

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

“**A**nd Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not dimmed nor his energy abated. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.”

With these words the life of the greatest leader Israel ever had draws to a close. The Torah ends as it began, with an act of tenderness on the part of God. Just as He had then breathed the breath of life into the first man, so now He buries the greatest of men as the breath of life departs from him. There is a sense of closure: Adam and Eve had been prevented from eating from the Tree of Life, but Moses gave the Torah - "a tree of life to all who hold fast to it" - to Israel, granting them their taste of eternity. There is also a sense of exile and incompleteness: just as Adam and Eve had been forced to leave Eden, so Moses was prevented from entering the promised land.

Adam and Eve may have been tempted to look back; Moses looked forward. But both stories are essentially about human mortality. The name Adam itself comes from the word *adamah*, "the earth." Indeed the same play on words appears in both cases. In that of Adam: "And the Lord God formed the man [ha-adam] from the dust of the ground [ha-adamah] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."

In the case of Moses: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than any man [ha-adam] on the face of the earth [ha-adamah]."

The parallel is striking. Though we are each in the "image and likeness" of God, we are also "dust of the earth," embodied souls, part of the natural universe with its inexorable laws of growth, decay and decline. We cannot live for ever, and neither the first man, fashioned by God Himself, nor the greatest man, who saw God "face to face," is an exception to the rule. For each of us there is a Jordan we will not cross, a journey we will not finish, a paradise we will not reach this side of the grave. But we have within us immortal longings.

There never was nor ever will be another Moses, but his life was as eloquent as his teachings,

and no less challenging. In him, every conventional wisdom about leadership is overturned.

We judge leaders by their success. Moses failed at almost every stage. When he first tried to secure freedom for the Israelites, Pharaoh responded by making their burdens worse. The Israelites complained. They continued to complain through the long years of wandering. They had no food; they had no water; the food was boring; the water was bitter; they wanted to go back. Forty days after receiving the greatest revelation in history, the people had made a golden calf. On the brink of entry into the land, the spies brought back a demoralising report, delaying their arrival by forty years. Korach challenged his leadership. His own brother and sister spoke negatively about him. He himself, for a momentary lapse in striking the rock, was forbidden to enter the promised land. In his final speeches he predicted that Israel, having received every blessing, would forget its vocation and suffer exile again. Can a life of failures be a success? In worldly terms, no. In spiritual terms, emphatically yes.

We expect a leader to have a sense of destiny, personal greatness. Leaders generally believe in themselves. Moses did not. When asked by God to lead the Jewish people, he refused time and again. "Who am I," he said, "that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" I am unworthy. The people will not believe in me. Yet it is this man, apparently so self-effacing, who takes hold of a fractious, recalcitrant people and turns it, within the space of a generation, into a nation capable of conquering a land, establishing a state, and co-authoring with God surely the most remarkable story of any group on earth. We have to remind ourselves that the man who delivered, in the Book of Devarim, the most eloquent and visionary speeches ever uttered, was the same person as the one who said, early in the Book of Shemot, "I am not a man of words, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." Moses' greatness lay precisely in the fact that he did not believe in himself. He believed in the Caller and the call.

Moses was not Abraham, irenic, serene, composed, a man who lived far from the clamour of politics, private in his relationship with God. He belongs to a later stage of history, when Israel is no longer a family clan but a people, with all that implies in terms of potential conflict and strife. He is a man poised

between earth and heaven, bringing God's word to the people and the people's word to God, at times wrestling with both, trying to persuade the people to obey, and God to forgive. Not for him a peaceful death like that of Abraham, "an old man and full of years." Instead Moses dies, "his eyes undimmed, his energy unabated." In Dylan Thomas' phrase, he does not go "gently into that dark night." Indeed the first half of the phrase explains the second half: Moses' energy was unabated because his eyes were undimmed, because he never lost the vision that had driven him since his encounter with God at the burning bush. He was a burning bush himself, aflame with a passion for justice, who (unlike Aaron, his brother) preferred principle to compromise.

Rashi notes that the mourning for Aaron was more widespread than for Moses (of Aaron it says, "the entire house of Israel grieved"; in the case of Moses the word "entire" is missing). The reason is that Aaron was a man of peace; Moses was a man of truth. We love peace; but truth is sometimes hard to bear. People of truth have enemies as well as friends.

One thing above all else shines from this passage: Ha-ish Mosheh, "Moses, the man. This appellation occurs five times in the Torah (Ex. 11:3, Ex. 32:1, Ex. 32:23; Num. 12:3; Deut. 33:1). Moses was the greatest human being who ever lived, but he was and remained a human being. This is an unmistakable theme of these closing chapters, conveyed in several ways. "To this day no one knows where [Moses'] grave is" - a statement to discourage his burial site from becoming a place of pilgrimage or worship. "There on the mountain that you have climbed you will die and be gathered to your people, just as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people. This is because both of you broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites . . ." The repeated references to Moses's sin are reminders that "There is none on earth so righteous as to do only good and not sin" - not even the greatest. Long before the birth of other monotheisms, the Torah is setting out an axiom fundamental to its vision: if God is God then humanity can become humanity. Never may the boundaries be blurred.

Judaism came to birth in a world in which the dividing line between heaven and earth was anything but clear. The gods were semi-human. The epic heroes of humanity were semi-divine. It is precisely this lack of clarity against which Judaism is a sustained note of protest. The heroes of Judaism are not gods in human form. To the contrary, the absolute transcendence of God means the absolute responsibility of mankind. Precisely in Judaism more than any other faith in history, the human person reaches its full stature, dignity and freedom. We are not tainted with original sin. We are not bidden to total submission. These are honourable ways of seeing the human condition, but they are not the Jewish way. (I once pointed out the

difference between the synagogues and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The former - the Altneu shul in Prague is one of the few surviving examples - were small, modest, humble; the latter magnificent, often taking centuries to complete. I suggested that in a Cathedral the worshippers are aware of the vastness of God and the smallness of mankind. In a shul, we sense the closeness of God and the greatness of mankind. I stand by that analysis). That is why Judaism was and always will be a distinctive voice in the conversation of mankind.

Ha-ish Moshe: Moses, mortal, fallible, full of doubts about himself, often frustrated, occasionally angry, once falling into an abyss of despair - that is the Moses who, more than anyone else, set his seal on the people he led to freedom, permanently enlarging their horizons of aspiration. The Moses we meet in the Torah is not a mythical figure, an epic hero, an archetype, his blemishes airbrushed away to turn him into an object of adoration; and he is all the greater for it. He is human, gloriously human.

Maimonides writes, in his great declaration of human freewill: "Every human being [note: not just "every Jew"] may become righteous like Moses our teacher or wicked like Jeroboam." Such an assertion, made of any other founder of any other faith, would sound absurd, but of Moses it does not sound absurd. His very humanity brings him close and summons us to greatness. Moses was the greatest of the prophets - and the prophets themselves lived among the people. They had no robes of office. They administered no sacred rites. Though God spoke to them, they spoke in words people could understand. They were not oracles, shamans, people wrapped in mystery who spoke in parables and enigmas that only the initiated could fathom. The clear, absolute, ontological boundary between heaven and earth means that God never asks humanity to be more or less than human.

This is an austere view of the world but it also the most lucid I know, and ultimately the most humane. Lucid because it insists on a radical distinction between the infinite and finite, the eternal and ephemeral, God and us. The most humane because it invests each of us, equally, with dignity sub specie aeternitatis. We are, all of us, the image and likeness of God. We need no intermediary to speak to God. We need no sacrifice to apologise to God. We need no priest or divine intercessor to be forgiven by God. We are each the son or daughter of God.

The distance between us and God may be infinite, but there is a bridge across the abyss. It is not a person or a place, but something altogether different. It is language, words, communication. In revelation God speaks to us. In prayer we speak to God. Moses' greatness was that he - the man who said, "I am not a man of words" - brought us the divine word: the written Torah which never ages, and the oral Torah through

which it is made new and alive in every generation. Judaism is a religion of holy words, words that when internalised have the power to transform a "stiff-necked people" born in slavery into "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" dedicated to creating a society of gracious and collective freedom. Judaism is the ongoing conversation between the "I" of God and the "Thou" of mankind, in which each of us has a share.

It is that shared conversation that allows an Abraham, who calls himself "dust and ashes," to say to God "Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?" It is that possibility of dialogue that allows Moses to say, "But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book You have written." It is that ongoing dialectic of written and oral Torah - revelation and interpretation - that has embraced patriarchs and prophets, sages and scribes, poets and philosophers, commentators and codifiers, and has not ceased from Moses' day to ours.

Not wrongly, therefore, did Jewish tradition when it sought to accord Moses the highest honour, call him not Moses the liberator, the law-giver, architect of a nation, military hero or even greatest of the prophets, but simply Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher. "Moses commanded us a Law, the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." Those words - no mere words but the foundational document, the covenantal text shaping the pattern of Jewish life and the structure of Jewish history - are in every generation the link between us and heaven: never broken, never annulled, never lost, never old. God may "hide His face" but He never withdraws His word.

As we take our leave of Moses, and he of us, the picture we have is indelible: of the man who failed yet succeeded, who came close to despair yet left an immortal legacy of hope, who died without finishing his journey yet who has been with the Jewish people on its journeys ever since. It is his very humanity that shines forth from the pages of the Torah, sometimes with such radiance that we are afraid to look, but always and only a mortal and fallible human being, a medium through whom God spoke, an emissary through whom God acted, reminding us eternally that though we too are only mortal, we too can achieve greatness to the extent that we allow the presence of God to flow through us, His word guiding us, His breath giving us life. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l*
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RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"**A**nd no human knows of [Moses'] burial place even to this day." (Deut. 34:6) Amid the great joy of Shemini Atzeret-Simḥat Torah, emanating from the biblical commandment "and you shall thoroughly rejoice" (Deut. 16:15), a curious

dialectic between celebration and solemnity nevertheless exists. This is palpable especially in Israel, when the dancing and festive readings from the end of Deuteronomy and beginning of Genesis are followed shortly thereafter by the recitation of the Yizkor memorial prayers.

Perhaps the duality of the day stems from the fact that we conclude Deuteronomy with the death of Moses, about whom the Bible testifies: "And there has not arisen a prophet again in Israel similar to Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10). From the perspective of Moses' death, the fundamental joy of Simḥat Torah appears somewhat of an anomaly. How can a day on which we read of this great loss also serve as one of the most festive days of the Jewish calendar year?

I believe the answer is to be found in the verse, "and no human knows of [Moses'] burial place even to this day" (Deut. 34:6). Many explain correctly that this has prevented the creation of a Mosaic shrine and a cult of Moses worship. I would like to add to this an additional understanding, based on the following vignette – which I heard from one of my mentors, Rabbi Moshe Besdin – that sheds profound light on the reason why the greatest of our prophets is denied a known gravesite.

A small impoverished town in Poland, with a limited number of Jewish families who were all very pious but ignorant of the holy texts, was in need of a rabbi. The parnass (community leader) was dispatched to the famous Volozhin Yeshiva to search for a candidate, but after being turned down by the most promising students, he became desperate. He finally approached a serious but other-worldly student with the bold request: "Come to be our town rabbi. We are a famous town: Rabbi Akiva, the Rambam and the Vilna Gaon are all buried in our community." The student, adept at Talmud but ignorant of Jewish history, imagined that a town with a history of such illustrious scholarly leadership must still have at least a quorum of Torah scholars; He thanked God for his good fortune and immediately left with the parnass.

After a few weeks it became clear that no-one in town possessed even rudimentary Torah knowledge. The devastated young rabbi asked the parnass to take him to the cemetery. "At least I can contemplate your former glory at the gravesites of Rabbi Akiva, the Rambam, and Vilna Gaon!"

"You didn't understand me," responded the parnass. "In Volozhin, the students cited these great rabbis, and debated their legal arguments and discussions, as if they were walking among them. Rabbi Akiva argues, the Rambam decides, the Vilna Gaon rules. In your yeshiva, they are truly alive. In our town, no one has ever heard of what they wrote. In our town, they are dead and buried."

When the Torah tells us that no one knows of

the location of Moses' gravesite, it is because for the Jewish people, Moses never died. We publicly read and privately contemplate his teachings on a daily basis. The greatest proof of his continuing presence in our lives is the fact that we conclude his Divine revelation only to immediately begin to read his words once again as we start the biblical cycle anew.

Therefore, on Simchat Torah, the day on which we read of Moses' physical passing, we should wholeheartedly rejoice in the eternity of his teachings, emblemized by one of the signature songs of Simchat Torah: "Moshe emet, v'Torato emet!" – "Moses is truth, and his Torah is truth!"

We can similarly understand the seemingly incongruous tradition of reciting the memorial Yizkor prayers on festivals. But in fact, the practice perfectly captures the essence of the day. In those precious moments quietly reflecting on our deceased loved ones, we are offered a unique opportunity to consider the ways in which their qualities and love of Judaism continue to impact us. Indeed, there are few sources of more profound happiness than the realization that our loved ones live on through us, our children, and our descendants. They live on – and so are not gone and buried – just as Moshe Rabbenu lives on, and is not buried and covered over as long as we still read and learn his Torah! © 2020 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"An ox or sheep or goat that shall be born, it shall remain with its mother for seven days..." (Vayikra 22:27) The Torah tells us that a kosher animal intended to be used for a sacrifice cannot be offered immediately. Rather, only from the eighth day and onwards is it suitable for a korban. Some say this is so that it has lived through a Shabbos, which gives strength to all creatures. But there is an interesting Midrash on the topic.

The Midrash tells us that we must wait a full week for the animal to be sacrificed because were it offered on the first day it was born, people might make the mistaken assumption that it is being offered to the heaven or earth, which were created on the first day.

Were it offered on the second day, it could mistakenly be thought it was offered to the firmament created on day two, or to the land and sea on the third day; the sun, moon, and stars on the fourth day, and so on. Says Hashem, "Wait a complete week and know that I created the entire world and rested on the seventh day, then offer it for My name's sake."

This Midrash is a bit difficult to understand. If one were to sacrifice on any of those days, the connection to the heavens, the sun, or the animals is all only because that was the day on which Hashem created them, and certainly, one would remember that

Hashem created everything! Without that knowledge, the connection to these items doesn't begin.

Perhaps, though, we are being taught how to come closer to Hashem, which is the essence of korbanos. Even though the underlying cause of the offering would be Hashem's Creation, people could conflate His power with that of the heavenly bodies, or other creations. This would serve to dilute recognition of His glory, much as the origins of idol worship according to some sources was that people wished to give honor not only to Hashem, but to His legions, much as one would honor a minister of the king as a means of honoring the king.

But Hashem doesn't want that. He wants us to recall that ain od milvado, there is nothing but Him. So, we wait until the animal's week is complete, and we recall that Hashem created the world and then ceased creating on the seventh day. No partners, no middlemen, just Hashem. By focusing on that, we truly give all glory to G-d.

A kollel fellow in Israel finally found the esrog of his dreams. As is customary, he took it from the store and brought it to his Rav for a ruling on its kashrus for use. R' Yehoshua Neuwirth z"l better known as the Shmiras Shabbos K'Hilchaso, looked at the esrog and admired its beauty, then said, "It's truly a stunning esrog. Take it back to the dealer. It's posul."

The man was shocked. "What's wrong with it? I didn't find a single blemish!" "How much does it cost?" asked the Rav. "500 shekel," replied the confused man.

"Tell me," asked R' Neuwirth. "Does your wife have a new dress for Yom Tov? Don't your children have holes in their shoes? You can buy a cheaper esrog which will still be kosher and then take care of your family's needs. For you, an esrog that costs so much is unfit for use."



"Take to yourselves on the first day, fruit of a lovely tree, palm branches... and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G-d..." (Vayikra 23:40)

The mitzva of Lulav and Esrog (along with Hadasim and Aravos) is central to Sukkos. The four species represent different types of Jews, as well as different parts of the body. It's a beautiful mitzvah, but what does it have to do with being happy before Hashem? A deeper look may help us understand it. We know that the mitzva can only be fulfilled when the four species are tied/held together. The unity is essential for the happiness.

As we said they represent different types of Jews, it conveys the concept of Jewish unity as a basic necessity for happiness. When we are fighting with others, or feeling jealous or like we're competing with them, we cannot be happy even with ourselves. The Gemara says these four species are chosen because

they depend on rain, and we are asking Hashem to bestow rain upon us soon after the holiday. Perhaps this is why these two concepts are juxtaposed in a single verse.

Rain is the symbol for parnasa, financial success. Just as no one could blame someone else for causing the rain not to fall, neither can they blame others for impacting their livelihoods.

Though it might seem possible under normal circumstances, we understand that though Hashem set the world up to operate on a system, He maintains control of the overrides. Hashem doesn't allow anyone to affect us, negatively or positively, unless He has decreed it to be this way.

Therefore, at this time of the harvest, we are adjured to hold these species in a single bundle, and consider what it represents. There are others in the world with us who are different. Each of us has their own needs, and Hashem meets them, just as He meets the needs of the different plants and animals in the world.

Once we recognize that we have no reason to be at odds with anyone else, we are able to feel more camaraderie and love for others. We no longer feel jealous or petty about something others have that we don't. We are reminded that Hashem is in control of everything, just as He is of the rain, and we can be happy knowing that we are all getting exactly what we need, directly from Him.

A printer had an established long-time business in a town in Eretz Yisrael. One day, a young fellow opened up a new printing business not too far away. The established printer's family was outraged. "How dare he come in and try to take away the business?!" and tried to force him out.

The old printer, however, did not do so and he was not upset. Instead, he invited the new competitor over and shared with him insights into that community and taught him the tricks of the trade. The older man's family was dumbfounded.

"Why should I not teach him the business?" he asked. "My livelihood doesn't come from my work, but from HaShem. If this fellow takes half my work, I will still make my destined portion, but with less effort. Should I not then gladly teach him what I know?" © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

This week begins the holiday of Sukkot! This very special holiday starts Monday evening, October 6th, and ends with sundown on Monday, October 13th. Immediately adjacent to Sukkot is the holiday of Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah, which begins Monday night (following the end of Sukkot) and – when outside the land of Israel – is celebrated for two days (this year, Tuesday and Wednesday).

The holiday's name is derived from the Torah mandated obligation to live in a "sukkah – a temporary outdoor hut," which symbolizes that the Almighty sheltered the Jewish people when they left Egypt: "So that your future generations will know that I sheltered the Children of Israel when I brought them out of Egypt" (Leviticus 23:43).

The word sukkah comes from the materials that we use as a temporary roof to cover these huts, which is called the "schach – shelter." We are enjoined to live these seven days in our sukkah – we are obligated to take our meals, to sleep, and to try to spend as much time in it as possible.

Sukkot is celebrated as a harvest festival; a time when we look at all the "fruits" of our labor. In other words, it is the time of year when we step back and appreciate all that we have achieved through our hard work. But it is also a time to appreciate all the good that the Almighty has bestowed upon us.

In the last five years I have spent quite a bit of time in rural areas of the USA, aka "The Heartland." I have come to marvel at their religiosity and the immanence of the Almighty in their lives. Of course, it is no coincidence that farmers – people who work the earth – are amongst the most religious of people, trusting in the benevolence of God. They take a perfectly good edible seed and stick it in the ground – not knowing whether there will be rain, drought, floods, or pestilence. They put forth arduous work without any guarantees of outcome. They trust in the Almighty for their food, their livelihood, and their very existence.

Likewise, the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah teaches us that our lives are totally intertwined with God. We often lose sight of this key element of our existence. We tend to think that our possessions, our money, our homes, our intelligence, etc. will protect us. But during the holiday of Sukkot, we are exposed to the elements in a temporary hut. Living in a sukkah puts life into perspective. Our corporeal bodies are even more transient than our possessions.

Life is vulnerable. Jewish history has borne out how our homes and communities are fleeting. No matter how well-established, wealthy, and "secure" we have become in a host country, in the end it too is a temporary dwelling. Our trust must be in the Almighty who sheltered us when He took us out of Egypt and continues to do so every day of our lives.

Aside from the mitzvot of eating and sleeping in a sukkah, we have another unique mitzvah on the holiday of Sukkot. The Torah informs us in Leviticus 23:40 of a special commandment for Sukkot: to take the arba minim – the Four Species. The four distinct species that we are commanded to take are 1) etrog – citron, 2) lulav – a branch from a date-palm, 3) hadassim – myrtle branches, and 4) aravot – willow branches.

Being a harvest festival, it is only natural that

we collect different things that grow and incorporate them into our prayer services for the holiday. In the prayer section known as Hallel we gather these four species in our hands and wave them in the four directions of the compass as well as up and down. This is symbolic of several things, including a reminder that the Almighty's presence is everywhere.

Of course, this reminds me of a funny story. Anyone who has ever shopped for a set of arba minim knows that they can range in price from fairly reasonable \$25-\$30 to outrageously expensive – sometimes in the many thousands of dollars. The main driver of the difference in the cost of the four species is, in general, due to the rarity of the citron.

A citron is one of the original varieties of citrus fruits. By contrast, the common lemon is a hybrid fruit. Lemons were bred to produce a citrus fruit with a smooth and thin rind, an abundance of interior fruit, and an astringent flavor. Citrons have a thick and bumpy rind, which is susceptible to all sorts of blemishes, and have far less fruit within. Citrons also have a milder flavor than lemons. For this reason, many of the original citron varieties were grafted to produce a superior fruit.

Since the Torah mandates that a citron be used for the mitzvah of the four species, obtaining a graft-free citron is required. Thus, the provenance of the etrog has to be carefully documented. In addition, the Torah stipulates that the etrog must be particularly beautiful – thus it has to be blemish free, of a particular shape, color, etc. All these details can drive the price of a set of four species through the roof.

A friend of mine who prided himself on being able to snag bargains decided he would wait until the final day before the holiday to acquire his set of arba minim. In the closing minutes, he went into his local Judaica store to negotiate a purchase. Seeing that there were many, many different citrons still available he calculated that the store proprietor would give him an absolute bargain so as to not get stuck with them once the holiday began and they became “unsellable.”

He sauntered over to the table with the most expensive citrons, where the prices started at \$100 each. He picked up the nicest one and told the shop owner that he'd pay \$20 for it. But the storekeeper was not having it. He told him that the best he was willing to do was \$80. My friend argued for a full 15 minutes, pointing out that the holiday would begin in a couple of hours and at that point they wouldn't be worth anything. But the shop owner held his ground. My friend bought the etrog for \$80, somewhat consoled by the fact that he managed to get 20% off the retail price. He collected the rest of the four species and started to head out the door.

As he was leaving an elderly Chinese woman entered to the store and gestured at the tables of citrons. “How much for the lemons?” she asked the storekeeper. He looked at her and without blinking said,

“They're two for a dollar.”

There is an enormous lesson here. Almost every “thing” in life has no innate value – the value is only what we assign to it. All the money, gold, and precious jewels in the world are absolutely valueless on a far-flung desert island with only one inhabitant, scarce food, and no trade. The only “things” of true value are things that cannot be purchased – like time, health, and relationships.

We must recognize that wealth is only a tool, one that we must utilize to improve certain aspects of our lives. Wealth is only a means to an end, not an end unto itself. Only the most foolish of people would waste the precious commodities of time and real relationships to collect vast sums of wealth that they will never even be able to spend.

The great medieval philosopher known as Maimonides addresses the futility of human beings striving to build lasting monuments (and homes) while neglecting the eternal cultivation of the soul. In his magnum opus on philosophy known as *Moreh Nevuchim* – The Guide for the Perplexed (III:12), Maimonides critiques human vanity: “Man's days are numbered, and his existence is fleeting. Yet he builds lofty structures, the endurance of which he cannot guarantee for even a few years. He imagines that his name will be remembered forever by means of these edifices, but his soul departs, and he knows nothing of what becomes of them.”

Maimonides is highlighting one of life's greatest contradictions: a short-lived being devotes his life to erecting structures intended to last centuries, instead of being far more concerned with the cultivation of his immortal soul. This parallels *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), where King Solomon laments that a man toils and amasses, only for another to inherit. “For what has man of all his labor [...] all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief” (2:22-23).

Maimonides interprets these verses to mean that human achievements in the physical realm, no matter how lasting in appearance, are ephemeral compared to the eternal pursuits of knowledge and virtue. He similarly writes in his introduction (*Shemoneh Prakim* Chapter 5) to *Pirkei Avot* – Ethics of our Fathers, “Foolish people weary themselves all their days with building palaces, collecting wealth, and seeking honor. Their souls are consumed by vain desires, until they die without attaining wisdom.”

It is for this reason that we read the book of *Kohelet* on the Shabbat of Sukkot. A major theme of *Kohelet* is the futility of mundane pursuits and pleasures, and the search for a deeper meaning to life. *Kohelet* jars us from our contentment with the reminder that mundane accomplishments are fleeting and empty. Even at the close of the harvest, we must seek real achievement and fulfillment.

This is the message of the holiday of Sukkot. It

takes place during the season of the gathering of all our produce, a payday of sorts. Yet we are commanded to move into a temporary dwelling – one that represents the temporary and transient nature of both our lives and our world. According to our sages, the sukkah represents the sheltering embrace of the Almighty. We are made to recognize that the true purpose of our lives is to connect to the Almighty and live by His eternal value system.

When the baseline for happiness in our lives isn't measured in terms of wealth acquisition, but rather by acquiring and maintaining a relationship with God, spending time with our loved ones, and living true Torah lives we can begin to appreciate all that we have, not what we do not.

In this way we are given the opportunity to focus on all the blessings in our lives. We should all try to internalize how fortunate we are to be living at a time that our ancestors could not even begin to imagine; the overall peace and tranquility we have experienced for the majority of our lives and the creature comforts and personal power that we take for granted far exceeds anything previous generations might have ever dreamed possible.

As we see in the book of Kohelet – life itself is dangerous and fragile. It is therefore doubly important to appreciate what we have when we have it – and be thankful to the Almighty for all the blessings in our lives. © 2025 Rabbi Y. Zweig and shabbatshalom.org

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 (*murkev*). 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 ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

An Abundance of Joy

A fundamental transformation takes place during the month of Tishrei, as we shift from the mood that permeates the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur to that which is felt on Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres -- Simchas Torah. The Rambam (Hilchos Chanuka 3:6) paraphrases the reason given by Chazal as to why no hallel is recited on the Yomim Noraim. Chazal (Rosh Hashana 32b) state that it would be inconceivable to celebrate with hallel at a time when the books of life and death are open. The Rambam describes these days as days of teshuva and fear and therefore not days of abundant joy. Although the Rambam does not take the approach that Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have no aspect of joy associated with them, he does emphasize that the joy is mitigated by the solemnity of this time. Concerning Sukkos, however, the Rambam (Hilchos Lulav 8:12) invokes the identical phrase "abundant joy" in describing the celebration of Sukkos; what was absent during the Yomim Noraim defines the essence of the Sukkos.

The transformation from a time of non-

abundant joy to a time characterized by abundant joy is a result of the proper observance of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. If the awe of these days inspired one to teshuva there is a tremendous sense of relief following Yom Kippur. The uncertainty about the outcome of one's judgment is resolved and there is an abundance of joy that is now felt. This feeling transforms Sukkos into a time of "zman simchasenu" to the greatest degree.

During Sukkos we reach the height of simcha in the Beis Hamikdash. The Rambam cites the passuk (Vayikra 23:40) that highlights the ultimate celebration of Sukkos as occurring in the Beis Hamikdash. As such, it appears that we, who live in a time when there is no Beis Hamikdash, lack the ability to properly observe the dimension of simcha which is so integral to this yom tov. Perhaps the celebration of Shemini Atzeres -- Simchas Torah has a special meaning for us who live during a time of churban Beis Hamikdash. What aspect of avodas Hashem do we still have that remains from the Beis Hamikdash? During Neila we recite a tefilla which concludes that after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, we only have the Torah. This tefilla is emphasizing that the Torah was a feature of the Beis Hamikdash that is still present. Torah was actually the central theme of the Beis Hamikdash -- the aron housed the luchos and the Sanhedrin sat in the Lishkas Hagazis. Thus, the Written and the Oral Torah were the heart and soul of the Beis Hamikdash. The only part of the Beis Hamikdash that remains is the Torah itself. As Sukkos comes to an end and we celebrate the last yom tov of Tishrei, the abundant joy that was once felt in the Beis Hamikdash accompanies the Torah itself. Klal Yisrael adopted the minhagim of Simchas Torah as the most appropriate way to conclude this inspiring month. Abundant joy as we celebrate with the Torah itself completes the transformation from the Yomim Noraim to Zman Simchaseinu.

It is particularly fitting that talmud Torah be the expression of our greatest joy. In the beracha we recite every morning before beginning our study of Torah we insert a unique request: we ask Hashem that our Torah study be enjoyable. Although all mitzvos should preferably be performed in the state of joy, talmud Torah is unique in that simcha is an integral part of our study of Torah. In the introduction to the sefer Eglei Tal the theme is developed that the amount of joy one experiences during talmud Torah impacts on the mitzva proper. Thus, a plea for success in reaching that simcha is incorporated into our Birchas haTorah. As we dance with our sifrei Torah at the culmination of Zman Simchasenu, we prepare for the year ahead. We look forward to a year of simchas haTorah and daven for the opportunity to celebrate our time of abundant joy in years to come in the place of simcha, the Beis Hamikdash, may it be rebuilt soon in our days. © 2023

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RABBI ZVI MILLER

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Moshe was the Father of all Prophets. He, alone, attained the highest level of Divine knowledge. When Moshe's tenure of leadership was complete, HaShem chose Yehoshua bin Nun to be Moshe's successor. It would be reasonable to assume that Yehoshua was selected because he, too, was outstanding in Torah scholarship.

However, there were others in this generation who were superior to Yehoshua in Torah scholarship. If so, what qualifications did HaShem recognize in Yehoshua that merited him with the leadership?

The Torah revealed to Moshe the reason why HaShem chose Yehoshua, "Yehoshua has served you with outstanding devotion and has afforded you much honor. He would always be the first one in morning to greet you and the last one at night to depart from your presence. Each day he would arrange the benches in the study hall, as well as, place fresh tablecloths on the tables. Since he served you with his whole heart, it is fitting that he should serve the People of Israel, as the verse says: 'The one who guards the fig tree shall eat its fruits and the one who guards his master shall be honored.'" (Midrash Raba 12)

Amazingly, the primary criterion for leadership of the Jewish people is not Torah wisdom! Rather, Yehoshua merited leading the Nation of Israel because he devoted himself, on a daily basis, to honor Moshe, his teacher. Additionally, he regularly honored the Torah itself as well as its students.

Yehoshua's love of Torah reflected his heartfelt recognition of Torah's supreme and incomparable preciousness. He expressed his passion for Torah through honoring Moshe Rabenu and his students.

Before Moshe's passing, he transferred his knowledge of Torah to Yehoshua. The love of Torah and its students, that Yehoshua had developed, made him a fitting vessel to receive the Torah.

May our hearts be filled with love of Torah and honor for its students. In turn, HaShem will bless us with Torah wisdom and many opportunities to serve the People of Israel. © 1997 Rabbi Z. Miller & The Salant Foundation

