manhattan jewish experience

Sukkot *in a nutshell*

I. SO WHY THE HUTS?

Immediately after the Jewish Days of Awe – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – comes the less-known holiday of Sukkot; the Feast of Booths. This year, the holiday begins Wednesday evening (at sunset) October 16th and lasts until nightfall of Wednesday, October 23rd. It is immediately followed by the holidays of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah from nightfall on Wednesday October 23rd- Friday, October 25th. Like many Jewish holidays, it has both an agricultural theme and a historical theme. This reminds us both of the land of Israel (it is the harvest-time there) and of the history of the Jewish people. When the Jewish people left Egypt and were wandering in the desert, Gd sheltered them in protective dwellings called Sukkot.

A. Agrcultural

The agricultural theme of the holiday also brings out its universal motifs. All of us, no matter our religion, can take a moment to offer thanks to Gd for all that we have been able to gather close to ourselves in our lives. Even if we are not farmers gathering in the harvest, we can give thanks for our families, our paychecks, our homes etc. Sukkot is called "the time of our joy" and is a spiritual precursor to the more secular Thanksgiving holiday.

B. So you bring your own security?

Jews celebrate Sukkot by building temporary sukka dwellings for the eight-day holiday. Jewish custom is to eat meals and spend leisure and quality time in the sukka and – in some places – even sleep overnight there. It is also a time when families and friends come together to celebrate. We spend all year In physical homes, so it's not so hard to believe that we begin to think that our physical homes are our protection. At the same time, we forget about our real Chief of Security: Gd. Thus, for eight days, we leave the comfort of our home into temporary and at times flimsy structures, to remind us that it Is Gd protecting us all year round.

C. Even the water is judged

Jewish tradition teaches that on Sukkot, the world is judged for its water. Since we know the devastating effects of drought on millions of human beings in the world, it is a good opportunity to pray for a plentiful gift of water this year so that we will all have enough to drink and to grow the crops we depend upon for our survival.

II. Home Sweet Home

The Sukkah is our home for seven days. When eating, drinking, entertaining guests, reading and sleeping we try to use the Sukkah as it were our permanent residence, known as a ***Dirat Keva***. Many people place their nicest silver cups and dishes in the Sukkah as well as their lulav and etrog*.

A. Indoor/Outdoor dining

Men have an obligation to have *all sit down meals – at least when they involve bread or foods from the five grains - in the Sukkah*

Though snacks in small amounts or fruit and drinks may be eaten outside the Sukkah.*

Though an obligation for men, women should certainly eat In the Sukkah when they can.

B. Blessed

When eating a snack or food that is grain based, there is an additional blessing made for eating in the Sukkah.

It is made after the blessing on the food is made, before eating the food.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יקוק אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לֵישֵׁב בַּסֻּכָּה

Bah-rookh ah-tah ah-doh-noi eh-loh-hay-noo meh-lekh hah-oh-lahm ah-sher ki-deh-shah-noo beh-mitz-voh-tahv veh-tzee-vah-noo lay-shayv bah-soo-kah

Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to dwell in the sukkah.

C. Bad Weather?

Since one would not stay at home if it were very uncomfortable, so too one is exempt from eating and sleeping in the Sukkah when it becomes too uncomfortable.

If it rains, smells bad, suffers from meddlesome flies and bees or it is simply too cold, too hot or too windy, then one is exempt.*

D. Sky View

One of the most important parts of the Sukkah itself is the roof, called Schach. The Schach must be made out of items that grow from the ground, such as bamboo or palm branches. These must be detached from the ground. The loose covering allows one to see the stars and gives one the opportunity to reflect on the beauty of the world.

*A Day Apart: Shabbt at Home, Noam Zion

III. So what's with the tree branch and big lemon?

The Biblical commandment to take the four species is found in Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:40: "and you shall take for yourselves on the first day the beautiful fruit of a tree (i.e. etrog), palm branches (i.e. lulav) bough of a leafy tree (i.e. myrtle, or hadasim) and river willows (i.e. aravot)" In order to beautify the mitzvah we gather the lulav, the three myrtle branches and the two willows together in one package, held together by a sheath woven from dried lulav. The hadasim (myrtle) should be on the right side and slightly higher than the willows on the left-side.

A. What are we holding?

Etrog – a citron, which is nice and yellow, lots of bumps, symmetric hourglass shape, no blotches or dark spots, especially towards the top. Should have a nice fresh fragrance. Reminds us of the heart.

Lulav – a Palm branch, which is straight and tall. The two top leaves should be stuck together, forming a sort of spear at the top.

Hadasim – Three myrtle stems are bound to the right side of the lulav. Should have 3 leaves coming from each stem. They should have a fresh smell .

Aravot – should ideally have red stems, straight
edges on their leaves and be shaped somewhat like lips. Need to be kept hydrated so they don't dry out and crumble.

B. The Blessings

How are they used?

Take the lulav with the myrtles and willows attached in the right hand and the etrog in the left. Hold them apart, or one may hold them together with the etrog upside down, and recite the following blessings in Hebrew

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יקוק אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת לוּלָב.

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech ha-Olam, Asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al netilat lulav

Blessed are You, Lord, our Gd, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us on the taking of the lulav.

When you take the four species on the first two days of sukkot, add:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יקוק אֱלֹקֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech ha-Olam, She'Hechiyanu v'Kiymanu v'Higiyanu l'Zman Hazeh.

Blessed are You, Lord, our Gd, King of the Universe, Who has sustained us and enabled us to reach this time.

C. Shake It

After saying the blessing, bring the four species **together and shake them 3 times in every direction, First face east, and then shake following this order**: Front, right, back, left, up, down.
They should be shaken gently by holding them out from your body (with the tip of the lulav still pointing up) and then bringing them back in.
The four species should be shaken once each day all week – but most importantly on the first day – and continuing through the last day, Sunday 10/20, which is the holiday of Hoshana Rabba. The 4 species are not taken on Shemini Atzeret or Simchat Torah.

D. What do they mean?

1. Body parts

Etrog: refers to the heart, the place of understanding and wisdom.
Lulav: Palm refers to the spine/backbone, uprightness.
Hadasim: Myrtle corresponds to the eyes, enlightenment.
Aravot: Willow represents the lips, the service of the lips (prayer)

2. People

Each represents a different type of person. Some people learn Torah and do mitzvot (good deeds), like the Etrog which tastes good and smells good. Some people learn Torah but don't do good deeds like the Lulav, which tastes good but smells bad. Some people do mitzvot but don't learn Torah, like the Hadasim, which smell good but taste bad. Some people don't learn Torah and don't do any mitzvot, like the Aravot, which neither taste or smell good. It doesn't matter that the four species are all different from one another- we still are required to hold them all together; we need to unite them all. The message of the four species goes beyond Sukkot as it reminds us of the importance of the unity of all the different personality types that make up the Jewish people,

MJE SUKKOT SCHEDULE

Monday, October 6

6:13 pm Candle Lighting
6:15 pm Mincha with the Jewish Center

Tuesday, October 7

9:30 am Morning Services with MJE
10:45 am Kiddish in Sukkah on 11th fl
Sermon By Rabbi Jack Hartstein
6:15 pm Mincha with the Jewish Center
7:09 pm Candle Lighting pre-existing flame

Wednesday, October 8

9:30 am Morning Services with MJE
10:45 am Kiddish in Sukkah on 11th fl
Sermon By Rabbi Jack Hartstein
6:15 pm Mincha with JC
7:08 pm Yom Yov Concludes

Friday & Saturday October 10 and 11

6:00 pm FNL with MJE - Talk by Rivkie Siderson
6:06 pm Candlelighting

9:30 am Morning Services with MJE
Sermon By Dovi Siderson
10:45 am Kiddish in Sukkah on 11th fl
5:55 pm Mincha with the Jewish Center
7**:05 pm** Shabbat Concludes

Shmini Atzeret Simchat Torah

Monday Oct 13
6:00 pm Evening Prayers with JC and Candlelighting

Tuesday Oct 14
9:30 am Shmini Atzeret Morning Services with MJE
6:00 pm Mincha and Special Talk Rabbi Wildes
7:00 pm MJE Simchat Torah Dance Party

Wednesday October 15
930 am MJE Simchat Torah Services & Boozy Brunch
6:00 pm Mincha with Jewish Center
6:58 pm Yom Tov Concludes

RSVP FOR SIMCHAT TORAH HERE

DO YOU MAKE TIME FOR DATE NIGHT, WITH YOUR FAITH?

Rabbi Mark Wildes

Years ago, a man by the name of Andrew Burian spoke to Manhattan Jewish Experience (MJE) participants about his experience during the Holocaust. After finishing his incredible account of survival of many concentration camps, an audience member asked "Why did you stay religious after enduring and witnessing all those horrors?"

I'll never forget his answer:

"Because I loved it," he sighed. "I missed it".

What does love have to do with religion? For so many Jews, especially in America, the answer is, regretfully, nothing. For many, the idea of practicing Judaism is wrapped up in a sense of obligation and fear - a responsibility to not let something so old die out, fear of disappointing our parents, or maybe even Gd. But love? Certainly not.

It makes sense. What is the most popular day in synagogue for American Jews? You guessed it - Yom Kippur. And rightfully so - it is the holiest of holy days when we have the greatest opportunity to transform and work on ourselves. It is the "Day of Awe," in which we proclaim over and over Gd's ultimate power and awesomeness. It is critical.

And so synagogues throughout America fill their pews for one or two days, and the people come, and fast and atone, and afterwards most resume their ordinary lives, with the most "Jewish" thing being eating bagels and lox on Sundays and going out for Chinese food on Christmas.

Too few Jews are exposed to what comes right after Yom Kippur - "zman zimchaseinu" - the time of our rejoicing as the Torah describes the holiday of Sukkot, and the next week Simchat Torah. During this time we gather with friends and family, we build a Sukkah, we eat, we drink, give presents to our children, feed the needy, sing and dance. We celebrate and bask in the energy of abundance and joy. We are actually commanded to enjoy ourselves. The Torah says: vsamachta bchagecha: "thou shalt be happy on the holidays."

It's a real shame that so many of us weren't raised to celebrate these holidays, because a Yom-Kippur-only Jewish life reinforces the perception that so many have of Judaism as a sin and guilt oriented faith, and leaves no room for practice out of love.

But why is love in terms of our connection to Judaism and Gd important in the first place? Like in any relationship between two people there needs to be a balance between what we feel obligated to do and what we truly want to do - what we do because we respect the other person and what we do because we love them. A relationship with one and not the other is doomed to failure and so striking that balance is key.

Looking at my own marriage, I take out the trash, pay the bills, and schlep to events I don't always want to go to because I have the utmost respect for my wife and ultimately I want to make the relationship work. At the same time, we enjoy a romantic dinner, kick back and watch a movie and share our innermost thoughts and feelings because I want to - because I love her.

Respect and love - a marriage needs both. Our relationship with Gd is no different and so Judaism needs both.

Survivor Andrew Burian didn't just wake up one morning in love. His life was filled with daily actions which ultimately resulted in these feelings. This is why any two people are really in love - the initial chemistry is just infatuation, the real love comes from years of giving and extending oneself for the other - from years of respect. The holiday rituals year after year are meant to eventually get us to a place where we do the mitzvot not just because of what will happen to us if we don't, and not even because we realize Gd's awesomeness - but because we just can't help ourselves. We're in love.

We need Yom Kippur. We need to cultivate reverence and awe for Gd. Love without respect and obligation is transient. But like in any relationship, we need to celebrate the love or it will atrophy. We need to create space to just be with our partner, to enjoy each other. We need a date night! If not, then we're left in a loveless marriage - best case scenario married to a platonic best friend/ roommate, and worst case scenario - running for the hills and looking for any opportunity to get away.

Sukkot and Simchat Torah are "date night". It is our chance to simply enjoy our relationship with Gd and our beautiful faith.

My blessing to us all is that we take the Yirah - the reverence we experienced on Yom Kippur, and that together we move up to the Ahava - to the joy and love expressed on Sukkot and Simchat Torah. In doing so may we achieve that delicate balance and the highest levels of connection, both in our relationship with Gd, with our Judaism, and with each other.

Dedicated to the memory of Eitam and Na'amah Henkin, the Jewish couple killed this past week in Israel. They truly loved their Judaism.

originally published on https://www.huffpost.com/

SUCCOT FOR OUR TIME

Extract from Koren Sacks Sukkot mahzor

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Of all the festivals, Succot 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 picture of ultimate success, the man who has it all – the houses, the cars, the clothes, the adoring women, the envy of others – he has pursued everything this world can offer from pleasure to possessions to power to wisdom and yet, surveying the totality of his life, he 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 King Solomon, the author of the book, 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 Succot 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, where we take time to recapture some of the innocence we had when we were young, when the world still had the radiance of wonder.

The power of Succot 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 gloriously wealthy to buy yourself the same leaves and fruit that a billionaire uses in worshipping Gd. Living in the succah and inviting guests to your meal, you discover that the people who have come to visit you are none other than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their wives (such is the premise of Ushpizin, the mystical guests). What makes a hut more beautiful than a home is that when it comes to Succot 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 Gd'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.

Succot 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 who share our history and our hope.

Most majestically of all, Succot 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. Gd 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. Succot reminds us that Gd'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 succah, even if 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 Gd's sheltering wings.

***originally publihed on http://RabbiSacks.org**

SUKKOT: SPARE PARTS

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The holiday of Sukkot is flavored by two distinctly different mitzvoth. The experience of four minim is the most aesthetically pleasing mitzvah and the arrangement is the only object referred to by the Torah as "hadar"or"lovely" and attractive. Each of the four elements references a different feature of nature, and each item conjures multiple layers of imagery. The most famous interpretation of this arrangement associates the various species with different human body parts: the etrog is heart-shaped while the leaves of the aravot resemble human lips. Presumably, these species underscore the beauty of the human form as well as the religious potential latent within each anatomical component. Many other themes and symbols are embodied in this unusual bouquet. The colors are striking, the aromasenticing,and the entire experience adorns Sukkot with beauty.

Strikingly, the sukkah itself is portrayed very differently from the four species. The Torah schedules the mitzvah of resiading in the sukkah during the period of gathering grains and manufacturing wines: "b'aspecha migarnecha u'miyikvecha". Based on this time stamp, the gemara (Succah 12a) infers that the "sechach"roof of the sukkah must be manufactured from agricultural leftovers-the materials which are typically discarded during harvestand during wine-making such as husks, shells, twigs and branches.As a result,the sechach must include only organic, non-manufactured items. The sukkah is defined as a "leftover", manufactured from surplus and discarded materials,which have little obvious aesthetic or even functional value. As opposed to the four minim, which are exquisite and even lavish,the sukkah is constructed from spare parts held together by duct tape. It is this rudimentary hut which houses the Divine presence.

This profile of a sukkah illustrates the value of economization. We are often drawn to the "expensive" or the "attractive"and we ignore potential in items which aren't flashy or colorful. Economization, or not wasting material, reminds us of potential in all items and, of course, by extension, the potential in all people. Ya'akov conducts a daring nighttime dash back across the river to reclaim a few small and worthless vessels. Already prodigiously wealthy, he can well afford to discard those vessels and avoid the hostile wrestling match which ensues. Yet he values all items and doesn't waste or discard his possessions.

Valuing rather than discarding teaches us to identify previously unrealized potential in items and people we often overlook. If a sukkah can be fashioned from "spare parts",what other pursuits in life can be enabled or advanced through resources which aren't immediately obvious? Which people in our lives don't immediately grab our attention but are invaluable resources in our quest for meaning and for meaningful relationships?How can we build sukkah-like towers from the shells and twigs in our world?

Beyond the value of economization and recognizing potential in everything surrounding us, the sukkah confers the trait of resourcefulness-or the ability to make"do with less". We are often challenged to succeed without ideal resources at our disposal and in imperfect conditions. Sometimes we are challenged due to material shortages–lack of funds, manpower, or other abilities. Can we still succeed when facing these compromised situations? How do we fare when the shortages aren't material but psychological, medical or emotional? How do we perform when we are tired or when our health is ailing? Are we successful and poised when stressed or otherwise emotionally strained. All these situations demand resourcefulness and resilience–the ability to utilize 'spare parts' and to perform under less-than-ideal circumstances while still fashioning a "sukkah". This personal and communal challenge of resourcefulness is even more acute in the modern context in which we live more comfortable and resourced lives than in past generations. We easily purchase the goods and services to make our lives more comfortable and we live generally more "padded" lives. However, there is great skill in getting by with less and without that skill we are often hampered in life-particularly when facing more constrained situations without the easy availability of necessary or ideal 'resources'. The ability to function and to succeed with less is a vital skill and sometimes atrophies in conditions of comfort and abundant resources.

The mitzvah of sukkah showcases the untapped potential within our surroundings and within ourselves. Often this potential lies in the objects in our lives which are not flashy and are easily ignored. Similarly, we often overlook quiet people who can deeply enrich our experience. The mitzvah of sukkah also demonstrates that success isn't always a product of greater resources. In fact, sometimes more is less and less is more.

originially published on www.yutorah.org

SUKKOT: FROM FEAR TO FESTIVITIES

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Fear and trembling.

Those have been our primary religious emotions during the past several weeks.
Although Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are referred to nowadays as the High Holidays, traditionally they were known as the Days of Awe, Yamim Noraim. Frightful days, fearful days.
During this recent time none of us escaped a sense of insecurity. Recognizing that these days are days of divine judgment, we could not help but wonder as to how we were being judged. We felt vulnerable, insecure, and anxious about what the coming year has in store for us.
And this was as it should be. After all, the central theme of the prayers has been fear and trembling. We actually have asked of the Almighty that he "cast His fear over all of His handiwork, and His awe over all of His creatures."
The great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard entitled his book about Abraham's binding of Isaac "Fear and Trembling". With his great spiritual acumen, he was able to discern that the central theme of the passage in Genesis which Jews read on Rosh Hashanah was man's vulnerability in the face of Gd's demands.
But now we have emerged from this literally awesome period. Judaism does not want us to remain stuck in these overwhelming emotions of anxiety and uncertainty. And so, our Torah has provided us with the festival of Sukkot, a time not for fear and trembling, not even for a contemplation and soul-searching, but a time for serenity and joy.
We emerge from what mystics have termed the "dark night of the soul" into the bright light of simcha, of happiness.
But this happiness is not necessarily one of song and dance, and gala celebration. It is a deeper happiness, a feeling of contentment. It is a happiness which derives from a sense of safety and security, a basic sense of trust.
The central symbol of the holiday of Sukkot is the sukkah, the makeshift and often ramshackle hut in which we dwell, or at least take our meals during the holiday.

What is the meaning of this simple symbol? And how does it inspire this spiritual attitude of trust?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch said it best when he wrote:
"The building of the sukkah teaches you trust in Gd. You know that whether men live in huts or in palaces, it is only as pilgrims that they dwell. You know that in this pilgrimage Gd is our protection. The sukkah is a transitory hut that one day will leave us or we will leave it. The walls may fall, the leafy covering may wither in this storm, but the sheltering love of Gd is everywhere. You dwell in the most fleeting and transitory dwelling as calmly and securely as if it were your house forever."
And so this week, we undergo what scientists call a paradigm shift. We experience a different set of religious emotions, emerging from a deeply felt solemnity into a sense of calm security.
And we also redirect our orientation to Gd. He is no longer the harsh and exacting judge. He is not even the forgiving and compassionate judge. He is now our shelter and protector, the permanent "Rock of Israel", in the transitory experience we call life.
We are able to effect this shift, and this redirection, by using the symbols that the holiday provides us, chief among them the sukkah.
What is the secret of the sukkah? How does it work its wonders?

The secret is to enter it respectfully and reflectively, spend as much time as possible enveloped in its shade, and invite into it two types of guests.
For starters flesh and blood friends and family, with special hospitality for those who may never have enjoyed a sukkah experience.
Bt we also symbolically summon the "ghost guests", the ushpizin, our ancestors going back to Abraham and Sarah, whom we invite to join us.
Like no other mitzvah, we immerse ourselves in the sukkah. As Chassidim say, we enter the sukkah with "our boots on", totally, holding nothing back. We dwell in it to the fullest extent possible, for an entire week.
And we encounter there twin blessings: the companionship of others, and the cherished memories of those who sat in other Sukkot before us, ancestors recent and long gone, who all participated as we do in that protracted pilgrimage known as Jewish history.

originally publihed on http://OUTorah.org

THE FESTIVAL OF INSECURITY

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

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 Gd" (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 Gd 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, Gd appeared to an entire nation. Sukkot is about Gd'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, 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 Gd … 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 Gd, 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)

The festival of 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 Tanach that speaks in praise not of Gd but of the people Israel.

"How odd of Gd / to choose the Jews," goes the famous rhyme, to which the answer is: "Not quite so odd: the Jews chose Gd." They may have been, at times, fractious, rebellious, ungrateful and wayward. But they had the courage to travel, to move, to leave security behind, and follow Gd's call, as did Abraham and Sarah at the dawn of our history. If the sukkah represents Gd's clouds of glory, where was "the loving-kindness of your youth"? There is no sacrifice involved if Gd 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 Gd for His people. Sukkot represents the love of the people for Gd. Shavuot represents the mutuality of love expressed in the covenant at Sinai in which Gd pledged Himself to the people, and the people to Gd. (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 Gd'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 Tanach 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 civilisation, the invention of printing, and the industrial revolution. These were destabilising 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 X111). 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

originally published on http://rabbisacks.org/

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIMCHAT TORAH AND THE HAFTARA

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

Some of the most famous verses regarding Torah study, including the key verse, "And you shall meditate therein day and night" (Yehoshua 1:8), are found in our haftara. We must ask ourselves why it is that these verses find their place at the beginning of the book of Yehoshua, and not in the five books of Moshe. In order to answer this question, let us cite the most important talmudic passage dealing with our verse:
Rabbi Ami said: We learn from the words of Rabbi Yose that even if a person studies only one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening, he fulfills the mitzva of "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth" (Yehoshua 1:8).

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Even if a person reads only the Shema in the morning and in the evening, he fulfills "[This book of the Torah] shall not depart." But one may not say this in the presence of ignorant people. And Rava said: It is a mitzva to say this in the presence of ignorant people.

Ben Dama the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister asked Rabbi Yishmael: Somebody like me who has studied the entire Torah - is he permitted to study Greek wisdom? [He answered:] Apply to him this verse: "This book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth, and you shall meditate therein day and night." Go out and find a time that is neither day nor night, and study then Greek wisdom.

He argues with Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani, for Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: This verse is neither an obligation nor a mitzva, but rather a blessing. The Holy One, blessed be He, saw in Yehoshua that the words of the Torah are exceedingly dear to him, as it is stated, "But his servant Yehoshua, the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from tent" (Shemot 33:11). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Yehoshua, the words of the Torah are so dear to you; this book of the Torah shall not depart out of your mouth. (Menachot 99b)

To understand this passage, we shall cite in utmost brevity the words of Rav Sh. Y. Zevin, based on the words of the author of the Tanya in Shulchan Arukh ha-Rav.

Rav Zevin writes as follows:

The study of Torah and the knowledge of the Torah are two separate mitzvot. Study without knowledge is possible in two ways: Either a person already knows all the laws of the Torah, and as Ben Dama, the son of Rabbi Yishmael's sister, asked Rabbi Yishmael: Somebody like me who has studied the entire Torah is he permitted to study Greek wisdom? Or an ignoramus, who even if he studies understands nothing, and acquires no knowledge...

What is the biblical source for these two mitzvot? ... "And you shall teach them diligently" (Devarim 6:7) points to knowledge. And thus the Sages said: "'And you shall teach them diligently' – the words of the Torah must be sharp in your mouth."... The Ran writes: This does not mean that with this a person is exempt, for a person is obligated to study at all times, day and night, to the best of his ability. And we said in the first chapter of Kiddushin (30): "Our Rabbis taught: 'And you shall teach them diligently' - the words of the Torah must be sharp in your mouth, so that if someone asks you a question, you shall not stutter, but rather say to him... And reading Shema morning and night does not suffice for this." He means to say: Even if the reading of Shema could exempt a person from the mitzva of study, it does not exempt him from the mitzva of knowledge, for the reading of Shema does not suffice for a person to know how to answer another person's questions...

What, then, is taught by the verse, "And you shall meditate therein [day and night]"? Even if a person is very busy with his livelihood and cannot study Torah all the time, nevertheless he is obligated to establish times for Torah [study] by day and by night, even one chapter in the morning and one chapter at night. About this they said: In a time of need, when a person's preoccupations are excessive, and he has no time for even a single chapter, he can fulfill his obligation with the reading of Shema by day and by night in order to fulfill the mitzva of "And you shall meditate therein day and night," it being a time of need and there being no alternative.

Rav Zevin means to say that the command given to Yehoshua does not relate to knowledge of the Torah. Yehoshua occupied himself with acquiring Torah knowledge throughout the years that he ministered to Moshe in the wilderness. But this chapter in his life ended when he was appointed leader of Israel charged with conquering the land. From now on, he will have little time for study, because he will be busy fighting the Canaanites and governing Israel. Therefore, the commandment that applies to him is not to increase his knowledge, but to maintain an existential connection to Torah through brief daily study. The purpose of this study is not the knowledge to be gained therefrom, but putting his daily personal schedule into a framework in which the connection to Gd and Torah are basic components of his consciousness. Accordingly, this commandment was given to him at this time, at the beginning of the book of Yehoshua, when he became leader.

In light of this, reading this chapter as the haftara for Simchat Torah is meaningful even for us. It comes to teach us that Simchat Torah is not the personal holiday of scholars who spend most of their waking hours amassing Torah knowledge, but rather it is the holiday of the entire Jewish people, who are busy earning their livelihood. It comes to teach about the relationship of the entire people to Torah. The siyyum that is celebrated on Simchat Torah relates to the cycle of weekly Torah readings in the synagogue, which is also a practice directed at man's existential situation, inasmuch as it provides him with a connection to Torah and to the revelation at Mount Sinai. The weekly Torah reading is not a rabbinic ordination program and does not merely provide intellectual knowledge of the Torah. Every year we return to that same cycle of reading, without making any changes, because the goal is experiential, and all of Israel are partners in that experience.

Chazal have already commented on the mitzva of bringing children to the hakhel ceremony, that it is to "to reward those who bring them." This should be understood to mean that hakhel involves educational and experiential gain, because even the connection of a child who does not understand what is written in the Torah must be strengthened. The Tosafot (Chagiga 3a) transferred this principle from the reading of the parasha of hakhel in the Temple to the weekly reading of the Torah in the synagogue, and saw a reason to include children in that as well. R. Yitzchak Or Zaru'a (II, no. 48) expanded upon this idea

After he has read, the prayer leader goes and sits on a chair and all the children go and kiss the Torah scroll after it is rolled up. This is a good custom to train and encourage children in mitzvot. This is similar to what is found in tractate Soferim, which concludes that they would not leave their minor children behind, but rather they would bring them to synagogue in order to encourage them to perform mitzvot. On the day that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryahu was established in his position, he opened by saying: "You stand this day all of you before the Lord... your little ones, your wives..." – the men to hear, the women to receive reward for coming, by why do the children come? To reward those who bring them. From here it has become customary for Jewish girls to come to synagogue in order to reward those who bring them... And also because children come to synagogue, the fear of heaven enters their hearts. As we have learned: Yehoshua ben Chananya, happy is she who gave birth to him. And it is explained in the Yerushalmi, in the first chapter of Yebamot: Because his mother would bring him to the study hall so that his ears should cleave to words of Torah, as this is the meaning of the Mishna: "[Yehoshua] ben Chananya, happy is she who gave birth to him."

The underlying message of hakhel, of the mitzva of meditating upon the Torah day and night, and of our joy on the holiday of Simchat Torah is one and the same: the entire community, and not just an elite of scholars, has a portion in Torah study, and all participate in this mitzva alike

originally published on https://www.etzion.org.il/