

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Sukkot)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

A number of years ago, I met a wealthy businessman named Yaakov (not his real name...) from Caracas who was spending Pesach with his family at a hotel in Florida. Over the course of the festival, we struck up a friendship, and I discovered he was a Holocaust survivor who had been first in the Janowska road camp and later in Auschwitz. Towards the end of the week I summoned up the nerve to ask him if there was anything in particular that stood out in his mind as the reason he had survived. Without hesitation, he responded: "It was one mitzvah; the sukkos (festival holiday of Sukkoth, the feast of the tabernacles.) I spent in Auschwitz.

I guess my face must have registered surprise, because he immediately explained. When he arrived in Auschwitz in the middle of his thirteenth winter, one of the Kapos (barracks captains, often even more cruel than the Nazis...) took a liking to him and arranged for him to be in charge of the daily rations to be given out to the prisoners at the end of the day. It was a job that would save his life. He spent the days in a small shed attached to the large barracks, responsible for dividing up the bread and soup to be given out to each inmate at the end of the day. In addition to having access to food he was also often put into difficult situations having to respond to prisoners desperate for food....

One day, while preparing the rations in the dark winter night, he heard banging on the door of the shed, and opened it up to discover a man he knew to be a great Torah scholar and one of the eminent Rabbis of his area before the war, standing in the snow.

Before he could turn the man away (sure that he wanted scraps of bread), the man stepped into the shed, telling Yaakov he needed a favor.

"You know tonight is the first night of the festival of Sukkos, and I need two whole loaves of bread before you cut them up... so I can fulfill the special custom of making the ("Hamotzi") blessing over two whole loaves (known as Lechem Mishnah...) in the sukkah."

"I was in shock", recalled Yaakov, at the request. Not only was he asking for two whole loaves of bread, but he was even planning somehow on fulfilling the mitzvah of having a 'meal' in the Sukkah!"

"You have to understand", he explained, a whole loaf of bread in Auschwitz was like a million dollars today. Can you imagine someone walking in off the street and asking for a million dollars? Even though he promised he would only take a bite, (the equivalent of his own ration) and then return the loaves to me, giving away those loaves would effectively mean I was risking my life."

Even more intriguing however, was how on earth this Rabbi had managed to build a sukkah (a booth built to specific halachic specifications...) in Auschwitz- Birkenau.

As it turned out, that summer and fall of 1944 the Nazis were bringing hundreds of thousands of Jews (including the remaining 400,000 Jews of Hungary) in a last-ditch effort to complete the 'final solution' before the war would end.

In the twisted organizational logic of the lager camps world, the Nazis needed to have additional barracks to hold the new prisoners for labor until they could be exterminated. As such, prisoners were dismantling tiers of bunks in the barracks (prisoners there literally began sleeping in piles of bodies on the floor of the barracks) while rows of bunks were being reconstructed in the central parade ground.

Seeing the rows and rows of bunks outdoors and realizing the festival of Sukkot was coming, this rabbi had managed to secure some schach (plant shrubbery) and place it atop some of the boards of the semi-constructed bunks beneath the open sky in such a way as to construct a minimally kosher sukkah (booth) for the festival. However, the mitzvah of living in the sukkah can only be fulfilled by either sleeping (which was out of the question) or eating in the sukkah, which was his aim.

Seeing the hesitation on the boy's face, and desperate to fulfill this mitzvah against all the odds, the rabbi begged him for the loaves, if only for a few minutes.

"I will give you these loaves", said the boy (Yaakov) but only on condition you take me with you to fulfill the mitzvah of the sukkah."

The rabbi, shocked by the impetuous response began to attempt to dissuade the boy from this condition. He would be risking his life by walking outside after curfew, and again for carrying two whole loaves of bread and of course for attempting to sit in a sukkah. But nothing he could say would dissuade the boy, so together the two of them, and old Rabbi and a student, risked their lives and sat, for a few brief moments, in a sukkah in Auschwitz.

(As an interesting post-script, 'Yaakov' told me that many years later he was in Chicago on business and got stuck there for Shabbat whereupon his host took him to the Tish of a great Rebbe, who turned out to be this same Rabbi, who happened to decide to tell this very story that very same night...).

What does it mean to sit in a *Sukkah* (booth)? What are we meant to be thinking and feeling? And why would two men decide to risk their lives, just to sit in a *sukkah* in Auschwitz?

One of the things that distinguish the festival of Sukkot from the other festivals is the ambiguity concerning the nature of the historical underpinnings of this festival. After all, *Pesach* (Passover) commemorates the Jews' exodus from Egypt, and *Shavuot* commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. But what exactly are we commemorating on Sukkot?

The Torah (*Vayikra* (Leviticus) 23:43) explains:

"...Le'maan yedu' doroteichem ki ba'Sukkot hoshavti et B'nei Yisrael be'hotzi' otam me'erezt mitzrayim."

"...In order that your (future) generations might know that I (G-d) made the children of Israel dwell in Sukkot when I took them out of Egypt."

In other words, the Torah commands us to spend a week living and eating in temporary booths (*sukkot*) to commemorate the fact that we dwelled in these same *sukkot* for forty years in the desert. One wonders why this is so important. So the Jews built booths to protect them from the sun in the desert; why does that warrant a week long celebration? After all, we don't spend a week wearing old clothes, even though the Jews had to wear clothes in the desert, so why the special celebration of *sukkot*?

And for that matter, why is this festival celebrated specifically at this time of year? Passover commemorates an event (the Exodus from Egypt) that occurred on the exact date the festival is celebrated, as is true in the case of the festivals of Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. But why are we celebrating *sukkot* *now*?

And one especially wonders about this celebration when considering the fact that there does not seem to have been any major miracle; unlike the falling of the Manna and the miraculous well of Miriam, we just built *sukkot*. So why the celebration? After all, we don't have a festival to commemorate the rocks Moshe hit in trying to bring forth water; why not have a 'rock- week'festival!

Interestingly, the Talmud (Tractate *Sukkah* 11a) does tell us of an interesting difference of opinion between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, as to what these 'Sukkot' mentioned in the Torah really were: Actual Sukkot (booths) or the Clouds of Glory (*Ananei Kavod*) mentioned elsewhere in the Torah....

While the opinion that these were indeed the Clouds of Glory (which somehow miraculously protected the Jews from their enemies and caused their clothes never to wear out etc...) would go along way to explaining our questions, what of the opinion of Rabbi Akiva that the Jews lived in actual booths in the desert (Clouds of Glory not withstanding...)? What is it that we are celebrating?

Indeed the language of the afore-mentioned verse does not even suggest that Hashem (G-d) built these Sukkoth, just that he allowed them to dwell in them.

The **Sefat Emet** (in his commentary on the Torah, 5655) suggests that on Yom Kippur we attempt to recapture the world as it was before we sinned. When Adam and Eve were first created, Hashem placed them (us) in the Garden of Eden which was the world as it could be. However, due to our inevitable mistakes we were forced to leave the Garden of Eden and venture out into the world as it had become: a world more distant from G-d. And ever since that time we are attempting to perfect this world and rectify our mistakes to recapture the world as it could be: the world of the Garden of Eden.

Indeed, Yom Kippur, which culminates ten days of *teshuvah* (repentance, or literally 'returning', from the root '*shuv*' to return) is the day when we attempt to turn back the clock and become the person we were meant to be *before* the mistakes we have made. Hence Yom Kippur falls on the anniversary of the day when the Jews were given the second set of tablets (given after the first tablets were destroyed in the debacle of the Golden calf when the first tablets were destroyed...) because it is the day when we are given the opportunity to go back to the way life could be.

But if Yom Kippur remains just one special day of the year, when we let go of the world and come close to Hashem, then we have missed the point. The real challenge of the Sukkah is whether we can bring a little bit of Yom Kippur with us back into the world.

Indeed **Rav Moshe Feinstein** (in his *Darash Moshe*) suggests that essentially, this world is an illusion. We see a physical world of natural order where materialism rules and the bigger house means the better man. So we spend a week in the Sukkah to remind us that all we own and all the things we think we have are really an illusion; reality is the world of the Garden of Eden; the world of ethics and love, of closeness to Hashem and Torah.

This was precisely what the forty years spent by the Jewish people in the desert was all about. After the mistakes that they made (with the Golden calf and the sin of the spies) the Jews spent 40 years in the desert remembering that the world is a passing illusion, and that if G-d is the source of all reality, then G-d is reality, an experience easier to have in the desert.

This then, perhaps, is the nature of our celebration of the festival of Sukkot. When we sit in the sukkah, particularly immediately after the experience of Yom Kippur, we are embracing the idea that what we have is not who we are, and attempting to make the lessons of Yom Kippur real in the grind and routine of the every day.

And if two Jews can disconnect from the nightmare illusion all around them, and succeed in connecting to reality, even in Auschwitz, the perhaps we can tap into a small fraction of that strength to do the same in our every day as well.

May we be blessed to succeed in taking a little bit of Yom Kippur with us on our journey this year....

Wishing you all a Shabbat shalom and a Chag Sameach, a joy-filled holiday of Sukkot,

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