fundamentally undone at the revelation of Sinai and going forward; whereas in the Bavli, there is only the slightest

breach at the border of the two realms just at the moment of the revelation to Moses. The Bavli minimizes the possibility of the descent of the Divine Presence and emphasizes the impenetrable border between the two worlds. This strict separation fits better with the lived experience of the Rabbis in an age lacking prophets and miracles. It furthermore reflects the architecture of the sukkah and the *sekhakh* covering as the liminal space between the divine and human realms. The Bavli editors thus seem to have reworked the earlier midrash from the land of Israel to suit the symbolic message of the sukkah as understood in the Bavli sugya.

Pesikta d’Rav Kahana, 12:11 (Mandelbaum, 212; Braude, 236-7)

א"ר אבא בר יודן למלך שהיה משיא את בתו וקבע קרטיסין בים ואמר, בני רומי לא יחתון לסוריא, ובני סוריא לא יסקון לרומי, וכיון שהשיא את בתו התיר קרטיסין
 כך עד שלא ניתנה התורה, השמים שמים ל"י והארץ וג' (תהלים קטו, טז), אבל משניתנה תורה מן השמים, ומשה עלה אל האלהים (שמות יט, ג), וירד ל"י על הר סיני (שמות יט, כ).

Rabbi Aba the son of Yudan said: A parable of a king who was marrying off his daughter. He had issued a decree across the sea and said, “The people of Rome may not descend to Syria and the people of Syria may not ascend to Rome.” When he wanted to marry off his daughter, he permitted the decree.

So too, until the Torah was given, *The heavens belong to YHVH, but the earth He gave over to man* (Psalms 115:16). However, once the Torah was given from the heavens, *Moses went up to God* (Exodus 19:3) and *YHVH came down upon Mount Sinai* (Exodus 19:20).

Rabbi Yishak Arama (1420-1494), Akedat Yishak Exodus 44, Yitro

במדרש מאי דכתיב (תהלים קלה, ו) כל אשר חפץ ה' עשה בשמים ובארץ. משל למלך שגזר על מלכותו בני רומי לא ירדו לסוריא ובני סוריא לא יעלו לרומי. לימים בקש המלך לישא אשה מסוריא עמד וביטל הגזרה ואמר מכאן ואילך ירדו בני רומי לסוריא ויעלו בני סוריא לרומי. ואני אתחיל. כך כשברא הק"ב את עולמו בתחלה אמר (שם קטו, טו) השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני האדם וכשבקש ליתן תורה לעמו ישראל אמר מכאן ואילך יעלו תחתונים אל עליונים וירדו העליונים אל התחתונים ואני ארד תחלה דכתיב וירד ה' על הר סיני (שמות יט, כ) ואח"כ ואל משה אמר עלה אל ה' אתה ואהרן נדב ואביהוא וע' איש מזקני ישראל (שמות כד, א). הוי כל אשר חפץ ה' עשה בשמים ובארץ:

What is the meaning of the verse: *Whatever YHVH desires He does in heaven and earth* (Psalms 135:6)? A parable to a king who decreed on his kingdom that those in Rome may not descend to Syria and the Syrians may not ascend to Rome. After some time, the king wanted to marry a woman from Syria. He arose and cancelled the decree and said, “From now on those in Rome may descend to Syria and those in Syria may ascend to Rome. I will be the first.”

So too when the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, he first said, “The heavens belong to YHVH and the earth He gave to mankind” (Psalms

115:16). When He wanted to give the Torah to His nation Israel, He said, “From now on the lower realm may ascend to the upper realm and the upper realms may descend to the lower realm. I will descend first.” As it is written, *YHVH came down upon Mount Sinai* (Exodus 19:20). And after that, *He said to Moses, “Come up to YHVH, with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel* (Exodus 24:1). Thus, *Whatever YHVH desires He does in heaven and earth, in the seas and all the depths.*

Source #5 – Avot d’Rabbi Natan A 34

This Amoraic source assumes God descended to the terrestrial world many times. It takes this as a simple reading of the verses without any hint at the pushback expressed in the Bavli sugya because of philosophical or exegetical considerations. Significantly, the two verses cited in the Bavli sugya [B][1] to prove that God descended to earth are both listed in Avot d’Rabbi Natan.

עשר ירידות ירדה שכינה על העולם
 אחת בגן עדן שנאמר וישמעו את קול אלהים מתהלך בגן (בראשית ג, ח).
 ואחת בדור המגדל שנאמר וירד ה' לראות את העיר ואת המגדל (שם יא, ה).
 ואחת בסדום שנאמר ארדה נא ואראה הכצעקתה הבאה אלי (שם יח, כא).
 ואחת במצרים שנאמר וארד להצילו מיד מצרים (שמות ג, ח).
 ואחת על הים שנאמר ויט שמים וירד (שמואל ב' כב, י).
 ואחת בסיני שנאמר וירד ה' על הר סיני (שמות יט, כ).
 ואחת בעמוד הענן שנאמר וירד ה' בענן (במדבר יא, כה).
 ואחת במקדש שנאמר השער הזה יהיה סגור ולא יפתח וגו' כי ה' אלהי ישראל בא בו (יחזקאל מד, ב).
 ואחת שעתידה להיות בימי גוג ומגוג שנאמר ועמדו רגליו ביום ההוא על הר הזיתים (זכריה יד, ד):

Ten descents did the Shekinah make down to the world:

Once in the Garden of Eden, as it is said, *And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden* (Genesis 3:8).

Once in the generation of the Tower of Babel, as it is said, *And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower* (Genesis 11:5).

Once in Sodom, as it is said, *I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me* (Genesis 18:21).

Once in Egypt, as it is said, *And I came down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians* (Exodus 3:8).

Once on the Red Sea, as it is said, *He bowed the heavens also, and came down* (2 Samuel 22:10).

Once at Sinai, as it is said, *And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai* (Exodus 19:20).

Once in the pillar of the cloud, as it is said, *And the Lord came down in a cloud* (Numbers 11:25).

Once in the Temple, as it is said, *This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened . . . for the Lord, the God of Israel hath entered in by it* (Ezekiel 44:2).

And one will take place in the future, in the days of Gog and Magog, as it is said, *And His feet shall stand that day upon the mount of Olives* (Zechariah 14:4).³³

¹ Compare Mishnah Sukkah 2:6 with Mishnah Hagiga 1:6. See Yakov Nagen, *Water, Creation, and Immanence: The Philosophy of the Festival of Sukkot* (Otniel: Gilui, Yeshivat Otniel, 2008), 33; and idem, *The Soul of the Mishnah* (Dvir, 2016), 228-32. The analysis in this chapter is heavily indebted to Nagen, *Water*, 44-52.

² Sifra `Emor 17:11. See parallel at Bavli Sukkah 11b and analysis at Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot in the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 239-243.

³ Temple Scroll 42:3-17. Rubenstein, *ibid.*, 65.

⁴ Text and vocalization follow manuscript Kaufmann, which is considered the most reliable text of the Mishnah. It was written in 12th century Italy making it the earliest complete manuscript of the Mishnah.

⁵ This section of Bavli Sukkah comes to us in several versions. One torn Geniza fragment exists for this section of Talmud in the Cambridge University Library T-S F2(2).49. Manuscripts (abbreviated to ms. and plural mss.) Oxford 2677 (Heb. e. 51; Sussman 858) and JTS Rab. 218 (EMC 270; Sussman 5966) are both Yemenite manuscripts written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. Although written relatively recently, these manuscripts generally preserve a highly authentic text.

Mss. Munich 140 (Sussman 7206) and JTS Rab. 1608 (ENA 850; Sussman 6045) are both Sephardic from the 13th century. Ms. Oxford 366 (Opp. Add. Fol.23; Sussman 627) was written in Provence from the 14-15th century.

Manuscripts from Ashkenaz are ms. British Library 400 (Harley 508; Sussman 1059) dating back to 11-12th century, ms. Vatican 134 (Sussman 7407) from the 13th century, and ms. Munich 95, the only extant complete manuscript of the Bavli written in 1342.

The earliest printed edition is from Soncino Press in Pesaro 1515. Next is Daniel Bomberg's complete printing of the Bavli in Venice 1521. We add a comparison to the Vilna edition in common use today both in print and online at Sefaria.org.

The text presented here follows the best exemplars for each variant but with strong preference for the Geniza fragment where available, and the Yemenite and Sephardic versions. Only major variants are cited in the notes and readers can consult the manuscript charts at The Friedberg Project for Talmud Bavli Variants at bavli.genizah.org and www.lieberman-institute.com for further details. For a full description and analysis of the manuscripts see Rabin Shushtri, "The Text of Tractate Sukka in the Babylonian Talmud," [Hebrew] (PhD thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2009).

⁶ מנא הני מילי: following mss. Munich 140 and JTS 1608. Oxford 366 reads מנא הני מילי. Mss. British Library 400, Vatican 134, Munich 95, and printed editions read מנא הני מילי. Mss. Oxford 2677 and JTS 218 lack these words altogether, on which see Yakov Nagen, *Sukkot in Rabbinic Thought: Motifs in the Halacha of Sukkot in Talmudic Literature*, PhD Diss. (2003), 80 n. 47.

⁷ מתני: following mss. Oxford 2677, JTS 218 and JTS 1608. Mss. Munich 140, British Library 400, Munich 95, Oxford 366, Vatican 134 and all printed editions read מתני. מתני is also recorded in the parallel at Megilah 7a mss. Munich 140 and probably British Museum 400; see also *Dikduke Sofrim* to Shabbat 54b.

⁸ זוהא: following Geniza fragment CUL T-S F2(2).49; citation by Sherira Gaon (Source #1); Oxford 2677 similarly reads זוהא; and ms. JTS 218 reads זו. Mss. Munich 140; JTS 1608, Oxford 366, British Library 400, Munich 95, and printed editions read זוהא. Both words have the same meaning of "pair."

⁹ Following mss. Munich 140 and JTS 1608. Ms. Munich 95 reads until ודברתי וגו'. Mss. British Library 400 and ed. Venice read until הכפורת. Mss. Oxford 2677 and JTS 218 continue the verse until העדות. Eds. Pesaro and Venice misquote the verse and read ונועדתי בתוך בני ישראל ודברתי לך שם. הכפורת.

¹⁰ נהורם: so mss. Oxford 2677, JTS 218, Munich 140, British Library 400, and Rabenu Hananel. Ms. Munich 95 and printed editions read תנהורם. Ms. JTS 1608 reads הנהני. Bavli Shabbat 88b cites this same tradition in the name of Rabbi Nahum.

¹¹ Ed. Vilna inserts here למטה מעשרה, adding an answer to which the next line responds with a new question. However, all other witnesses omit these words so that Rabbi Nahum's statement is the first part of one extended question.

¹² מכל מקום...נקט ביה: These words, which serve to clarify the focus of the questions, are present in Geniza fragment CUL T-S F2(2).49, mss. JTS 1608, Munich 140, Oxford 366, Vatican 134, and printed editions. These words do not appear in mss. Oxford 2677, JTS 218, British Library 400, and Munich 95.

¹³ Following mss Oxford 2677, JTS 218, Munich 140, and British Library 400. Mss. Munich 95, JTS 1608, eds. Pesaro, Venice, and Vilna insert עד עשרה.

¹⁴ This interpretation follows Sherira Gaon in a Geniza fragment responding to a question about this line. See Source #1; and Israel Lewi, Introduction to Commentary to Yerushalmi Nezikin, *Netuim* 5, 1999, 89-99, n. 22 (translation from German); and Hanokh Albeck, *Mavo la-Talmudim* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1987), 445 n. 467. Rashi and Tosafot at Shabbat 54b, “Rav” comment that all four Amoraim taught this statement, assuming a reading of מתנו, see manuscript variants (the citation in Tosafot in Ed. Vilna strangely reads מתני, though eds. Soncino and Venice read מתנו).

¹⁵ This statement is cited as a baraita at Bavli Sanhedrin 7b, also in conjunction with Exodus 25:22. This statement is introduced by, “the master said,” at Bavli Shabbat 92a and Eruvin 4b. See also Talmud Yerushalmi Sukkah 1:1, 51d = Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:1, 2d for a similar statement in the name of the school of Rabbi Yannai as well the same measurement mentioned at Bavli Niddah 26b. See further below n. 22.

¹⁶ This insight can explain why for the ark’s height, the one handbreadth thickness of the ark-covering is included in the total to make ten handbreadths, while in the sukkah the space below the covering must be ten handbreadths and the *sekhakh* lay above the walls. In both cases the protective item, the cherub or the *sekhakh*, rests just above the ten handbreadth height.

¹⁷ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 37-65; and “Shekhinah,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 18 (2007): 440-66.

¹⁸ Exodus 19:18; Genesis 15:17; Exodus 3:2, 13:21-22, 24:16-18, 40:38; Numbers 9:15-16, 14:14; Deuteronomy 4:24, 9:3. See analysis of this theme in the Bible and in midrash at Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot*, 243-260.

¹⁹ See further analysis at Michael Fishbane, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarat* (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 2002), 399-404.

²⁰ Pesikta d’Rav Kahana 1, 4 (Mandelbaum, 9), which also cites Exodus 19:20 as an example of God descending; Exodus Rabbah, Va’era 8:1; Numbers Rabbah, Naso 12:11 and 14:3; Bavli Eruvin 43a-b.

²¹ Mishnah Kilayim 2:8, 4:3, 4:7, 6:1-2; Shev’it 3:6; Shabbat 11:3; Eruvin 1:6, 9, 2:1, 4, 5, 7:5, 8:3, 6, 8, 10:7, 9; Baba Batra 3:5; 4:1; Middot 2:3; and Nega’im 13:12. See also David Kraemer, *Rabbinic Judaism: Space and Place* (New York, Routledge: 2016), 88.

²² The Bavli has a parallel discussion at Shabbat 92a and Eruvin 4b; however, those discussions are likely secondary to this one in Bavli Sukkah 4b (see Tosafot to “*asarah tefahim menalan*”). That Bavli Sukkah 4b applies the proof from the Ark directly to the Sukkah, and not general partitions, can be demonstrated by several details: (1) the question in the Bavli does not seek the source that ten handbreadths is a separate domain as in the Yerushalmi, but rather simply, “how do we know this,” referencing the law of Mishnah Sukkah; (2) the inclusion in the ensuing discussion of Zechariah 14:4, which speaks about Sukkot; (3) the full sugya appears only in Bavli Sukkah while Bavli Shabbat 92a and Eruvin 4b cite only a snippet of the sugya with the formula, “the master taught,” typical of citation from elsewhere; and (4) the continuation of the Bavli, which eagerly seeks a source for the penetration of the upper and lower boundaries, is not relevant to the technical height of partitions for Sabbath boundaries, but significantly highlights the symbolic liminality of the *sekhakh*. The Yerushalmi’s inquiry for the source of ten handbreadths, by contrast, is likely primary in the context of Sabbath domains, on which see further below Source #2.

²³ The continuation of the Talmud focuses on this verse in its second source for ten handbreadths, but this first response in the Talmud already seems to have it in mind as it leads up to the second response. See further below in compositional analysis and Nagen, *Water, Creation, and Immanence*, 50.

²⁴ See Assaf Rosen-Zvi, “Even Though there Is No Proof to the Matter, there is an Indication of the Matter’: The Meaning, Character and Significance of the Phrase in Tannaitic Literature,” *Tarbiz* 78 (2009), 323-44.

²⁵ Rubenstein, *History of Sukkot*, 260-270.

²⁶ See Mishnah Sukkah 2:2, 9.

²⁷ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, p. 38.

²⁸ See Nagen, *Water, Creation, and Immanence*, 73 n. 42, citing Israel Burgansky, “The Babylonian Talmud Tractate of Sukkah: Its Sources and Methods of Compilation” [Hebrew] (Ph.D. thesis, Bar Ilan University, 1979), p. 74.

²⁹ See above n. 22.

³⁰ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah from Heaven in the Speculum of the Generations* [Hebrew] (New York: Soncino, 1962), 192.

³¹ See Genesis Rabbah 4 for a more detailed elaboration of this imagery.

³² The parable is based on Roman law and historical events, though molded to fit the literary context of the midrash. Under Roman law, only two Roman citizens and those granted the right of *conubium* could officially contract a legal marriage called *justum matrimonium*. Marriage between citizens and non-citizens was called *matrimonium injustum* with legal consequences for the status of the children and inheritance. This regulation was relaxed over time and became obsolete in 212CE when Caracalla granted citizenship to all free men in the Empire under the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. Significantly, Caracalla’s parents were the Emperor Severus and the Syrian-born Julia Domina. Although her father was a citizen and Severus married her before he became emperor, their marriage may still have inspired the marriage between an emperor and a Syrian in the parable. The theme of a king permitting himself to violate his own law so he could marry an otherwise forbidden relation is also reflected in Julia’s rumored advice to her son: “If you wish, you may; are you not aware that you are the emperor and that you make the laws and do not receive them?” (*Historia Augusta*, *The Life of Antoninus Caracalla*, 10, 2 [Loeb edition vol. 2 p. 27]). See further at Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1942), 10-12; David Cherry, “The Minician Law: Marriage and the Roman Citizenship,” *Phoenix* 44 (1990), pp. 244-266; and Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 294.

³³ Translation from Judah Goldin, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Natan* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955), 140-1, with slight modification.