

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

What exactly is a sukkah? What is it supposed to represent?

The question is essential to the mitzvah itself. The Torah says: "Live in sukkot for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in sukkot so that your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in sukkot when I brought them out of Egypt: I am the Lord your G-d" (Lev. 23: 42-43). In other words, knowing - reflecting, understanding, being aware - is an integral part of the mitzvah. For that reason, says Rabbah in the Talmud (Sukkah 2a), a sukkah that is taller than twenty cubits (about thirty feet or nine metres high) is invalid because when the sechach, the "roof," is that far above your head, you are unaware of it. So what is a sukkah?

On this, two Mishnaic sages disagreed. Rabbi Eliezer held that the sukkah represents the clouds of glory that surrounded the Israelites during the wilderness years, protecting them from heat during the day, cold during the night, and bathing them with the radiance of the Divine presence. This view is reflected in a number of the Targumim. Rashi in his commentary takes it as the "plain sense" of the verse.

Rabbi Akiva on the other hand says sukkot mammash, meaning a sukkah is a sukkah, no more and no less: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. It has no symbolism. It is what it is (Sukkah 11b).

If we follow Rabbi Eliezer then it is obvious why we celebrate by making a sukkah. It is there to remind us of a miracle. All three pilgrimage festivals are about miracles. Pesach is about the miracle of the exodus when G-d brought us out of Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot is, according to the oral Torah, about the miracle of the revelation at Mount Sinai when, for the only time in history, G-d appeared to an entire nation. Sukkot is about G-d's tender care of his people, mitigating the hardships of the journey across the desert by surrounding them with His protective cloud as a parent wraps a young child in a blanket. Long afterward,

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the sight of the blanket evokes memories of the warmth of parental love.

Rabbi Akiva's view, though, is deeply problematic. If a sukkah is merely a hut, what was the miracle? There is nothing unusual about living in a hut if you are living a nomadic existence in the desert. It's what the Bedouin did until recently. Some still do. Why should there be a festival dedicated to something ordinary, commonplace and non-miraculous?

Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) says the sukkah was there to remind the Israelites of their past so that, at the very moment they were feeling the greatest satisfaction at living in Israel - at the time of the ingathering of the produce of the land - they should remember their lowly origins. They were once a group of refugees without a home, living in a favela or a shanty town, never knowing when they would have to move on. Sukkot, says Rashbam, is integrally connected to the warning Moses gave the Israelites at the end of his life about the danger of security and affluence: Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your G-d ... Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery ... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." (Deut. 8: 11-17)

Sukkot, according to Rashbam, exists to remind us of our humble origins so that we never fall into the complacency of taking freedom, the land of Israel and the blessings it yields, for granted, thinking that it happened in the normal course of history.

However there is another way of understanding Rabbi Akiva, and it lies in one of the most important lines in the prophetic literature. Jeremiah says, in words we recited on Rosh Hashanah, "I remember the loving-kindness of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2). This is one of the very rare lines in Tanakh that speaks in praise not of G-d but of the people Israel.

"How odd of G-d / to choose the Jews," goes the famous rhyme, to which the answer is: "Not quite so odd: the Jews chose G-d." They may have been, at times, fractious, rebellious, ungrateful and wayward. But they had the courage to travel, to move, to leave

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security behind, and follow G-d's call, as did Abraham and Sarah at the dawn of our history. If the sukkah represents G-d's clouds of glory, where was "the loving-kindness of your youth"? There is no sacrifice involved if G-d is visibly protecting you in every way and at all times. But if we follow Rabbi Akiva and see the sukkah as what it is, the temporary home of a temporarily homeless people, then it makes sense to say that Israel showed the courage of a bride willing to follow her husband on a risk-laden journey to a place she has never seen before - a love that shows itself in the fact that she is willing to live in a hut trusting her husband's promise that one day they will have a permanent home.

If so, then a wonderful symmetry discloses itself in the three pilgrimage festivals. Pesach represents the love of G-d for His people. Sukkot represents the love of the people for G-d. Shavuot represents the mutuality of love expressed in the covenant at Sinai in which G-d pledged Himself to the people, and the people to G-d. (For a similar conclusion, reached by a slightly different route, see R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, *Meshekh Chokhmah* to Deut. 5: 15. I am grateful to David Frei of the London Beth Din for this reference.)

Sukkot, on this reading, becomes a metaphor for the Jewish condition not only during the forty years in the desert but also the almost 2,000 years spent in exile and dispersion. For centuries Jews lived, not knowing whether the place in which they lived would prove to be a mere temporary dwelling. To take just one period as an example: Jews were expelled from England in 1290, and during the next two centuries from almost every country in Europe, culminating in the Spanish Expulsion in 1492, and the Portuguese in 1497. They lived in a state of permanent insecurity. Sukkot is the festival of insecurity.

What is truly remarkable is that it is called, by tradition, *zeman simchatenu*, "our time of joy." That to me is the wonder at the heart of the Jewish experience: that Jews throughout the ages were able to experience risk and uncertainty at every level of their existence and yet - while they sat *betzila de-mehemnuta*, "under the shadow of faith" (this is the Zohar's description of the sukkah: Zohar, Emor, 103a) - they were able to rejoice. That is spiritual courage of a high order. I have often argued that faith is not certainty: faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. That is what Sukkot represents if what we celebrate is sukkot *mammash*, not the clouds

of glory but the vulnerability of actual huts, open to the wind, the rain and the cold.

I find that faith today in the people and the State of Israel. It is astonishing to me how Israelis have been able to live with an almost constant threat of war and terror since the State was born, and not give way to fear. I sense even in the most secular Israelis a profound faith, not perhaps "religious" in the conventional sense, but faith nonetheless: in life, and the future, and hope. Israelis seem to me perfectly to exemplify what tradition says was G-d's reply to Moses when he doubted the people's capacity to believe: "They are believers, the children of believers" (Shabbat 97a). Today's Israel is a living embodiment of what it is to exist in a state of insecurity and still rejoice.

And that is Sukkot's message to the world. Sukkot is the only festival about which Tanakh says that it will one day be celebrated by the whole world (Zechariah 14: 16-19). The twenty-first century is teaching us what this might mean. For most of history, most people have experienced a universe that did not change fundamentally in their lifetimes. But there have been rare great ages of transition: the birth of agriculture, the first cities, the dawn of civilization, the invention of printing, and the industrial revolution. These were destabilizing times, and they brought disruption in their wake. The age of transition we have experienced in our lifetime, born primarily out of the invention of the computer and instantaneous global communication, will one day be seen as the greatest and most rapid era of change since *Homo sapiens* first set foot on earth.

Since 9/11 2001, we have experienced the convulsions. As I write these words, some nations are tearing themselves apart, and no nation is free of the threat of terror. There are parts of the Middle East and beyond that recall Hobbes' famous description of the "state of nature," a "war of every man against every man" in which there is "continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, chapter X11). Insecurity begets fear, fear begets hate, hate begets violence, and violence eventually turns against its perpetrators.

The twenty-first century will one day be seen by historians as the Age of Insecurity. We, as Jews, are the world's experts in insecurity, having lived with it for millennia. And the supreme response to insecurity is Sukkot, when we leave behind the safety of our houses and sit in sukkot *mammash*, in huts exposed to the elements. To be able to do so and still say, this is *zeman simchatenu*, our festival of joy, is the supreme achievement of faith, the ultimate antidote to fear.

Faith is the ability to rejoice in the midst of instability and change, travelling through the wilderness of time toward an unknown destination. Faith is not fear. Faith is not hate. Faith is not violence. These are vital truths, never more needed than now. © 2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“You shall dwell in booths for seven days... So that your generations will know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt..." (Leviticus 23:42-43)

Why do we sit in the sukkah for seven days? This question is most significant because of the introductory verse, "so that your generations may know." Although Maimonides rules that the reason for a commandment does not necessarily have to be understood in order for it to be fulfilled, many important religious personalities (like Reb Haim of Brisk) maintain that knowing the proper reason for the commandment of sukkah is mandated by the words of this verse.

Of course, what makes this problematic is that there is a difference of opinion among our Sages as to what the sukkah symbolizes: Does the sukkah remind us of the simple desert huts within which the Hebrews lived during their various desert encampments, primitive dwelling places that did not always protect from the torrid heat by day and the freezing cold by night? Or rather, is the sukkah a symbol of the clouds of glory, the rays of splendor by which the Divine Presence encompassed the Hebrew nomads, a foretaste of the Holy Temple that would eventually connect heaven and earth? (See Talmud Sukkah 11b)

In a similar fashion, Ecclesiastes 1:2 seems to have two different visions of life, one of which is epitomized by the opening verse, "A breath of breaths, says Kohelet, a breath of breaths, everything is a breath," versus "The end of the issue, everything having been heard: fear the Lord and observe His commandments for that is the whole of the human being" (12:13). The key word in the opening verse is "breath" - hevel in Hebrew. "Hevel," which literally means a breath and generally refers to the oxygen vapor that emerges from an individual's mouth on a cold day, is very much devoid of substance and disappears almost as quickly as it comes. It seems to represent the emptiness and flimsiness of human existence. Indeed, many English translations render the Hebrew "hevel" as "futility" or "vanity." The concluding verse, on the other hand, seems to view the human being as an individual worthy of being commanded by G-d and is therefore able to give his life ultimate and even transcendent meaning by dedicating himself to the performance of G-d's commandments. Which is the correct interpretation, not only of Kohelet but also of life itself?

I believe that the answer to our query will come from a critical verse describing the creation of the first human being, which occurred on Rosh Hashana: "And the Lord G-d formed the human being of dust from the earth and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the human being became a living creature." In

effect, that part of G-d within each of us is the breath of G-d which He exhaled.

And when this verse of creation concludes with the words "and the human being became a living creature," the officially accepted commentator Onkeles renders this to mean "a communicating spirit." Such a translation implies that the ability of a human being to communicate, to expel breaths in conversation, may be a most exalted expression of the image of the Divine within each of us. The Ten Commandments created by Divine speech were far more powerful than the Egyptian pyramids. The Gettysburg address had a far greater affect than military weaponry.

And so the Hassidim have an amazing interpretation for the liturgical statement in our Ne'ila Prayer on Yom Kippur, "the difference between the human being and the animal is not at all, for everything is a breath." The Hassidim take the line as follows: the difference between the human being and the animal is infinite, ein sof, the infinite G-d whose Divine breath is within every human. After all, everything is within that breath.

Apparently, there is room to view the human being as a broken shard, a passing dream, a fleeting breath; but at the same time we can see the human being as the carrier of the very breath and stuff of the Divine, who has the ability to transcend himself and his generation by means of the spoken and written word and who can influence G-d by his prayers and his actions. He is "only a little lower than G-d crowned with glory and majesty" (Psalms 8: 5-6). And the truth is, both of these visions are true; which one will emerge victorious in every single human being depends upon that human being himself.

So it is with the sukkah. It appears to be a flimsy structure that hardly protects against oppressive heat and is not at all impervious to rains and winds. Nevertheless, when we bring into the sukkah the Special Guests (ushpizin), our patriarchs and matriarchs, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David, and when we decorate the sukkah with pictures of the Holy Temple and the High Priest at his sacred service, and when we sanctify the sukkah with blessings over the four species, kiddush wine, songs of praise and words of Torah which accompany our Sukkot meals, and most of all when we fill the sukkah with familial and universal love, we transform that flimsy structure into the rays of splendor of the eternal House of G-d which unites heaven and earth. © 2013 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

There is a common thread throughout the Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Hoshanah Rabbah and Simchat Torah festivals - a thread that binds our people.

Note the four species we take as the Sukkot holiday begins. Each represents a different kind of Jew. But for Rabbi Jacob Reimer the most important part of the lulav and etrog is what he calls the - thingamejing, - or the agudah, the strip that binds the lulav together. Without that strip a lulav and its parts would separate, making it impossible to take as one as described in the Torah.

Hoshanah Rabbah adds a similar dimension. After all, of all the species the arava seems least important. It is the one without smell or taste, symbolic of the person without good deeds or knowledge. Still it is the arava and none of the others that play the central role on Hoshanah Rabbah, teaching that every individual, even the seemingly less important play a crucial role in the fabric of our nation.

At the center of Shemini Atzeret is the prayer for geshem - rain. The mystics note that water by definition teaches the message of togetherness. There is no one molecule of water that can exist alone. Hence the Hebrew word for water is only in the plural - mayim.

All this reaches its crescendo on Simchat Torah, the holiday of ending and starting the Torah,

much like a circle that knows no beginning or end. Thus, on Simchat Torah we dance in circles - the knowledgeable with the less knowledgeable, the committed with the less committed, the secularists with the religious, those on the political right with those on the left. On Simchat Torah were all on the same plane. All together.

It's an important concept especially in these days when our people and our land face such serious challenges. The only way we can overcome is if we remain as one with everyone playing a role.

Years back, at the first Soviet Jewry conference in Brussels, a young Argentinean spoke of how lonely he felt as a Jew in Buenos Aires. In those days, the sixties, the fascists ruled Argentina; Hitler's picture could be seen everywhere. The young man went on to say that at the conference he began learning the Hebrew language. He learned that the smallest letter was the yud, or the pintele yid. But, he continued, if one writes a second yud near the first it spells G-d's name. Two Jews together reflect the unity of G-d, and no matter how small each may be, together they can overcome everything.

That's what this young man felt at that conference - a sense of unity which made him believe that our people would prevail. And it's that sense of unity that we desperately need during these times.
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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“For [regarding] man, there is no one righteous in the land who will do good and not sin" (Koheles 7:20). The basic message seems to be that no one is perfect, not even the righteous. As the commentators (e.g. Rashi) point out, this verse is a continuation of the previous verse, giving us a reason why wisdom is so important; since no one is perfect, we must constantly review our actions so that we can correct any mistakes made. Nevertheless, the words "who will do good" seem to be superfluous. Wouldn't the message be just as effective if it just said "for no one is without sin" (as Sh'lomo said in his prayer after he built the Temple, see M'lachim I 8:46 and Divray HaYamim II 6:36), or "even the righteous are not without sin"? Why did Koheles/Sh'lomo add the words "who will do good" to his description of the person who will inevitably sin?

That Sh'lomo didn't mention the righteous when the Temple was inaugurated is understandable. After all, he was requesting of G-d that when remorseful sinners come to the Temple they be able to achieve atonement, something that applies to all sinners, not just the righteous. In Koheles, though, his point is that even the righteous are not perfect. The question is why

he mentioned that the righteous are trying "to do good" when telling us that even the righteous sin.

It would be difficult to say that "who will do good" is meant as a description of a righteous person (see Metzudas Dovid), as the comma in the verse is after the word "in the land," separating the word "righteous" from the words "who will do good." Besides, if it were a description of what the person did to be considered righteous, it should be in past tense, not future tense.

The Midrash (Koheles Rabbah and Midrash Zuta) asks how the person could be considered righteous if he or she sinned. Even though the Talmud (B'rachos 7a) makes a distinction between a "tzadik gamur," one who is completely righteous, and a "tzadik she'aino gamur," one who is still considered "righteous" despite occasional mistakes, since the point is that no one is perfect (not even the righteous), the verse must be referring to the "completely righteous" as well. The Midrash therefore explains the verse to be referring to those responsible for dispensing charity, since they cannot know exactly how much each person really needs. It is therefore inevitable that they will occasionally give some more than they really need (thereby spending community funds inappropriately) and occasionally give some less than they actually need (leaving the mitzvah of supporting the poor unfulfilled). Although the sin was inadvertent, atonement is still necessary (see Sanhedrin 46b), and wisdom is needed both to minimize the instances of inadvertently sinning and to constantly analyze what was done to correct any mistakes. Taking the Midrash a step further, since it is when the righteous person is trying "to do good" (in this case distributing funds to the needy; the concept applies to other situations of trying "to do good" as well) that the "sinning" occurs -- and the "good" cannot be accomplished without making a determination as to how to accomplish the "good," a determination that necessarily includes the risk of doing it imperfectly -- Koheles/Sh'lomo included "who will do good" in his description of the righteous person who will inevitably sin.

The Sh'la (Taanis, Eulogy for the Death of the Righteous and the Destruction of the Temple 9) discusses how man, being a physical being and therefore incomplete, must "do good" (i.e. the mitzvos) in order to attain completion. It is his incomplete nature that leads to sin, so his need to "do good," a euphemism for his being deficient, is mentioned as a preface to the inevitability of sin. (Most understand the word "in the land" to be an explanation for the inevitability of sin; the Sh'la is adding another dimension to it.) In other words, we can't avoid trying to do good if we want to accomplish what we were put in this world to accomplish; not sinning isn't enough, we have to try to "do good" as well. And since it is next to impossible to accomplish anything truly meaningful without taking any risks (as Buck Showalter's father put it, "the sweetest

fruit always grows at the end of the limb"), it is inevitable that even the righteous will occasionally make mistakes, albeit inadvertent ones. It is our job not only to take those risks by attempting to "do good," but to be as careful as possible to minimize the amount of mistakes made (and their severity) when taking them. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Somebody's a Nobody

One of the most joyous customs associated with the holiday of Sukkos is the celebration of Simchas Bais Hashoaevah. In the times of the Bais HaMikdash, a water libation accompanied the customary offerings. Simchas Bais Hashoaevah, literally, the Joy of the Water Drawing, was observed with a most ebullient celebration. It included a marvelously varied array of harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets, among other instruments. The greatest sages and most pious of rabbis performed acrobatics and antics that would have normally been below their dignity. In fact, the sages in Tractate Sukkah 51, note that, "one who has not seen the celebration of the Bais Hashoaevoh has never seen true joy."

Rambam (Maimonides) discusses this aspect of exuberance and adds that "one who in his insolence restrains himself from serving Hashem in a joyous manner is a sinner and fool." Yet the Rambam adds a caveat. "But this joy was not performed by the ignorant ones and by anyone who wanted (to dance). Only the great sages of Israel, the heads of Yeshivos and the Sanhedrin, the pious, the elders and men of righteous action would dance, clap, and sing in the Bais haMikdash on Sukkos. Everyone else, men and women would come to watch and listen" (Rambam Hilchos Lulav 8:14).

This passage begs explanation. Why shouldn't everyone, even the most profane of men, sing and dance and make merry in celebration of the L-rd? Further what does the Rambam mean by not including "those who want to dance"?

Ultimately, anyone who ended up dancing, even the most pious of sages, obviously wanted to dance. What, then, does he Rambam mean when he said that this joy was not performed by anyone who wanted to dance? A classic story circulates in all Jewish humor anthologies.

Before the start of the Ne'eilah service, the holiest and final supplication of Yom Kippur, the rabbi rose from his seat and bolted toward the Holy Ark. He spread his hands toward heaven and cried out, "Ribbono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I am a total nothing before you! Please inscribe me in the book of life!"

All of a sudden the chazzan (cantor) ran toward the Aron and joined the rabbi! "G-d Almighty," he shouted, "please forgive me, too, for I am truly a nothing

before you!" There is an awed silence amongst the congregants.

The shammas (sexton) then followed suit. He, too, ran up toward the ark and in tearful supplication pronounced, I too am a nothing!"

Mouths around the congregation dropped open. The President of the synagogue's men's club, Ed Goldstein, a large man, was also caught up in the fervor of the moment. Suddenly, he, too, bolted from his seat in the back, and lumbered toward the front of the shul. With great eagerness he prostrated himself in front of the Ark and cried out at the top of his lungs. "Forgive me Oh L-rd he shouts, for I too am a nothing! Suddenly a shout from the back of the synagogue was directed toward Goldstein's hulk of a figure. It shouted with incredulity. "Harrumph! Look who thinks he's a nothing!"

Rambam teaches us that whoever runs to dance and sing and make himself crazy is not truly lowering himself before the Almighty. If someone inherently likes to cavort wildly, then he is not dancing for the sake of lowering himself before the Almighty, rather he is having a wonderful time. When King David liberated the Aron (Ark of the Covenant) from the Phillistines, he danced in front it as if he were a lowly slave. When confronted by his wife, Michal, for dancing like a servant, he retorted. "I would make myself even lower before Hashem."

When rejoicing during the festivities we must bear in mind our true reasons for enthusiasm -- who we are, and why we dance. Because in order to be a nobody, you gotta be a somebody. © 2013 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI YOCHANAN ZWEIG

A Fresh Start

“You shall take for yourselves on the first day...” (23:40) The Tur records a custom among Ashkenazim to fast on the eve of Rosh Hashana. (Orech Chaim #582) As the source for this custom, he cites a Midrash which questions why the Torah identifies the time for taking the lulav as "the first day" -- "bayom harishon"; should the day not be identified as the fifteenth of the month? The Midrash concludes that the first day of Sukkos is "rishon l'cheshbon avonos" -- "the first day for the accounting of our sins" and therefore Sukkos is identified as "yom harishon".

The Midrash offers the following parable: There was once a city that owed the king a large sum of money in taxes. As a result of the residents' failure to pay, the king marched against the city with an armed garrison. Prior to reaching the city, a delegation consisting of the elders of the community was sent to appease the king. After meeting with the delegation the king discharged one-third of the debt, but still continued to advance. Fearing for their safety, the city sent a second delegation comprised of common-folk to meet

with the king. They succeeded in convincing him to discharge another one-third of the debt. However, the king continued to advance towards the city. Finally, all of the residents of the city emerged from their homes to beseech the king, who had already reached the city gates, to deal with them kindly. Moved by this display, the king discharged the remaining one-third of the debt. Similarly, the Jewish people amass a large number of sins throughout the year. On the eve of Rosh Hashana the men of distinction fast and Hashem absolves the nation of one-third of their sins. During the "aseres y'mei teshuva" -- "ten days of repentance", another one-third of the sins are absolved. The entire nation fasts on Yom Kippur, absolving them of their remaining transgressions. With the onset of Sukkos a new account of sins for the year begins.

Why is Sukkos, rather than the day immediately following Yom Kippur identified as the "first day for the new accounting"? Furthermore, Sukkos appears to play no part in Bnei Yisroel's atonement. Why does the Midrash use this parable to extol the virtue of Sukkos?

The Beis Yoseif asks why the fast on the eve of Rosh Hashana appears to have the same efficacy as the fast of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, each one discharging one-third of the sins. (Ibid)

The Bach notes that there are three chapters concerning aspects of Sukkos recorded in the Torah, sitting in the Sukkah, bringing the festive offerings and finally, taking the four species. Why does the Torah specifically choose the four species to relate the message that Sukkos is the "first day for the new accounting"?

In English common law a person who defaulted on a debt was subject to incarceration. However, in the modern era almost every civilized society has bankruptcy laws which allow a person to discharge debts that he is unable to repay by declaring bankruptcy, protecting him from his creditors. What is the logic behind the institution of bankruptcy? Why would society allow a person to sidestep accountability for his actions?

A person who is mired in debt, unable to extricate himself from his predicament, eventually ceases to be a productive member of society and becomes a liability. By allowing this person to discharge his debt either partially or completely, we are enabling him to stand on his own two feet, once again contributing as a productive member of society. Great care must be taken however, to ensure that this institution is not abused. The potential danger of a person using bankruptcy as a crutch to protect him from his own negligence and irresponsible behavior always exists.

It is a mistake to think that Hashem forgives us only because of His great benevolence. What we must realize is that His absolution is not a crutch upon which we can continuously rely, to discharge our irresponsible behavior. Rather, we are given a respite so that we can

become, once again, functioning members of society, earning our keep, unburdened by our great number of transgressions. If we fail to view atonement in this manner, instead of being a tool which allows us to become responsible for our actions, it will have the opposite effect. Atonement becomes a crutch which breeds irresponsibility.

If a person is responsible for at least a portion of his debts, the danger of bankruptcy being used to encourage irresponsible behavior is smaller than if the entire debt were discharged. Therefore, although Yom Kippur discharges the same amount of sin as Rosh Hashana eve, there exists a great difference between the two absolutions. After Rosh Hashana a person is still responsible for a portion of his sins. On Yom Kippur, when complete absolution occurs, the danger of misusing atonement is greater, and only a day such as Yom Kippur can afford such a service to the Jewish people.

For atonement to be complete it must be accompanied by a commitment to begin paying our debts and accepting responsibility for our actions. Sukkos is the time when new responsibilities are placed upon us and therefore serves as the litmus test for the veracity of our commitment. Consequently, Sukkos is identified as "the first day for the accounting of our sins".

The Ran cites the Yerushalmi which disqualifies a dried-out lulav based upon the verse "lo hameisim yehallelu kah" -- "the dead cannot praise Hashem". (Sukkah 29b) The lulav is a symbol of freshness and vitality, reflecting the new lease on life that we have gained following Yom Kippur. We therefore use the lulav as the tool to praise Hashem for His beneficence. The Torah most appropriately delivers the message concerning the beginning of a new accounting in the chapter of the four species which symbolize this concept. © 2013 Rabbi Y. Zweig and torah.org

RABBI PINCHAS AVRUCH

Succos – Staying Focused

For most holidays, the Torah reading is the narration of the events the festival is commemorating. This past week's Yom Kippur reading detailed the procedures for the special service in the Bais HaMikdash (Holy Temple in Jerusalem). The Pesach reading recounts the Exodus from Egypt, and we read of the Revelation at Sinai on Shavuot. Succos, though, does not honor one particular event, so the reading comes from Parshas Emor, where all of the holy days are discussed in the middle of a narration of numerous facets of Divine service.

"On the fifteenth day of [Tishrei] is the festival of Succos, a seven day period for Hashem." (Vayikra/Leviticus 23:34). It is noteworthy that the Torah calls this holiday "Succos" (plural of succah) but has not, at this point, explained why a succah is germane to

the celebration. It is not until the end of the narrative, even after the discussion of the mitzvah of the Four Species, in verses 42 and 43, that it is related, "You shall dwell in booths ("succos") for a seven day period...So that your generations will know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt." If our observance of dwelling in booths is the focus of the festival, these closing verses are out of place; they should be at the opening.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor and foremost leader of Torah Jewry of his time) explains that the concept of "succah" - living in a transient, temporary abode - is not novel to the Jew. Essential to our faith is the precept that our daily existence in this world is given to us as our chance to perfect our spiritual selves and develop a G-d consciousness by utilizing mitzvah opportunities and studying Torah. Furthermore, since the physical trappings of our existence in this world are given to us as aids to achieving our spiritual objectives, there should be no discomfort when we spend money or utilize assets for the fulfillment of mitzvos or giving of charity; this is ultimately why we were given these assets!

Therefore, concludes Rabbi Feinstein, the concept of "succos" is not new, as it is lived everyday, no matter where we find ourselves. The festival of Succos was given to us to help concretize and fortify this tenet in a practical, substantive way.

This understanding also offers a deeper insight as to why we are forbidden from residing in the succah when it is extremely uncomfortable, such as when it is raining or very cold. If the essence of the succah is to teach the perspective to be maintained through our daily lives - which includes the mindset that our assets should never be the cause for a sense of discomfort because they are all a temporary means to a greater end - then that lesson cannot be learned when the succah is physically uncomfortable.

The famed Chofetz Chaim (Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities) once welcomed a visitor into his home. The visitor was somewhat surprised to see the Spartan conditions in which this renowned leader of Torah Judaism lived, with only a simple wooden table and some benches furnishing the main room of the simple house. When asked what bothered him, the guest blurted out, "Where is your furniture?" Rabbi Kagan responded, "Where is yours?" The visitor answered, "I am only a guest here. I didn't bring any furniture." To which the Chofetz Chaim replied, "I, too, am only a guest in this world. My most prized possessions, my Torah learning and mitzvos, are waiting for me in my real home in the World to Come."

Our liturgy refers to the festival of Succos as "the time of our happiness". After the teshuva (return to G-d) of the month of Elul, the recognition of G-d as our Father and King on Rosh HaShanah and the spiritual cleansing of Yom Kippur, we now have seven days to enjoy and revel in our new relationship with our Father in Heaven. The blessings we asked for on the High Holy Days are not an end to themselves. The succah reminds us that we must not to become distracted by the temporal; we must keep our focus on our ultimate objective of building the bond. © 2002 Rabbi P. Avruch and Project Genesis, Inc.

YITZ WEISS

Divine Embrace

One of the themes of Sukkot is to recognize that G-d 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 G-d was our guardian when we left Egypt into the desert and remains our protector today.

The minimum requirement for a kosher succah is not four walls, but two walls and a tefach (a handbreadth). If we were to construct a succah 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 succah 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 succah 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 Congregation Tifereth Israel, Passaic, New Jersey*



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