

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Of all the festivals, Sukkot is surely the one that speaks most powerfully to our time. Kohelet could almost have been written in the twenty first century. Here is the ultimate success, the man who has it all – the houses, the cars, the clothes, the adoring women, the envy of all men – who has pursued everything this world can offer from pleasure to possessions to power to wisdom and yet who, surveying the totality of his life, can only say, in effect, “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.”

Kohelet’s failure to find meaning is directly related to his obsession with the “I” and the “Me”: “I built for myself. I gathered for myself. I acquired for myself.” The more he pursues his desires, the emptier his life becomes. There is no more powerful critique of the consumer society, whose idol is the self, whose icon is the “selfie” and whose moral code is “Whatever works for you.” This is the society that achieved unprecedented affluence, giving people more choices than they have ever known, and yet at same time saw an unprecedented rise in alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, stress related syndromes, depression, attempted suicide and actual suicide. A society of tourists, not pilgrims, is not one that will yield the sense of a life worth living. Of all things people have chosen to worship, the self is the least fulfilling. A culture of narcissism quickly gives way to loneliness and despair.

Kohelet was also, of course, a cosmopolitan: a man at home everywhere and therefore nowhere. This is the man who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines but in the end could only say, “More bitter than death is the woman.” It should be clear to anyone who reads this in the context of the life of Solomon, that Kohelet is not really talking about women but about himself.

In the end Kohelet finds meaning in simple things. Sweet is the sleep of a labouring man. Enjoy life with the woman you love. Eat, drink and enjoy the sun. That ultimately is the meaning of Sukkot as a whole. It is a festival of simple things. It is, Jewishly, the time we come closer to nature than any other, sitting in a hut with only leaves for a roof, and taking in our hands the unprocessed fruits and foliage of the palm branch, the citron, twigs of myrtle and leaves of willow. It is a time when we briefly liberate ourselves from the sophisticated

pleasures of the city and the processed artefacts of a technological age and recapture some of the innocence we had when we were young, when the world still had the radiance of wonder.

The power of Sukkot is that it takes us back to the most elemental roots of our being. You don’t need to live in a palace to be surrounded by clouds of glory. You don’t need to be rich to buy yourself the same leaves and fruit that a billionaire uses in worshipping G-d. Living in the sukkah and inviting guests to your meal, you discover – such is the premise of Ushpizin, the mystical guests – that the people who have come to visit you are none other than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives. What makes a hut more beautiful than a home is that when it comes to Sukkot there is no difference between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. We are all strangers on earth, temporary residents in G-d’s almost eternal universe. And whether or not we are capable of pleasure, whether or not we have found happiness, nonetheless we can all feel joy.

Sukkot is the time we ask the most profound question of what makes a life worth living. Having prayed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to be written in the Book of Life, Kohelet forces us to remember how brief life actually is, and how vulnerable. “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” What matters is not how long we live, but how intensely we feel that life is a gift we repay by giving to others. Joy, the overwhelming theme of the festival, is what we feel when we know that it is a privilege simply to be alive, inhaling the intoxicating beauty of this moment amidst the profusion of nature, the teeming diversity of life and the sense of communion with those many others with whom we share a history and a hope.

Most majestically of all, Sukkot is the festival of insecurity. It is the candid acknowledgment that there is no life without risk, yet we can face the future without fear when we know we are not alone. G-d is with us, in the rain that brings blessings to the earth, in the love that brought the universe and us into being, and in the resilience of spirit that allowed a small and vulnerable people to outlive the greatest empires the world has ever known. Sukkot reminds us that G-d’s glory was present in the small, portable Tabernacle Moses and the Israelites built in the desert even more emphatically than in Solomon’s Temple with all its grandeur. A Temple can be destroyed. But a sukkah, broken, can be rebuilt tomorrow. Security is not something we can achieve

physically but it is something we can acquire mentally, psychologically, spiritually. All it needs is the courage and willingness to sit under the shadow of G-d's sheltering wings. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2023 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

What is the true symbolism of the Sukkah? The Talmud (B.T. Sukkah 11b) cites a difference of opinion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer as to whether the Sukkah commemorates the actual huts in which the Israelites dwelt in the desert, or the "clouds of glory" which encompassed us as a sign of Divine protection.

Leviticus chapter 23 catalogs all the holy days of the Hebrew calendar, beginning with the Sabbath and concluding with Sukkot. The 33rd verse begins a description of Sukkot:

"The 15th day of the seventh month shall be the festival of Sukkot (Booths), seven days for the Lord; the first day shall be a holy convocation, when you may not perform creative work..."

The text goes on to mention the festival of the Eighth Day of Assembly (Shmini Atzeret), and then seemingly concludes the entire calendar sequence with the words: "These are the special appointed times of the Lord" (23:37).

But just as we thought the description of the festivals was complete, the narrative inexplicably reverts to the festival of Sukkot. This time, however, the Bible stresses the connection to the Land of Israel, and the agricultural cycle:

"But on the 15th day of the seventh month, when you harvest the grain of the land, you shall celebrate a festival to the Lord for seven days, with the first day being a day of rest and the eighth day being a day of rest" (23:39).

Another curious feature of this second account is that having repeated the command to observe Sukkot in the context of the farmers' request, the Bible now introduces other crucial themes of the festival, including the command to take up four species of plant indigenous to Israel (citron, palm frond, myrtle branch and willow), and to rejoice on our holy days, wrapping up its description with a repetition of the command to dwell in booths, this time stressing the historical aspects of the festival:

"You shall dwell in booths for seven days, so that your generations shall know that I caused the Israelites to live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" (23:42-43).

It seems that the Bible is making a clear distinction between the significance of the Sukkot Festival before the Israelites entered the Land, and the

nature of the festival once we were living in Israel. How so?

Outside Israel, the hut-like booths symbolized our temporary dwellings while we wandered across the desert and, by extension, throughout our long exile when we were a people without a homeland.

Once we entered the Land of Israel, however, and "harvest[ed] the grain of the land," we could celebrate the harvest with special blessings and rituals involving the four species – vegetation unavailable in the desert. In the Promised Land, the entire festival and even the symbolism of the Sukkah itself assumed a heightened significance.

Now, the shabby, makeshift desert huts came to represent the sheltering wings of the Divine Presence, the clouds of glory with which God protected us so that we'd be able to fulfill our mission as His divine ambassadors. When we are living in the Diaspora, the Sukkah can only teach us to be grateful to the Lord who preserves us under difficult and dangerous conditions; whereas living in Israel, we understand that as the people of God's covenant, no matter how flimsy the walls of our temporary homes may seem, we constantly live under His protective grace, with the borders of our homeland for protection and the food provided by our land for life-giving sustenance.

This essential difference in the significance of the Sukkah prior to our inhabiting the Land of Israel and afterwards could also be seen when we returned to the Land after our Babylonian exile. Then, Ezra exhorted us to dwell in booths during the Festival of the Seventh Month, and to make our booths with "olive leaves and olive branches, with myrtles, psalms and willows" (Nehemiah 8:15).

In the Land of Israel, the Sukkah is adorned and enhanced by the local vegetation, the special fragrance of which symbolizes God's shelter and fulfillment of the Divine covenant. Seen in this light, as the Vilna Gaon noted, Sukkot is the festival which celebrates our entry into the Land of Israel!

God's revelation and gift of forgiveness (initially for the sin of the Golden Calf) took place on the 10th of Tishrei, Yom Kippur. The following day, He commanded the building of the Sanctuary, and the Israelites collected materials for the next two days. Then, on the 15th of Tishrei, the work of building the Sanctuary began, marking the restoration of the relationship between God and the Jews. This is noted by the Ramban, who explains that this is why the Book of Exodus is indeed the Book of Redemption.

"Then the Holy One Blessed be He returned and rested His Divine Presence among them and they returned to the exalted level of the patriarchs, which was the secret of God, with Clouds of Glory upon their tents, and they were considered to be redeemed. And so, the Book of Exodus ends with the completion of the Sanctuary and with the Glory of God filling it always."

(Ramban – Introduction to Book of Exodus)

Hence the Sukkah in Israel became clouds of divine glory, symbolizing the Sanctuary and the Holy Temple in Jerusalem – which will eventually bring the entire world to peace and redemption. And indeed, He has begun the process in our generation, when He brought us home to Israel thereby restoring and uplifting the fallen Sukkah of David, which has now become – after 2000 years of Exile – clouds of Divine Glory presaging the Third Sanctuary and World peace (Isaiah 2). © 2023 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

It is quite pleasant here in Israel to live in a succah for a week during this time of the year. The intense heat of our summer months has lessened and the rains and chill of our relatively mild winter have yet to arrive. Though the commandments and requirements of Succot are meant to be observed by Jews wherever in the world they may find themselves, it is clear that the holidays of the Jewish calendar year were tailor made to fit with the climate and natural beauty of the Land of Israel.

Yet, since they are to be observed globally, not everyone can enjoy the climate and seasons of the year as we do here in Israel. I remember bitter cold and snow on the on top of the succah in Chicago and later in Monsey. I also remember the stifling heat and dripping humidity that accompanied sitting in our succah in Miami Beach. Even though the halacha provides for and excuses those who are not able to sit in the succah because of extreme physical discomfort, Jews throughout the ages and in very difficult physical circumstances have always tenaciously clung to this observance, no matter what.

The commandment of succah is so dear to us that we are not easily dissuaded from its observance by the relatively minor discomforts of cold and heat. For just as the succot of old in the desert of Sinai negated all climate discomfort, so too did that memory invest Jewish succot wherever they were located with that same feeling of Divine protection and spiritual comfort.

The truth be said, the Jewish people have been dwelling, in a figurative sense, in succot for all of our national existence. Always a minority, always the iconoclast nation and culture, subject to discrimination and persecution, the Jewish people have continually found refuge and shelter in their protective spiritual succah.

That succah was built of Torah and tradition, family and community. There was and still is plenty of inclement weather and hostile climate surrounding our succah. And there are Jews who are so ignorant and alienated from their core Jewishness that they are completely unaware of the existence of that protective succah. Yet somehow, here in Israel and throughout the

Diaspora, there are thousands upon thousands of real succot erected in honor of the holiday.

There is also the national awareness of the inexplicable existence of that overall feeling that we are all dwelling in the great succah of Davidic origin and Divine protection. We have always lived in a flimsy succah and been exposed to wild forces that threaten our very existence. Yet our succah, though it might sometimes cause physical discomfort and even danger, never has betrayed us as a whole. It totters but does not fall, it shakes but it does not collapse. It has become the symbol of Jewish continuity and resilience, of optimism and unbounded accomplishment.

The Talmud records for us a description of that great and tragic sage of Israel, Nachum ish Gamzu. After the failure of the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Roman emperor Hadrian instituted a reign of terror against the sages of Israel. Nachum was mutilated and his limbs cut off. He lived in horrible squalor in a house that was rickety and exposed to the elements. Winds shook the house continually and the disciples of Nachum feared for his life, lest the house collapse upon him in his helpless state of being.

They arranged that a different, more sturdy and respectable structure would serve as his new home. They arrived at his bedside prepared to transfer him to this new home. They told him that after moving him they would return to the house to remove his belongings and other items, which they then would move to the new dwelling. He cautioned them saying: "No, my children. First remove all of the belongings that you wish to remove from the house and leave me here. Later you will return and then remove me. For know you well, that as long as I am in this house, the house will never collapse."

As long as the spirit and teachings of Nachum ish Gamzu remain in our house and succah, the house and succah will never collapse. That is the basic lesson of all of Jewish history and should serve as the guidepost to understanding and assessing our present society. And that is really the core message of the holiday of Succot to us and to our generations. © 2013 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 AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The Book of Numbers includes a listing of the festivals and the sacrifices offered to commemorate these days (Numbers 28, 29). While elsewhere in the Torah only the three major holidays of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot are mentioned (Exodus 23:14 -16; 34:18 -22; Deuteronomy 16), the Book of Numbers (as in Leviticus 23:4-44) includes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The different listings speak to different approaches to the holiday experience, which in turn

illuminate different goals of Judaism.

When only the three holidays of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot are listed, they reflect the cornerstone of what makes up our nationhood:

- On Passover, as we left Egypt; we were birthed as a people – Am Yisrael.

- On Shavuot, we received the law – Torat Yisrael.

- On Sukkot, the festival that marks our marching through the desert to Israel, we commemorate the gift of the land of Israel. Indeed, the four species taken on Sukkot are viewed by many as especially connected to the land – Eretz Yisrael.

From this perspective, the holidays send a very nationalistic message, which became the foundation of the Religious Zionist movement – Am Yisrael (the people of Israel) according to Torat Yisrael (the Torah of Israel) in Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel).

But in the Book of Numbers, the list is expanded to include Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. One could argue that the actual order presented – Passover, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot – highlights another aspect of Judaism – the universal vision of our religion.

- Through the Exodus from Egypt, we physically came into being; we emerged as a people. But a people without a purpose, like a body without a soul, has no meaning. Hence Shavuot commemorates the day we received the Torah, the infusion of spirituality into the physicality of Am Yisrael.

- The holidays now become more expansive as the list moves forward to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah marks the anniversary of God creating all of humankind. This theme reaches its crescendo on Yom Kippur with the reading of Jonah, the Jewish prophet who was told by God to take the message of repentance to Ninveh, a heathen city. And Sukkot is the most universal of festivals; during the week of the festival, we offer seventy sacrifices symbolic of the nations of the world (Sukkah 55b) and dwell for all to see in outdoor booths.

Passover and Shavuot speak of the development of the Jewish People. The remaining holidays aim to fulfill our task of bringing light to the world. It is no accident that these latter holidays fall seven months after Passover. Seven can be vocalized *save'a*, to be satiated. We realize our mission when we do our share to uplift humankind.

There has been long debate whether Judaism is fundamentally nationalistic or universalistic. Some express their Judaism by separating themselves from the larger world while others feel that their mission to perfect the world is so predominant that they forget their roots. The two archetypal Torah listings of the holidays indicate that we are both. As Natan Sharansky wrote in *Defending Identity*, "Identity without democracy can become fundamentalist and totalitarian. Democracy

without identity can become superficial and meaningless."

From my perspective, loving all people begins by loving one's own people. An enlightened sense of national identity, rather than being a contradiction to universal consciousness, is a prerequisite for it. © 2023 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

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

A Hybrid Etrog

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The *etrog* tree is very delicate. In order to make it stronger and live longer, people have grafted *etrog* branches onto other citrus trees, such as that of the bitter orange. The part of the tree that hosts the grafted branch is known as the rootstock. Most *poskim* say that this *etrog murkav* (hybrid *etrog*) may not be used on Sukkot to fulfill the mitzva of *lulav* and *etrog*. A number of reasons are given for this disqualification:

1. This fruit is not considered fruit of the *etrog* tree, but rather of the rootstock's tree.

2. Even if it is not considered a fruit of the rootstock's tree, it is still a fruit which is a mixture of two species. But the Torah requires an *etrog*, not a partial *etrog*.

3. The share the rootstock has in the tree may take away from the size of the *etrog*. If the *etrog* is the size of an egg (*kebeitzah*), but we deduct the part of the rootstock, it is smaller than an egg (and thus not large enough to use for the mitzva).

4. Even if the *etrog* is larger than an egg, it is still invalid because part of it is missing (*chaser*). Being partly composed of the rootstock means it is partially bitter orange, not *etrog*. Since the part that is bitter orange does not count, the *etrog* is missing a part. It is as if a bite has been taken out of it, and so it is invalid.

5. Sometimes the grafting itself is prohibited. Even if a non-Jew did it, the *etrog* is the product of a sin and may not be used to fulfill the mitzva.

Those *poskim* who permit a hybrid *etrog* offer responses to each of the above challenges:

1. The Torah never specifies that an *etrog* must be used. Rather, the phrase in the verse is "*pri etz hadar*" ("a fruit that is beautiful"). An *etrog murkav* is beautiful.

2. The idea that the rootstock is more important than the original tree in determining the nature of the fruit is correct only when speaking of prohibitions. However, the fruit produced by the graft is considered that of the original tree (i.e., the *etrog* tree).

- 3-4. Even a partial *etrog* is acceptable, and the part of the fruit contributed by the rootstock does not mean the *etrog* is missing anything.

5. Even if the grafting is prohibited (which is not at all clear, since both trees are species of citrus), this

would not disqualify the *etrog*. The idea that the product of a sin may not be used is correct only when speaking of sacrifices. However, it is not disqualified for use in other *mitzvot*.

The question of the hybrid *etrog* (*etrog murkav*) is indeed complicated (*murkevot*). The *Encyclopedia Talmudit* can provide the interested reader with references to many books and responsa that deal with this topic at length – a very appropriate topic of study for Sukkot. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd You elevated us from all languages..." (Shemona Esrai of Yom Tov) The Jews are the Chosen People. We know it, the world knows it, and Hashem knows it. But what does it mean? And how are we made different than the rest of the world?

To start, it was actually a self-selection process by Avraham Avinu, who chose to find the Creator despite the whole world being against him. He passed this belief and knowledge to his son Yitzchak, who handed it on to Yaakov. Yaakov had twelve children, all of whom were worthy inheritors of their fathers' faith, and thus the nation of Israel was born.

When Hashem was preparing to give the Torah to His chosen nation, He offered it to the other nations of the world, but they turned it down. He wasn't hurt by this. That was the point. In order to be chosen, you have to want to be chosen, and willing to do whatever it requires of you.

We left Egypt because Hashem wanted us to be His people. We accepted the Torah because He wanted us to be his people. We spent forty years in the wilderness, going and coming whenever Hashem saw fit, because He wanted us to be His people – and we want to do what He wants. As we say in the Tefilos of Yom Tov, Hashem chose us from all other nations, He loved us, and was satisfied with us. Then, He elevated us from all other languages and sanctified us with His mitzvos. But what does it mean to have been elevated above all languages, and what does that have to do with Yom Tov?

Just as loving us and sanctifying us with His commandments means Hashem gave us something unique, Lashon Kodesh (lit. the holy tongue) is something the rest of the world does not have. When, in the lifetime of Avraham, Hashem dispersed the nations who tried building the Tower of Babel, and changed their language so they could not communicate, most of the world lost access to the language with which the world was created.

Not just a language formed of consensus and mutual agreement, the Hebrew language has depth far beyond just describing things so people understand them. Adam named all the animals by looking at their spiritual makeup and identifying the letters and names of

Hashem instilled in them. He didn't make up names; he understood what they had to be.

Part of the message of Sukkos is that despite the harvests we're enjoying, we understand where the success truly comes from. It is not our efforts, but Hashem's will which causes things to grow. Similarly, the words of Lashon Kodesh, the language gifted to us alone, are Hashem's choice of verbiage and it is not simple.

The Malbim, in his introduction to the book of Yeshayahu, says that no prophet used two words for the same thing. There are no synonyms in Lashon Kodesh. Each word is specific and has its own nuances. It is very meticulous. We who were chosen by Hashem are to utilize His precious language to grasp the secrets of His world and influence, and recognize that the words we use, as well as our actions, must be precise and carefully chosen – just as we were.

R' Yaakov Edelstein zt"l was the Rav of a modern secular Israeli city, Ramat HaSharon, one of the great Mekubalim of the generation, and an approachable Litvishe Dayan and Posek.

A series of illnesses left him without the capability to speak, and he communicated by writing. At one point, he recovered enough that his caregivers felt they could teach him how to speak again. They asked him to write down the two words he wanted to start with. R' Yaakov wrote "Amen" and "Todah" (Thank you.) Two words that say it all, Bein Adam LaMakom and Bein Adam Lachaveiro.

The Ramban (Parshas Bo) says the underlying reason for every mitzva is for Man to acknowledge Hashem as his creator. Amen is a short, two-syllable word that simply and succinctly accomplishes this mission. The same goes for the word Todah. People crave recognition. By thanking someone, you give him recognition that he is worth something and that you need him. Nothing can satisfy him more as you acknowledge his importance in your world and the world at large.
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RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

Every once in a while when reading a bed time story to the younger children I find myself in the end wiping a tear from the corner of my eye and wondering if any of the children are really capable of appreciating the depth of the seemingly simple story, if it is not meant more for the parents and if we get it either.

One such book reappeared on the bookshelf recently. It must have been with all the stuff for sukkos 'cause it certainly belongs there. It's called, "The Happiness Box". The plot is something like this. There's this kid that's never happy with what he has. He finds things to complain about all day. Whatever he has is not enough or not just right and all he can find is fault.

One day after his family moves into a beautiful

new house a giant package arrives. It's a washing machine or some other large appliance and the kid is suffering from existential nausea because it's not for him. His clever father convinces him that the box is the real item of desire and it's just for him. It's called "a happiness box" and while inside one must think only happy thoughts.

This boy accepts the premise of the box and at first begrudgingly but later with greater ease is able to generate happiness producing thoughts such as; "Sometimes my mother makes dinners I like." And other such affirming statements that put him into a state of mind that makes him feel rich and full. After a while he's complaining a lot less. Then he becomes anxious about going to summer camp because all his possessions need to fit neatly into a duffel bag and he would have to leave "the box" at home. What would become of his state of happiness? He then realizes the great truth that the happiness is not in his box but in his head. The important life lesson is well learned. The children are fast asleep but I am more awake.

The simple child's story reminds me a little of a bad joke about a fellow who claims his dog is so talented he can do anything he is commanded to do. The challenge is taken up by a friend who throws a stick a distance and commands the dog, "Fetch!"

The dog looks up at him and begins his diatribe. "All day long people tell me what to do. Roll over! Jump! Go through the fiery hoop! Good dog. Bad dog. Sit! Heal. Eat this! Don't eat that! I can't take it anymore. It's no fun being a dog. I hate it. I wish I were never born! The fellow interrupts the dog and tells him with a sense of outrage, "All I asked you to do was fetch." The dog answers back with surprise, "Ohhhhhh! I thought you said "Kvetch".

Sukkos is referred to in our liturgy as "the time of our happiness". How do we celebrate? We leave our lovely homes and sit exposed to the elements in little boxes. We are commanded by the Torah; "and you should rejoice with your holiday and be only happy!"

Maybe the story is not so simplistic and the joke not so (as we say in yiddish) "farfetched". It's very easy to be focused on what's missing in life; to give special recognition to the cruel and heartless; to the unfinished business of history and history of business. Even more so these days we need a way to regain a sense of optimism. How about 7 days in "a happiness box" to see what's right in G-d's world. Hearing clearly the commandment as it is pronounced is a critical point. No where does it say, "kvetch"!

We all know how we can feel sometimes and how it creates a contagion of negativity. Therefore we hung two signs in our sukkah. One upon entering reads, "You are entering a no kvetching zone". The other posted prominently reads, "Don't even think of kvetching in the sukkah!" The Vilna Gaon called this the hardest mitzvah in the Torah to fulfill. So, don't expect it to happen with a simple story, a bad joke, by reciting an

imperative verse, or by hanging a humorous sign but it sure is a good beginning. © 2019 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

TorahWeb

The celebration of Sukkos is a culmination of several cycles that occur every year. It is the last of the Shalosh Regalim, and Hashem now rests His Divine Presence on us completing the process of Yetzias Mitzrayim and kabbolas haTorah. Sukkos is also referred to in the Torah as the Chag Ha'asif -- the Harvest Festival -- thereby completing the agricultural year that had begun during the previous planting season. We also conclude the month of Tishrei, with its spiritual highs of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, by celebrating Sukkos.

It appears that the agricultural aspect of Sukkos is merely physical in nature, and yet when analyzed more carefully there is a spiritual dimension even to the Harvest Festival. This celebration is closely linked to the post Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur aspect of Sukkos. The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva perek 9) elaborates on the relationship between blessing and success in this world and our ultimate reward for mitzvah observance. True reward for performance of mitzvos cannot take place in this world; the benefits of mitzvah observance are spiritual and thus are only appropriate in the spiritual setting of the next world. If so, why does the Torah elaborate upon physical things such as bountiful harvests as a reward for mitzvah performance? The Rambam explains that the promises are not as a reward but rather a mechanism to further mitzvah observance. We cannot serve Hashem properly without the physical blessings bestowed on us. These blessings are only significant as they enable us to continue in our performance of mitzvos.

Based on this Rambam, we can understand an otherwise strange tefillah recited by the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur. After experiencing the most intense spiritual encounter with Hashem, as he leaves the Kodosh Hakodoshim, the Kohen Gadol offers a fervent prayer. We would have expected this prayer to be spiritual in nature, and yet he prays for seemingly very materialistic blessings. Requests for bountiful crops and economic prosperity seem out of touch with the spiritual dimension of the day. However, if we understand the role of physical blessing as the enabler for future spiritual success, this prayer fits perfectly into the tone of the day.

The celebration of Sukkos as the Harvest Festival is not just about physical produce. By marking the bountiful harvest on the heels of the Yomin Noraim we are confirming our belief as to why Hashem grants us these seemingly materialistic blessings: our harvest is only meaningful if it furthers the spiritual goals attained during the weeks preceding Sukkos.

Today, most of us are not directly involved in the world of agriculture and it is difficult for us to relate to the

notion of a Harvest Festival. Yet, the message of the role of physical bounty in the service of the spiritual is as true today as it was for our forefathers. As we celebrate Sukkos and express our thanks to Hashem for our bountiful physical "harvest," let us focus on its true worth as a way of enabling us to attain the spiritual "harvest" of Torah and mitzvos. With this mindset, the celebration of Sukkos is truly fitting as the culmination of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur experience. ©2014 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The holiday of Sukkot is unique in many ways, not the least of which is that it is known as "zman simchateinu -- the time of our joy." Although the word "joy" is sometimes used interchangeably with the word "happy" they actually have very different meanings.

Everyone wants to be happy. In fact, many people mistakenly believe that a person's life goal should be "to be happy." I have even seen the Dalai Lama quoted as saying that "the purpose of our lives is to be happy." While I have no idea in what context this was said (or if it was even said at all), it is an absolutely incorrect attitude. Being happy is a description of a momentary state of being. At any particular moment a person may be happy, sad, angry, jealous, etc. These emotions are generally outcomes caused by a specific event or occurrence. Such transitory feelings cannot be the "purpose" of our lives.

The following story (which has been incorrectly attributed to King Solomon), really brings home the point of how fleeting happiness can be and highlights the futility of trying to achieve it. There are many versions of this story and they all follow the same basic theme.

A wise king once wanted to test his most trusted advisor, so he gave him the following challenging task: "I will give you six months to devise a ring that will sadden me if I am happy and will cheer me up if I am sad." The minister set out to accomplish this seemingly impossible task. He spoke to other advisors, wise men, and many jewelers but no one knew how to devise this "magic ring" that the king desired. As the deadline drew near he had made no progress and he was getting desperate.

One day while wandering in the poorer section of the city he came across an old jeweler and asked about obtaining this "magic ring." The old man took out a gold ring and carved something on it. The advisor saw what was written and a smile spread across his face. He hurried off to the palace and presented it to the king. When the king saw it he too smiled in satisfaction. On the ring was carved: "THIS TOO SHALL PASS!"

Exactly 164 years ago, on September 30, 1859, Abraham Lincoln used a version of this very same story when he addressed the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society. He then commented, "How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! How consoling in

the depths of affliction!"

Still, everyone seems to have something to say about happiness. A friend of mine is fond of saying, "My wife and I had no idea what happiness meant until we had kids, and then it was too late."

I am reminded of a story about a person who is desperately searching for happiness -- he treks to the Himalayan mountains to seek out a guru and asks him, "Guru, what's the secret of happiness?" Guru: "Don't argue with stupid people." He replied, "Really? For that I traveled thousands of miles? That's total nonsense!" Guru: "You are absolutely right."

However, happiness is fleeting. Joy, on the other hand, is a state of mind that comes from a certain sense of self-satisfaction; feeling accomplished, having lasting relationships, achieving meaningful goals, and living with a set of values and ideals. A person who has a fulfilling life, one full of meaning and a certain sense of achievement, is able to reach a general sense of satisfaction with who they are. This leads to a sense of calm and peace of mind.

People who manage to achieve this will, of course, experience some things in life that will bring them momentary happiness and some things that will bring them passing sadness. But if their core identity is one of self-satisfaction then they are better able to weather the passing gales and whirlwinds of momentary emotions. Obviously, this is easier said than done. What are the steps one can take to get themselves to that state of self-satisfaction?

That is what this holiday is all about. As mentioned above, the Torah designates the Sukkot holiday as "our time of joy" (Leviticus 23:39-43). This begins with the fact that it takes place at the time of year when agrarian societies celebrated the rewards that came from the hard labor of farming. Thus, this holiday is also referred to in the Torah as the Harvest Festival (ibid.). This is the time of year when everyone reveled in the fruition of all their hard work.

Similarly, we are commanded to bring the four species; "On the first day you must take a fruit of the citron tree, a palm frond, myrtle branches, and willow branches that grow near a brook" (ibid.). The number four is very significant -- it always represents the disparate member of a unified whole -- e.g. the four directions or the four elements of creation fire, earth, wind, and water, or the four different types of sons of the Passover Haggadah, etc. Likewise, here the sages explain that the four species; etrog, lulav, hadas, and aravah represent the four types of Jews.

If a person is missing one of the four species the other three do not count toward the mitzvah -- positive commandment. The message of this holiday is that all Jews must come together in unison because we complete each other. This is the element of having the need to build meaningful relationships with all types of Jews.

This is also why the Torah commands us to move from our permanent homes to the temporary dwelling of outdoor booths (i.e. sukkah) for the entirety of the holiday. It brings home the message that everything that we have in this world, even our very homes, is temporal. We cannot find a true and lasting happiness in anything physical -- its only what we achieve and the relationships that we build that will bring us real joy.

There is one more extremely important behavior that we must incorporate into our lives that will genuinely bring us joy, and not coincidentally we are taught this behavior in the very laws of this holiday.

Maimonides, the great codifier of Jewish law, mentions a rather surprising custom related to the taking of the four species. He writes, "The following custom was observed in Jerusalem: A person would leave his house in the morning [carrying the four species] in his hand. He would enter the synagogue with it in his hand; pray while it was in his hand; go to visit the sick and comfort the mourners with it in his hand. When he entered the House of Study, he would send it home with his son or servant" (Laws of Sukkah and Lulav 7:24).

This is very odd. Maimonides wasn't just mentioning the daily schedule of those that resided in Jerusalem -- he was trying to show what the appropriate behavior was on the holiday. So what does he mean when he writes that they used to go and visit the sick and comfort the mourners while carrying the four species? It is doubly strange considering there is no law of mourning on the holiday -- all laws of shiva and mourning are absolutely abrogated by the holiday! So what does he mean they used to go and comfort the mourners?

While it is true that an individual is not permitted any overt acts of mourning and there is no official shiva, mourners are still sad. Maimonides is teaching us that part of the obligation of being joyful on this holiday is cheering those who are sad from a recent loss or depressed from an illness. In other words, one of the ways a person can become truly joyful is by helping others through their hardships. Thus it becomes an obligation on this holiday to go and cheer the sick and comfort those who have suffered a recent loss. A person brings the four species along with him because both the four species and helping others are all elements of the holiday.

This is why the holiday of Sukkot is one where we focus on helping others, specifically by inviting guests. In fact, according to the ancient book of Kabbalah known as the Zohar, our forefather Abraham welcomed the three angels into his home during the holiday of Sukkot; "Sirs, if you would, do not go on without stopping by me. Let some water be brought to wash your feet. Rest under the tree, I will get you some bread to refresh yourselves" (Genesis 18:3-5). According to the Zohar, when Abraham said to "rest under the tree" he was referring them to his sukkah.

This is also why the holiday of Sukkot is when we specifically have the custom to invite our seven supernal guests (the famous seven leaders and spiritual heads of the Jewish people: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Aaron, Moses, and David) known in Aramaic as ushpizin -- because this is the holiday of inviting others in to our homes.

It is well-known (and well researched) that the most joyful people are those who focus on bringing happiness and joy to others. That is why the holiday of Sukkot requires us to do for others, because in doing so we will truly experience the holiday and fulfill it as a "time of joy." © 2023 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org

YITZ WEISS

Hug Samayach!

One of the themes of Sukkot is to recognize that Hashem is our protector. We go out of our permanent homes into a temporary dwelling and expose ourselves to the elements. In so doing we recall that Hashem was our guardian when we left Egypt into the desert and remains our protector today.

The minimum requirement for a kosher sukkah is not four walls, but two walls and a tefach (a handbreadth). If we were to construct a sukkah based on the minimum, we would really be exposed to the elements! Two walls and a bit don't seem to offer much protection! How are we to feel secure?

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l compares the sukkah measurements to an arm: two "walls" - i.e. from the shoulder to the elbow, and from the elbow to the wrist, and a tefach - the hand. Rav Auerbach says that sitting in the sukkah one is literally in the embrace of G-d!

May this year be one where we see the protection of G-d on a daily basis and the coming of Moshiach! Have a great yom tov! *This dvar torah was told by Rabbi Aaron Cohen in Cong. Tifereth Israel, Passaic, NJ*

