

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Simchat Torah)

There is a powerful story I heard many years ago but never shared publicly, considering it too fantastic to possibly be true. But recently having read an accounting of it in Yitta Halberstam's *Small Miracles of the Holocaust*, (*Dancing with G-d* pp. 178-181) I had the opportunity to ask a Hungarian Auschwitz survivor who recalled that this story had made the rounds in Auschwitz. It is difficult for me to imagine that the story is true, and yet, who could make up such a story?

Apparently, in the fall of 1944, as the last remaining Jews of Hungary were being sent to the gas chambers, a Commandant decided to consign every Jew under the age of 18 to their fate. Normally youth in their later teens were sent to the labor battalions, receiving a reprieve from the infamous selections, but for some reason this Officer was determined that all Jews under 18 should be gassed. It was a well-known fact that the Nazis would often look for ways to enhance the Jews' suffering during the holidays, and as it was the last day of Sukkot, the festival of rejoicing, the SS officer took special pleasure in condemning fifty more young Jewish men especially as they had thought given their age and relative good health that they would certainly be sent to work rather than death....

Thus it was that fifty able-bodied teens from a yeshiva in Hungary were all sent to the gas chambers. As the doors were closed and the reality of their situation began to sink in, for some reason there was a delay in the gas and the hundreds of Jews trapped in the gas chambers stood waiting.... By 1944 most of the Jews knew what was coming, and one could hear the silent sobs and painful mournful undertones as the Jews awaited their deaths...

Finally, one young yeshiva student sprang up and shouted:

"Brothers! Today is Simchat Torah when we are meant as Jews to rejoice in the Torah! We have one last chance to celebrate the gift of Torah, let us celebrate Simchat Torah one last time!"

And with that he began to sing the well-known words of a song sung in many communities on Simchat Torah:

"Ashreinu, ma'tov chelkeinu, u'ma' naim goraleinu..."

"How happy are we, how good is our lot, and how pleasant is our fate..."

Incredibly fifty young voices joined in and began to sing.... And still the gas had not dropped into the gas chamber. And the same gas chamber whose walls had absorbed so much pain and sadness and had known only the agony of death and final goodbyes suddenly echoed with the sounds of song and joy.

Can you imagine? "... how pleasant is our fate..."? How could any human being find the strength to say, much less sing those words, in that place?

And as they were singing and clapping the same Commandant walked by and heard the joyous sounds emanating from the gas chamber. Confused, he ordered the doors opened and soon became enraged.

Pointing at one of the young yeshiva boys, he demanded an explanation, at which point one of the yeshiva boys responded:

“We are rejoicing because leaving a world where Nazi beasts reign is cause for celebration! We are soon joining our loved ones in the world of truth and leaving your murderous world behind...”

The Commandant was so infuriated at their joy he ordered them all taken out of the gas chamber. Promising them instead a world of pain and torture, he had them thrown in a shed to await their horrible fate.

But ‘fate’ had a different plan; a much higher-ranking officer arrived the next morning with orders to procure a few hundred laborers for an important Nazi project. Happening upon this young group he had them all loaded on trucks bound for safer work; legend has it they all survived the war

So... how did a group of boys in Auschwitz find the strength not just to survive, but to actually *rejoice*, in a gas chamber in Auschwitz??

This week we leave the Sukkah, the booth we sit in for seven days every year, into Simchat Torah, signifying the celebration of the completion of the year-long reading of the Torah, the five books of Moses. One wonders why we celebrate the completion of the Torah specifically at the end of the festival of Sukkot? We literally go from sitting in the Sukkah straight into the dancing of Simchat Torah with our Torah scrolls; what is the connection?

Rav Moshe Feinstein, in his *Darash Moshe*, points out (quoting the *Yotzer* of the second day of Sukkot) that the mitzvah of the Sukkah (the huts we sit in) is equivalent to all of the Mitzvot in the Torah (“*ke’neged kol hamitzvot shkulah...*”), which is somewhat puzzling. One can understand why Shabbat or the prohibition against idolatry is such an important Mitzvah it is considered as important as all the Mitzvot; but why would that be true for sitting in a hut for seven days? Indeed, what is sitting in the Sukkah all about?

What are we meant to be thinking and feeling?

Interestingly, unlike Passover and Shavuot with clear historical origins, the events which the festival of Sukkot is meant to commemorate are not at all clear.

In fact, two of the most famous Rabbis in Jewish history debate the nature of these booths we call Sukkot.

According to the Talmud, (Tractate *Sukkah* 11b) Rabbi Eliezer says the Sukkot represent the clouds of glory (the *ananei kavod*) which miraculously protected the Jews in the desert.

Rabbi Akiva however believes we are commemorating actual sukkot (booths) the Jews dwelled in for forty years in the desert, which protected them from the elements until they finally entered the land of Israel, their permanent home.

A rather strange point of view to say the least; It is easy to understand why we would celebrate and commemorate the miraculous clouds of glory.

But what was so special about booths in the desert? Obviously if a nomadic people are wandering the desert for forty years they will build huts and booths much like the Bedouin still do today. So what is it we are celebrating?

Rav Moshe Feinstein in his **Darash Moshe** suggests that we think or at least often behave as though the world as we see it is reality and that the mitzvot and Torah Hashem (G-d) gives us are the illusion.

But in truth, this world, with its emphasis on materialism and the things we accrue, is the illusion and temporary, whereas Hashem, as represented by the clouds of Glory is the true reality.

If we could really know that this world is really like the blink of an eye, and that many of the things to which we ascribe so much significance are an illusion, then we would live entirely different lives.

As an example, suggests Rav Moshe, sometimes all the financial experts will recommend that a particular company or stock is almost a guarantee and a person as a result will invest heavily only to discover all the experts were wrong. And such a person overnight can lose everything. Conversely, sometimes a person will throw money at an idea which makes no sense or spend a fortune on lottery tickets and become wealthy overnight

The *Chofetz Chaim* points out that all the earnings of a person are determined by Hashem in advance, such that even though we certainly have to do our bit to be partners in the world, that actually has little to do with how much we will actually earn....

And if a person could really own this idea he would obviously not be stressed with the fluctuations of the stock market.

Imagine a Doctor tells a person he has six months to live: it is fair to assume such a person would re-prioritize his entire life, and all the endless email and social media, stock trading and board meetings, would seem so much less important. Indeed, for those six months what had appeared as a death sentence, would actually be a life sentence as this person would probably rediscover the true gift of life.

We forget that we have all been seen by the 'Doctor'. And it has already been determined how much time we have here; the only question is whether we remember this every day.

The clouds of glory, suggests Rav Moshe, represent the world and reality as it truly is, and the Sukkot, the actual huts Rabbi Akiva refers to, are the world as we see it. We move into our temporary huts to remember what our priorities should be, and what the world is really about.

This actually explains an interesting question:

During the festival of Sukkoth we add a one line prayer to the blessings after a meal:

“HaRachaman Hu’ Yakim Lanu ... Sukkat David Ha’Nofalet.”
“May the merciful one raise up the fallen Sukkah of David.”

This is a prayer for the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash, the holy Temple, yet the Beit ha’Mikdash (the Temple) is referred to here as a Sukkah, a strange term to say the least. A Sukkah, after all, is a temporary hut, which the Temple certainly was not. In fact, if there was ever a structure in Judaism, which was not meant to be temporary, it was the Temple!

Unless of course that is the whole point: the Beit HaMikdash was meant to be an environment where we could so feel Hashem (G-d)’s presence we immediately understood what in life was important and what was temporary and a waste of time ...

We sit in our homes with the illusion that they are ‘built to last’. And for seven days (or eight outside the land of Israel) we sit in what we consider to be a temporary hut. The message of Sukkoth is that our homes are really just Sukkoth; temporary huts, and our Sukkoth, representing the idea that we are under the clouds of glory, completely in G-d’s hands, are really the homes we make for ourselves that are built to last.

Sukkot challenges us to consider what things in life really last forever.

Perhaps those boys in that terrible place in Auschwitz got a glimpse of what was really important in life, and what really is eternal....

And from this understanding, we are ready to embrace and dance with the Torah and see its recipe for a joy-filled meaningful life as the reality and priority and not just a temporary opportunity to rejoice

Wishing all a wonderful holiday and a Chag sameach from Jerusalem,
Binny Freedman