

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Sukkot, or Tabernacles, is the most joyous of all the festivals. We call it the 'season of our rejoicing'. And like Pesach much of the celebration lies in the preparation. For a week, we leave the security of our houses and live in huts or booths to remind us of the tabernacles in which the Israelites sheltered during the forty years of wandering on their way to the promised land. For several days beforehand - beginning immediately after the Day of Atonement - Jewish families become teams of builders, putting up the fragile structure, roofing it with leaves, and decorating it so that it becomes a temporary home where we eat and study and welcome guests.

There is no more potent symbol of Jewish history than the sukkah, the temporary dwelling. For that, for the greater part of four thousand years, is where Jews lived. From the time of Abraham, we have travelled towards the land of Israel. But we have been destined to live there all too briefly. Instead our story has been one of exiles and dispersions, as if wandering in the Wilderness was not the fate of Moses' generation alone but a recurring theme of Jewish life. In the Middle Ages alone, Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, Cologne in 1424, Bavaria in 1442, Milan in 1489 and most traumatically from Spain in 1492. A century ago the wave of pogroms in Eastern Europe sent millions of Jews into flight to the West, and these great migrations continue even today among the Jews of the former Soviet Union. Jewish history reads like a vast continuation of the stages of the Israelites' journey in the thirty-second chapter of the book of Numbers: 'They travelled . . . and they encamped . . . They travelled . . . and they encamped.' The very name *ivri*, or Hebrew, means one who wanders from place to place. More than most, Jews have known insecurity, whether in the land of Israel or elsewhere. Too often home turned out to be no more than a temporary dwelling, a sukkah.

Yet with its genius for the unexpected, Judaism declared Sukkot to be not a time of sadness but the 'season of our rejoicing'. For the tabernacle in all its vulnerability symbolises faith: the faith of a people who set out long ago on a risk-laden journey across a desert of space and time with no more protection than the sheltering divine presence. Sitting in the sukkah

underneath its canopy of leaves I often think of my ancestors and their wanderings across Europe in search of safety, and I begin to understand how faith was their only home. It was fragile, chillingly exposed to the storms of prejudice and hate. But it proved stronger than empires. Their faith survived. The Jewish people has outlived all its persecutors.

At the end of his *History of the Jews* Paul Johnson wrote: The Jews were not just innovators. They were also exemplars and epitomisers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form . . . The Jews were the emblem of homeless and vulnerable humanity. But is not the whole earth no more than a temporary transit camp?

Those words go to the heart of Sukkot. To know that life is full of risk and yet to affirm it, to sense the full insecurity of the human situation and yet to rejoice: this, for me, is the essence of faith. Judaism is no comforting illusion that all is well in this dark world. It is instead the courage to celebrate in the midst of uncertainty and to rejoice even in the transitory shelter of the tabernacle, the Jewish symbol of home.



No other festival brings us so closely into contact with nature as does Sukkot. It is not merely living in the tabernacle that exposes us to the sun, the wind and the rain. It is also the other ritual of Sukkot, the 'four kinds'. The Torah commands us to 'take the fruit of the goodly tree. (the etrog or citron), branches of palm trees (the lulav), boughs of leafy trees (hadassim) and willows of the brook (aravot), and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for seven days' (Leviticus 23:40). These fruits of nature form a central part of the synagogue service. We hold and wave them during Hallel, the psalms of praise, and proceed around the synagogue holding them and chanting the special prayers called Hoshanot, hosannas, with their refrain, 'Help us, please, O Lord'.

Judaism has a complicated relationship with nature. While other ancient peoples identified gods with the forces of nature, the Hebrew Bible spoke of the one G-d who stood above nature, bringing it into being and establishing its laws and boundaries. It was a huge revolution of thought. G-d was not in but above; not immanent but transcendent. Ultimate reality was not to be found in the contending elements of the natural

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world. Instead it lay in something beyond, in the Creator, Ruler and Judge of all things. One creation alone - humanity - was destined to experience the tension between the natural and supernatural. We were and are, as the Bible puts it, a mixture of dust of the earth and the breath of G-d (Genesis 2:7).

It took an outsider and one who was deeply unsympathetic to Judaism to see what this entailed. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of Jews that 'they made of themselves an antithesis to natural conditions - they inverted religion, religious worship, morality, history, psychology, one after the other in an irreparable way into the contradiction of their natural values.' He added: 'For precisely this reason the Jews are the most fateful nation in world history.' He was correct, for Judaism represents the polar opposite of what he believed in: justice as against power, right instead of might, reverence rather than domination, compassion not control. The state of nature is a war of all against all. It is not where we find G-d or grace. In nature the weak are preyed on by the strong. In the Torah the strong have responsibilities to the weak. The ethics of Nietzsche and the Hebrew Bible are stark alternatives, and much of human civilisation was and continues to be the story of the conflict between them.

So it is no accident that Sukkot, the festival of nature, is built around the idea of rain. The 'four kinds' are plants which need rain to grow. In Temple times Sukkot was marked by an elaborate 'water drawing' ceremony, for at this time of the year, according to rabbinic teaching, 'the rainfall of the world is judged'. And in a remarkable speech at the end of his life, Moses explains to the Israelites why rain will be important to them in the years to come. Until now he has spoken of the promised land as a 'land flowing with milk and honey'. Now, for the first time, he explains that its fertility is not so simple. It depends not on rivers but on rain: The land you are about to enter arid possess is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your G-d looks after; the eyes of the Lord your G-d are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end. (Deuteronomy 11:10-12).

The Nile delta was naturally fertile. Israel was not. In the book of Genesis we read repeatedly of how the patriarchs had to leave because of famine and drought. Even today, water is Israel's scarcest resource. In a land of rivers, fertility comes from the ground. In a land like Israel, fertility comes from the sky in the form of rain. Nothing in such a land is predictable, nothing can be taken for granted. Instead your eyes turn towards heaven. The promised land turned out to be, not a place of natural security, but one whose inhabitants would be constantly aware of their vulnerability to forces beyond their control. Daily survival would demand a leap of trust. It still does. Climatically and militarily, Israel has always been peculiarly exposed: a dry land that depends on rain, a small country surrounded by great empires; never a fortress, always a sukkah. If nature prevailed, Israel would not survive. Perhaps that is why faith is engraved on our souls.



With a final and glorious touch of paradox, custom ordained that in the middle of this 'season of our rejoicing' we should read Ecclesiastes, on the face of it the most gloomy and unexpected book in the entire Bible. Its author is the man who has had and done everything. He has read books, studied the accumulated wisdom of mankind, built palaces and planted pleasure gardens, acquired wealth and all its trappings and 'denied myself nothing that my eyes desired'. Now, like all true hedonists, he has grown weary with life. 'Meaningless, meaningless', he says repeatedly, 'Everything is meaningless.'

The Talmud records the great debate that took place before Ecclesiastes was admitted into the biblical canon as a holy book. Understandably so, for the world according to Ecclesiastes is not what we expect from a man of faith. Wisdom, he says, only begets sorrow. Wealth creates anxiety. Politics is an arena of corruption. All striving under the sun ends in disillusion. One thing alone is certain, and that is death: 'Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both; as one dies, so dies the other, for both have the same breath. Man has no advantage over the animals for everything is meaningless.' If it is strange that so bleak a testimony should have been included in the Bible, it seems doubly ironic that it should have been chosen as a reading on the festival of joy.

But I sense in Ecclesiastes a surprising affirmation. It is a meditation about mortality, one of the most poignant ever written. The word Ecclesiastes uses to describe the human condition is *hevel*, usually translated as 'meaningless' or 'futile' or 'vain'. But it means something else: a breath. The words the Hebrew Bible uses to describe the spirit or soul - words like *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah* - are not abstract nouns. They are all terms which refer, each with its own nuance, to the act of breathing. The word *hevel* signi?es

the fragility of life, as if to say that the entire horizon of our experience is bounded by a mere breath. That insubstantial puff of air is all that separates us from death. Hevel is the almost-nothing which is life itself. Whenever I read it in Ecclesiastes I think of King Lear's lament as he holds the dead Cordelia in his arms: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?'

Ecclesiastes is a song of life - life in and of itself, frail, transitory, vulnerable, but all there is. No one saw more clearly than its author how we waste our time in the vain pursuit of immortality, as if by accumulating wealth or power we could cheat death of its final victory. Ecclesiastes has taken all those routes and seen where they end. From his many journeys its author has arrived at a deeply religious conclusion. G-d has given us one thing - life - and too many of our human strivings lead away from it. Life is the breath of G-d that transforms the handful of dust, and we serve G-d by celebrating it and not the counterfeit substitutes of human devising. 'I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That every man may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil - this is the gift of G-d' (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13).

Sukkot is a complex set of variations on the theme of life: life stripped of all illusions of security. It tells us that home, like immortality, is in how we live, not where or for how long. It is the festival of a people who have known more starkly than any other that the canopy of faith is the only shelter we have. And it is no small testimony that we can gather beneath its shade, and sing. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths (Leviticus 23: 42).” One of the most picturesque and creative festivals of the year is the Festival of Sukkot - when the entire family is involved in building and decorating a special "nature home" which will be lived in for an entire week. But what are we actually celebrating and what is the true meaning of the symbol of the Sukkah? Is it the Sukkah of our desert wanderings, the temporary hut which the Israelites constructed in the desert when they wandered from place to place? If so, then the Sukkah becomes a reminder of all of the exiles of Israel throughout our 4,000 year history, and our thanksgiving to G-d is for the fact that we have survived despite the difficult climates - the persecution and pogroms - which threaten to overwhelm us.

Or is the Sukkah meant to be reminiscent of the Divine "clouds of glory" which encompassed us in the desert with G-d's rays of splendor, the sanctuary which served as the forerunner of our Holy Temple in Jerusalem. In the Grace after Meals during the Sukkot festival we pray that, "the Merciful One restore for us

the fallen tabernacle of David", which would certainly imply that the Sukkah symbolizes the Holy Temple. The Talmud (B.T. Sukkot 11b) brings a difference of opinion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer as to which of these options is the true significance of our celebration. I would like to attempt to analyze which I believe to be the true meaning and why.

The major Biblical description of the festivals is to be found in Chapter 23 of the Book of Leviticus. There are two textual curiosities which need to be examined. The three festivals which are considered to be our national festivals, and which also Biblically appear as the "desert" festivals, are Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot; commemorating when we left Egypt, when we received the Torah at Sinai and when we lived in desert booths. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are more universal in nature and not at all related to the desert sojourn. It seems strange that in the Biblical exposition of the Hebrew calendar Pesach and Shavuot are explained, after which comes Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and only at the conclusion of the description comes Sukkot.

Now of course one can argue that this is the way the months fall out on the calendar year! However, that too is strange. After all, the Israelites left Egypt for the desert; presumably they built their booths immediately after the Festival of Pesach. Would it not have been more logical for the order to be Pesach, Sukkot, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?

Secondly, the Festival of Sukkot is broken up into two parts. Initially, the Torah tells us: "and the Lord spoke to Moses saying, '...on the fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Festival of Sukkot, seven days for G-d... these are the Festivals of the Lord which you shall call holy congregations...' (Leviticus 23:33-38). It would seem that these last words conclude the Biblical description of the festivals and the Hebrew calendar. But then, in the very next verse, the Torah comes back again to Sukkot, as if for the first time: "but on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather in the crop of the land, you shall celebrate G-d's festival for a seven day period.... You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a citron tree, the branches of date palms, twigs of a plaited tree (myrtle) and willows of brooks; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for a seven day period.....You shall dwell in booths for a seven day period..... so that your generations will know that I caused the people of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them from the Land of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d" (ibid. Leviticus 23:39-44). Why the repetition? And if the Bible now wishes to tell us about the four species which we are to wave in all directions in thanksgiving to G-d for his agricultural bounty, why was this verse not linked to the previous discussion of the Sukkot booths? And why repeat the booths again this second time?

I have heard it said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that this repetition of Sukkot with the

commandment concerning the four species is introducing an entirely new aspect of the Sukkot festival: the celebration of our entering into the Land of Israel! Indeed, the great philosopher legalist Maimonides explains the great joy of the festival of Sukkot as expressing the transition of the Israelites from the arid desert to a place of trees and rivers, fruits and vegetables symbolized by the four species (Guide for the Perplexed, Part 3 Chapter 43). In fact, this second Sukkot segment opens with the words "But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month when you gather the crops of the land (of Israel) you shall celebrate this festival to the Lord..."

Hence, there are two identities to the festival of Sukkot. On the one hand, it is a desert festival, alongside of Pesach and Shavuot, which celebrates our desert wanderings and survivals while living in flimsy booths. From that perspective, perhaps it ought to have found its place immediately after Pesach in terms of the calendar and certainly before the description of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in the Biblical text. However, this second identity of Sukkot, the four species which represent our conquest and inhabitation of our homeland signaling the beginning of redemption, belongs after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -the festivals of G-d's kingship over the world and his Divine Temple which is to be "a house of prayer for all the nations". This aspect of Sukkot turns the Sukkah into rays of Divine splendor and an expression of the Holy Temple.

So which Sukkot do we celebrate? Both at the very same time! But when we sit in the Sukkah, are we sitting in transitory booths representative of our wandering or rather in a Divine sanctuary protected by rays of G-d's glory? I think it depends on whether we are celebrating the festival in the Diaspora or in the Land of Israel. © 2012 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

The overriding theme of Sefer Koheles is how worthless life is if it is not dedicated to building a relationship with the Creator and fulfilling His commandments (12:13). The word for "worthless" (or, alternatively, "of no intrinsic value") is understandably used many, many times throughout Koheles, but it is not the only thought mentioned more than once in it. Thinking aloud about whether there is any benefit to wisdom over foolishness occurs three times (2:3, 2:12-13 and 6:8, see also 9:11), wondering whether hard work is worth the effort happens four times (1:3, 2:22, 3:9 and 5:15), that nothing is ever really new is mentioned twice (1:9 and 3:15), as is the notion that the dead are luckier than those still alive (4:2 and 7:1) and that the righteous and the wicked seem to be treated the same (8:14 and 9:2), and we are advised four times

not to think that we humans can understand everything that G-d does (3:11, 5:1, 8:17 and 11:5). Why are so many concepts repeated? Was it just for emphasis?

Rabbi Yitzchok Sorotzkin, sh'lita (Rinas Yitzchok, Koheles 1:1) discusses why Sh'lomo HaMelech was called "Koheles." He quotes Rashi, who says that he got this name because all of his words were said in a gathering ("kahal," i.e. people congregated whenever he would speak publicly in order to hear what he had to say, which makes sense, as he was the wisest man in the world). He then quotes several sources (Rokayach, Avudraham, Elyah Rabbah) who say that among the reasons why Koheles is read on Succos is because Sh'lomo HaMelech shared the thoughts contained in it with the nation when they were gathered together every Sh'mita year, on Succos, to hear him read Sefer D'varim (the mitzvah of "Hak-hel"). The implication (Rav Sorotzkin continues) is that of Sh'lomo's thoughts, it was only what became known as Sefer Koheles that was said in a public gathering. (I'm not sure how this is implied; it is possible that whenever Sh'lomo spoke publicly people gathered to hear him, not just when there was a specific commandment to gather together to hear the king read Sefer D'varim. If anything, the fact that only Sh'lomo was called "Koheles" and not any other kings-even though they also read Sefer D'varim to the gathered nation every seven years-indicates that there were gatherings to hear Sh'lomo all the time, whereas for the other kings they only gathered to hear them speak when obligated to do so.)

Rabbi Sorotzkin then quotes Avudraham's suggestion that the reason Sh'lomo shared these specific thoughts with the nation during "Hak-hel" was similar to the underlying reason for Moshe's speeches to the nation in Sefer D'varim (which is what has to be read aloud by the king during "Hak-hel"), i.e. to give them rebuke. Rabbi Sorotzkin furthers this notion by adding that Sh'lomo's intent was also to keep them focused on their mission. Just as Moshe wanted his lectures to motivate the nation to keep the Torah and not assimilate Canaanite culture into their own, Sh'lomo wanted to prevent the nation from being distracted by the good times they were experiencing. He did so by reminding them that there is nothing of intrinsic value in this world; its only real purpose is to provide opportunities to fulfill G-d's mitzvos and be in awe of Him.

If Sefer Koheles consists of the lectures Sh'lomo HaMelech gave the nation while he had their mandatory attention, there is no need to insist that just because it was the same Sefer D'varim that the king read aloud every seven years, Sh'lomo must have also read the same exact text regarding the worthlessness of this world every seven years. Since he became king in 2924, the Bais HaMikdash was completed in 2935, and he died in 2964, it is safe to assume that Sh'lomo presided over at least four "Hak-hels." If he shared his

thoughts regarding how worthless this world is several times, and the specific thoughts he wanted to share were slightly different each time, rather than Sefer Koheles being a transcript of the speech he gave every seven years, it would be a compendium of the speeches he gave over the years. And since he very likely repeated some of the thoughts he had shared in an earlier "Hak-hel" in a subsequent one, when Sefer Koheles was put together-and all of his thoughts on the worthlessness of the world compiled together-these ideas appear more than once in the compilation. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The holy Torah concludes with the blessings of Moshe to the people of Israel before his passing from the world. Though the point has been made before, a number of times in these parsha articles, it bears repetition - the blessing to each of the tribes is different in detail and purpose. Contrary to much current belief and practice in religious Jewish society, there is no one-size-fits-all blessing and assignment in life to all Jews.

Rather Moshe, to whom the task of nation building was assigned by Heaven, looks to construct a whole nation, multi-faceted and productive, holy and complementary, one to another. If everyone is to be Zevulun then what will be of Torah study and knowledge amongst Israel? But if everyone is Yissachar then again Torah will fail to survive within Jewish society.

King Solomon advised us wisely that every child is to be educated according to the individual talents, predispositions and abilities of that particular child. When home schooling was the vogue of Jewish education in biblical times, such an individualized educational program was more possible and attainable. With the introduction of universal and institutionalized schooling the task of individualized education, to meet every student's particular situation, became nearly impossible to achieve.

The system was built to create Yissachar and those that dropped out and became Zevulun were, to a certain extent, disrespected in the Jewish scholarly community. Though certainly Yissachar was to be respected, honored and supported, many generations lost sight that it was only through Zevulun that Yissachar could exist in the Jewish world. The two tribes were meant to complement each other, not to compete and denigrate one another.

It is striking to note how careful Moshe is to identify each tribe's nature and strengths. Moshe is the one person who forged the different tribes into one whole nation. He did so by granting each tribe its different due, by recognizing that all are necessary in this process of nation building.

The rabbis carried this idea farther when they identified the four species of plant life that form the commandment on Succot, as being representative of the basic groupings that have always formed Jewish life and society. All four groupings of plant life are necessary for the fulfillment of the commandment. All four groupings of Jews are also necessary to form a vital and healthy Jewish society.

The striking variety of people and ideas that have always characterized Jewish society throughout the ages was recognized and extolled by Moshe through his individualized blessings to Israel before his passing from this world. At times Jewish society appears to be riven and chaotic and we all long for the elusive "Jewish unity" that we all pay lip service to.

But what we really should mean is not Jewish conformity but Jewish loyalty, which is a far different matter. There is an old Eastern European, Jewish/Yiddish ballad that states this matter clearly and succinctly: "Whatever we are, we are but we are all Jews!" The blessings of Moshe as they appear in our concluding parsha of the Torah should help guide us to this important conclusion. © 2012 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

From Twerski on Chumash

by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

G-d reveals to Moshe The Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy: "Lord, Lord, G-d, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger and Abundant in Kindness and Truth; Preserve of Kindness of thousands of generations, Forgiver of Iniquity, Willful Sin and Error" (Exodus 34:6-7).

The Talmud states, "Whenever Israel sins, let them perform before Me this order, and I shall forgive them" (Rosh Hashana 17b). Yet, the Talmud sharply criticizes anyone who says that G-d will overlook people's sins (Bava Kamma 50a). The commentaries explain that "forgiveness" is not the same as "overlooking." Forgiveness must be earned, and a person is forgiven only when he deserves to be forgiven.

Our ethical works state that G-d conducts the world according to firm principles of justice. One of these principles is that it is just to act toward a person as that person acts towards others. The Baal Shem Tov said that this is the mean of the verse, "G-d is your shadow" (Psalms, 121:5). Just as one's shadow mimics one's every move, so does G-d act correspondingly to how a person acts. If a person is magnanimous and readily forgives personal offenses, then it is just that G-d forgive that person's misdeeds.

The Talmud states that Jerusalem was destroyed because people exercised the letter of the law (Bava Metzia 30b). If they exercised the letter of the law, why were they punished? It is because they refused to be magnanimous and yield, insisting on getting everything that the law entitled them to receive. In judging their sins, G-d, too, exercised the letter of the law and refused to yield.

We may think that when we forgive an offense, we are being charitable to the offender. The fact is that we are the beneficiaries of kindnesses we do to others.

Is being kind and forgiving to others self-serving? Perhaps, but this is a kind of selfishness that is "kosher." © 2012 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Smashing Success!

Did you ever wonder how the Torah ends? After all, if you were to write The Book, you surely would have ended on a high; at least when encapsulating the life of Moshe. I should have ended with Moshe's triumphant exit or by mentioning an eternal action. And indeed, textually, it sounds like the Torah does just that.

The last two verses in Chumash read: In all the signs and the wonders, which the L-rd sent him (Moshe) to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land; and in all the mighty hand, and in all the great awe, which Moshe wrought to the eyes of all Israel (Deuteronomy 34:11-12)

I would have explained mighty hand and the great awe as the great miracles that Moshe performed in the desert or the in defeating our enemies. But Rashi quotes a Sifri to explain these final verses in a very curious manner. And all the strong hand [This refers to] his receiving the Torah on tablets with his hands. And all the great awe [This refers to the] miracles and mighty deeds [that were performed for Israel] in the great and awesome wilderness before the eyes of all Israel This expression alludes to where] [Moshe's] heart stirred him up to smash the tablets before their eyes, as it is said, and I shattered them before your eyes (Deut. 9:17).

Imagine! Rashi chooses to identify the closing words that the Torah describes as one that Moshe wrought to the eyes of all Israel as none other than the smashing of the Luchos, the Two Tablets given to him at Sinai. Is there no better way to end the Torah? Is this Moshess defining act that is worthy of interpreting as the great awe done before the eyes of Israel? After all, many miracles were done before the eyes of Israel why choose the smashing of the Luchos? Is there no better way to venerate Moshe in the final yearly reading of the Torah?

The Volozhin Yeshiva was founded in 1803 by Rav Chaim of Volozhin the premier student of the Vilna Gaon. It was a ground-breaking institute as, until its founding, there were no organized Yeshivos. Students

who wanted to learn Torah would have to find their own rebbe, a place to eat and sleep and a group of like-minds to study with. Volozhin Yeshiva provided shelter and food plus a mass of brilliant students who would grow in Torah knowledge together.

Indeed, through the decades of its existence the greatest Jewish minds and ultimately leaders of Judaism emerged, among them Rabbi Avraham Dovber Kahana Shapira, Rabbi Abraham Issac HaKohen Kook, Rabbi Shimon Shkop, Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz. Yet in 1892, its Dean, the revered, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin decided to close its doors and shut down, the Yeshiva perhaps forever.

The Russian Government, at the time, demanded the introduction of certain secular studies. They also wanted to regulate the curriculum with dictates that included, "All teachers of all subjects must have college diplomas; no Judaic subjects may be taught between 9 AM and 3 PM; no night classes are allowed; total hours of study per day may not exceed ten." Rather than comply, Rabbi Berlin closed the yeshiva. The episode occurred during an era of the Yeshiva's greatness. The number of students approached four hundred. They came from the entire Russian Empire from Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Poland and even from western countries like Britain, Germany, Austria, and the United States. Volozhin was the center of Torah study the heart of which was the Holy Yeshiva. But that did not stop, the Netziv from closing the doors.

I often wonder, what went on in his mind when he made that decision. Did he think that this may be the end of organized Yeshiva study forever? Did he worry about the hundreds of students who perhaps would now never become great Torah Leaders? I don't know. I doubt he thought of the later emergence of great yeshivos, among them Telshe, Slobodka, Kletzk and Kelm, Mir that managed to arise. I cannot imagine that he thought of countless other institutions of Torah study that now host tens of thousands of students who in the tradition of Volozhin study day and night with no Government dictates or secular interference.

What would have been had he compromised? What would have been if he did water-down his values and traditions to meet the demands of the Russian Government? I posit that there may have been many fine scholars and observant Jews that may have emerged from the New Volozhin Seminary, but would have had a Reb Boruch Ber or Reb Shimon?

I think his act defined the future of the face of Jewish Torah scholarship. And so did Moshe's smashing of the Luchos. He did what he had to do in order that a Phoenix of Torah and observance would reemerge from the broken pieces. And thus the day in which we rejoice in the completion of the Torah, we thank Moshe whose bold act enabled a new vision and commitment that ultimately defined the future of Yiddishkeit. © 2010 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The last portion of the Torah reverberates with the image of circles. After all, immediately after its reading, we start the Torah from the beginning again. The circle symbolizes the deep meaning of Simchat Torah. We have, indeed, come full circle.

Not coincidentally we read this portion on Simchat Torah, the holiday when we dance in circles, and lovingly embrace the Torah as we joyously celebrate the cycle of public Torah reading.

Circles have a tremendously deep meaning. First of all, they symbolize love. We encircle those we deeply care for through embrace. In the words of Rav Shlomo Carlebach: "When you love someone very much, you embrace them. Isn't that stupid? To put your hands on their back? I would say put your hands on their face. On their back? But you know what that means? It means I love you so much I won't let you fall. Whenever you're downhearted, whenever you think you have no strength any more, whenever you're falling you can just rely on me. I'll hold you up."

Rav Soloveitchik offers another understanding of circles. He notes that the word teshuvah-repentance, is associated with the turning of the cycle of the year. (2 Samuel 2:1). As one moves further from Rosh Hashanah, one in fact is closer to the next Rosh Hashanah. Similarly, no matter how estranged one may be from G-d, there is the belief that one is approaching the Divine. The same applies to G-d's revelation, the Torah. Even if alienated from Torah study, one possesses the inner calling to reconnect with Torah learning.

Another thought comes to mind. In a circle, everyone is equal as all participants are equi-distant from the center. Unlike Shavuot, which emphasizes pure learning and invariably separates people into categories of the more and less knowledgeable, Simchat Torah is the great equalizer, for regardless of one's level of knowledge, we are all the same, reaching out, clasping the hand of the other, with whom we dance and sing.

No wonder, our portion-which accentuates the circular power of Torah-begins with the word ve-zot. (Deuteronomy 33:1) The first ve-zot in the Torah-and all firsts set the standard-speaks of the blessing Ya'akov (Jacob) gave his sons. There, ve-zot refers to the cycle of life-as Ya'akov implores his sons to follow in his footsteps, and, he asks that he be returned to be buried with his ancestors. (Genesis 49:28, 29)

And when the Torah, wrapped around its circular wooden poles is lifted, we declare-ve-zot ha-Torah-representative of its circular nature. The point is accentuated on Simchat Torah. For it is then that the lifter of the Torah inverts his hands, manifesting the language of circularity-of love, of return, of equality.

May we, on this Simchat Torah, encircle the Torah with endless love, depth, and holiness. © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

PIn its formal structure, Sukkot most closely resembles Pesach. Both are seven days long, and both arrive on the 15th day of their respective months, exactly half a year apart. Yet, Pesach doesn't have a post-holiday gathering, while Sukkot has the 8th day, Shemini Atzeret, which is a distinct, separate festival. For the first time in a week, we stop "living" in the Sukkah and put away our Lulav and Etrog. So what is this "Eighth day holiday" really about?

The Targum says that the word "Atzeret" means "gathering." One major part of Sukkot is the necessity for the Jewish people to gather together as Jews. Shemini Atzeret is a festival that is dedicated to the Achdut (unity), of the Jews. Although other holidays may also fulfill this same purpose, Shemini Atzeret, a holiday with no distinct reason, is dedicated to the theme of unifying all Jews.

Especially in these modern times, the issue of 'Who is a Jew' sometimes grows more important than 'What is a Jew'. Shemini Atzeret is a time where G-d doesn't want any Jews to become separated. He wants all Jews to be unified, no matter what their level of observance. Asking for Teshuva on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is a great emotional strain. Building a Sukkah and preparing for the holidays can tire a person out physically. We may feel relieved when all the holidays are done with and we can return to our normal routines. Shemini Atzeret shows us that we should feel exactly the opposite. We should say, "Please, stay one day longer." Don't be so eager to leave. Let us have one more day where all Jews can stand side-by-side and celebrate in unity! © 2008 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

THE AISHDAS SOCIETY

Aspaqlaria

by Micha Berger

R' JB Soloveitchik frames his Jewish thought and his perspective on mitzvos about tensions between various dialectics inherent in the human condition. Conflicting truths about man that are somehow both true.

For example, people construct a society in order to better serve their needs. And yet, man's highest calling is to serve the society, rather than themselves.

Perhaps the most classical such dialectic is the distinction Rabbi Soloveitchik draws between Adam as he is portrayed in the creation story in Genesis 1 and

Adam as portrayed in Genesis 2. Adam I is at the culmination of creation. All builds up to him. He is charged "to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth and master it." Man the engineer and technologist, forming the world to serve his needs. Majestic Man.

In Genesis 2, we're given a different view. From the time of his creation, Adam is in communication is G-d. "It is not good for man to be alone", so Hashem creates a woman "therefore man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife." This is a person as relying on his relationships and brings value to his life and the world through them. Adam II is Covenantal Man, who seeks redemption.

Succos is very much Adam II's holiday. The farmer, having just brought in his crop, has a propensity to credit himself for his success. Succos re-addresses that, by reminding him that it's not his mastery alone that brings food to the table. The succah teaches that it's not his fine house and the engineering it represents that bring security to his life.

There is a dispute between R' Eliezer and R' Akiva (Succah 11b) as to the nature of the succos in the desert that the mitzvah actually commemorates. According to R' Eliezer (and Unkelus Vayikra 23:42, as well as the Shulchan Aruch O"Ch 625"1, Gr"a ad loc), the original succos were clouds of glory. According to R' Akiva, they were actual huts.

Perhaps they're basing themselves on different ideas about the significance of the succah. In R' Eliezer's opinion, the succah is commemorating Hashem's gifts to us. It's to remind us that there is a Covenantal Partner in our efforts. R' Akiva has the original succah being the product of a partnership. Man builds, but it's Hashem who insures the success of that building. R' Eliezer focuses on our Partner, R' Akiva on our willingness to join the Conventional relationship. (See Aruch haShulchan O"Ch 625.)

Each speaks to the farmer celebrating his harvest as he gathers it at the end of the year. One speaks of the role of bitachon, trust in G-d, which may otherwise be forgotten. The other speaks of the appropriate end-state, of the synthesis of bitachon and hishtadlus, personal effort.

"And a mist came up from the ground, and gave moisture to the whole face of the earth." - Genesis 2:6 "And a mist came up from the ground": For the topic of the creation of man. He raised the tehom [groundwater?] and gave moisture to clouds to wet the earth and to make man. Like one who kneads bread, who adds water and after that kneads the dough. So too here, 'He gave moisture' and then 'He formed'." - Rashi ad loc

"And Hashem E-lokim formed the man, dust from the ground, and He breathed in his nose a living soul; and the man was a living spirit." Genesis, ibid v. 7

"Dust from the ground": He collected dust from the whole earth, all four directions... Another opinion, He

took his dust from the place about which it says 'an altar of earth you shall make for Me.' He said, 'If only the dirt would be an atonement for him, and he would be able to stand.'" - Rashi ad loc

In his work "Pachad Yitzchak", R' Yitzchak Hutner notes the steps of creation of man, according to this second opinion in Rashi. First, G-d adds water to the earth to make clay, then He forms man and breathes a soul into him.

R' Hutner writes that this is exactly what we recreate during the nisuch hamayim (water libation on the altar). The kohein pours water on the very spot Hashem did. This is accompanied by the simchas beis hasho'eivah, celebration and singing. Music is the most spiritual of the seven wisdoms. It speaks and moves the soul on a fundamental level. Through the Simchas Beis haSho'ievah we imitate G-d's breathing a soul into Adam.

We just came from Yom Kippur and teshuvah. When Hashem fulfills His promise "And I will give you a new heart, and place a new spirit within you." (Yechezkel 36:26) Simchas Beis haSho'eivah is a celebration of man's ability to recreate himself, and therefore follows the steps of our original creation.

To continue R' Hutner's thought with a couple of my own, in light of the above: Repentance too can be seen in both R' Eliezer's and R' Akiva's perspectives. One can seek atonement from Hashem, and thereby realize the need to have a partnership with Him. Or, one can seek atonement from the partnership itself. As the same R' Akiva says, "Praised are you Israel. Before Whom do you atone, and Who atones you." Atonement is both done by man through the Divine Presence, and is a gift from Him. A dialectic.

I would like to suggest one additional point. This description is from the second chapter of Genesis, it's the telling of the creation of Adam II. It's not merely the celebration of our recent re-creation, it's the celebration of our creation as beings in a covenantal partnership with the A-Imighty. And therefore, it's not only on Succos as a postscript to Yom Kippur, it is a fundamental part of the message of the holiday. © 2003 M. Berger and The AishDas Society

