

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny
(Sukkot)

Yom Kippur was over, and with the festival of Sukkot around the corner, I realized I had no way to get a set of four species in time for the festival.

*Traditionally, every day of Sukkot (The Festival of the Booths, or the Feast of Tabernacles), one gathers the four species mentioned in the bible (The **Etrog** or Citrus fruit, the **Lulav** or palm branch, the **Haddasim** or myrtle branches, and the **Aravot**, or willow branches) wrapping them together as part of the daily ritual of the holiday.*

We were actually in Lebanon at the time, and as I was the only Kippah-wearing soldier on the base, I already knew I would have no minyan (community prayer service), and no sukkah (the booth Jews traditionally eat and sleep in during the festival.) So the thought of having no set of 'arbah minim' (the four species) was really depressing.

With so many patrols and duties (we were in a hot zone) requiring an officer, the possibility of taking off time to get somewhere to buy a set was pretty remote, but I managed to re-arrange the officers' duty-roster leaving me an eighteen-hour window, and convinced my C.O. I could make it to Jerusalem and back in time to cover the next patrol.

This was no easy feat, as it usually took a good eight hours to get all the way down, but the thought of being in civilization for a few hours, as well as the chance to walk down Meah She'arim street in Jerusalem and pick out a nice set of the four species was more than I could resist.

All told, I ended up in Jerusalem for about three hours, which was enough to pick up a beautiful compact set of 'arbah minim', as well as some pizza for lunch, and ended up spending a good fifteen hours in travel. The challenge of keeping my Lulav (palm branch) intact and kosher while hitchhiking in a variety of small cars was not simple, but I made it back to base with my 'arbah minim' intact.

All of which gave me a whole different level of appreciation for the mitzvah that particular year. The Talmud tells us:

"Lefum' Tza'arah Agrah." : "According to the travail is the reward."

You get out of things what you put into them; the more effort you expend on something, the more you appreciate and value it.

So on the morning of Sukkot, just back from a patrol, I found myself all alone in what passed for the synagogue in our base. (Basically a half a caravan with a 105mm. shell-crate as an ark (with no Torah in it), a couple of benches, and a few dusty prayer books.)

It was too hot to pray inside, so I stepped outside and, facing south towards Jerusalem continued my prayers. There is a point in the Hallel (the special psalms of praise and thanks that are sung on festivals), which really hit me:

“Ma’ Ashiv La’Hashem?” “What have I to give back to G-d?”

There are certain moments in life, when you appreciate the gifts you have been given. In the middle of a war zone, with men getting killed or injured every day, and the number of close calls and near misses too many to count, you realize that life is a gift and you wonder why you are lucky enough to still be here. In silent gratitude, you pray yet again that you will succeed in making the life you have been given worth living.

“Kos Yeshuot Esah.” “I lift up the cup of my salvation”

You have to drink of that which you have been blessed with, and recognize just what a fleeting window of opportunity this world really is.

“Nedarai’ La’Hashem A’shalem.” “I must repay my promises to G-d.”

The battlefield is full of promises, and you swear you will do lots of different things, if you make it; the time comes you have to live up to your promises.

And in the midst of all these thoughts, deep in Lebanon’s Bekaa valley, with the Shouf mountain range rising up above, a niggun (a tune without words) just popped into my head and I began to sing. And pretty soon, lost in the moment, I actually began to dance.

It was a pretty powerful experience, until in the course of my experience I turned around and realized I was not alone. Standing about twenty feet behind me were the base cook and a couple of soldiers on kitchen detail, including one of my men.

Judging by the expressions on their faces, they must have thought I was absolutely mad. And who could blame them? What would you think if you had a tour of a military base located deep in a combat zone, and you happened across a lieutenant dancing in the dust with a lemon and a palm branch? Would you trust such an individual to lead men into battle?

What, indeed, is the festival of Sukkoth all about? And what lies at the root of some of the rather strange rituals of this particular holiday?

Imagine for a moment you have a Jewish friend who knows next to nothing about his Jewish roots, and you want to share with him the beauty of Judaism. So this week, he finally agrees to come over for Shabbat dinner, and as it happens, it is the first night of Sukkoth.

And imagine you live in a beautiful mansion. (Hey if you’re going to start imagining, why dream small, right?)

And then imagine his face as you welcome him into your beautiful home and lead him past the incredible living room, through the magnificent dining hall, past the fantastic kitchen so large it could double as a separate house, through the patio, past the incredible pool, round the back of the house to... a booth!

Not to mention what he is thinking as you proceed, in the shadow of your beautiful, state- of-the-art home, to serve dinner in this little cardboard box covered with grass. (Never mind his perception, if he stayed the night and came to synagogue in the morning just in time to find a few hundred people dancing with lemons and palm branches!)

In fact, one of the most beautiful parts of Pesach (Passover), is the moment when our children ask the four questions, the *Mah' Nishtana*, asking why this night is so different from all other nights?

Yet one wonders, why don't we sing the *Mah' Nishtana* on Sukkoth? After all, if ever there was day that is different, it is the day we shake our *arbah' minim*, and sit in booths as the rainy season begins! So why don't we say *Mah Nishtana*?

Another interesting question regarding the festival of Sukkoth concerns the historical background of the day.

Passover is the commemoration of our exodus from Egypt, and Shavuot is the commemoration of the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. So what does Sukkoth come to remember?

“And you shall sit in booths (Sukkoth) for seven days... in order that your generations shall know that I placed the children of Israel in Sukkoth when I took them out of Egypt.” (Leviticus 23:42-43)

One opinion is that these “*Sukkoth*” are actually the clouds of glory (see **Rashi** there.), which protected us in the desert. A second opinion (quoted ad loc. in the *Sefer HaChinuch*, the Book of Knowledge) however, is that the verse refers to ‘*Sukkoth mamash*’; actual booths the Jewish people dwelled in while in the desert.

So which is it? And what is the difference between these two possibilities? What is this debate really about?

It is interesting to note that the essence of the festival of Sukkoth seems to be wrapped up in a very special and yet challenging commandment:

“Ve'Samachta Be'Chagecha” “And you shall rejoice on your festival”, is a mitzvah specifically given with reference to the festival of Sukkoth. Why is there a special mitzvah to rejoice on this festival? And even if this commandment is meant to apply to all the festivals, it is given in the context of Sukkoth, implying that joy on Sukkoth is more than just one piece of the festival; it is, rather, the essence of the day.

Indeed, one of the most challenging statements in **Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law**, the *Yad HaChazakah*, concerns the concept of joy specifically brought in his laws of Sukkah Ve'Lulav:

“The joy that a person must experience (rejoice) in the fulfillment of a mitzvah, and the love of G-d, is a great service. And whomsoever holds himself back from this joy is worthy of punishment (consequence) as it is written: “By virtue of your not having served Hashem your G-d in joy, and with a good heart.” (Deuteronomy 28:47) (Laws of Sukkah Ve'Lulav 8:15)

There is an obligation, it seems, to rejoice in the fulfillment of mitzvot, and a lack of such joy apparently results, suggests Maimonides in the most severe consequences. And a closer look at the particular verse Maimonides cites in support of this statement is nothing short of incredible. This verse appears in the midst of what may perhaps be considered the most difficult chapter in the entire Torah: the verses of the *Tochacha*, or Reproof.

These verses, containing the terrible curses that will befall the Jewish people in the event that they stray from the path of goodness and righteousness sinking instead into the morass of evil and idolatry, are so terrible, that our custom is to read them in the Synagogue in a lower voice.

“And it shall be, if you do not hearken unto the voice of G-d...and all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you.” (28:15)

“You will be cursed in the city and in the field.” (v.16)

“G-d will send upon you pestilence and disease... until you are destroyed...” (v.20)

“And G-d will smite you with scurvy and rot...and they will pursue you till destruction.” (v.22)

“And you shall be like a plague... and an embarrassment (and horror) before all the kingdoms on earth.” (v.25)

“And your carcass shall be food for the birds of the heavens and the animals of the earth, and no one will even shudder.” (v.26) And so on.

And all of this, it appears, is because *‘you did not serve Hashem your G-d in joy, and with a good heart’*.

Now, I could comprehend the Torah telling me that all of this occurs because we have sunken into evil, bloodshed and violence, or even because we have somehow abandoned G-d’s ways. Even though these consequences are beyond our capability to understand, at least in this world, one might at least be able to struggle with such a formula.

But to suggest, as Maimonides clearly does, that all of this pain and suffering occurs not because we do not serve G-d, but rather because we do not serve G-d *with joy*, is absolutely unbelievable.

Imagine every Jew in the world keeping Shabbat every week, spending hours every day in synagogue, donning tefillin and refraining from any form of slander or gossip. Imagine thousands of kosher restaurants opening up simply because millions of Jews decide all together that from this day forth, they will only eat kosher food. Imagine twenty-five thousand *Nefesh B’Nefesh* flights to Israel, as all the Jews in the world realize the awesome gift of the fulfillment of the mitzvah to live in Israel, and finally come home.

Yet, soon after, all that is built by these millions of new and veteran mitzvah-toting Israelis, is completely destroyed, simply because they are not fulfilling the mitzvah *in joy!*

How many people do you know who walk into a supermarket and can’t stop smiling at the joyous experience of buying kosher hot dogs? And how many people do you know who wake up in the morning and can’t wait to get to the seven a.m. services and ‘pump tefillin’, smiling the entire way there in anticipation?!

What does Maimonides mean when he suggests that all of our mitzvah are almost meaningless without the joy that is meant to form the basis for their fulfillment? And what does this all have to do specifically with the festival of Sukkoth?

What indeed is Sukkoth all about?

Perhaps one particular historical detail will help to shed light on all that we have raised here.

One of the questions that the commentaries deal with concerning Sukkoth, is why on earth we are celebrating this holiday at the beginning of the rainy season? Why is this the season of Sukkoth? Especially if Sukkoth commemorates the fact that the Jews were protected in the desert either by clouds of glory or actual huts that they built, would not the appropriate time to commemorate this be immediately after Pesach, when we got out of Egypt and followed Moses into the desert?

Indeed, Jewish tradition makes an interesting point here. (See **Eliahu Kitov's** *Book of Our Heritage*, as well as **Rav Zevin's** *Moadim Ba'Halachah* on Sukkoth). The Jews, according to Jewish tradition, only built these Sukkoth at the end of the summer, to protect themselves from the cold. Until this season, they had no need for the Sukkoth, relying instead on the clouds of glory. But by now, after the sin of the spies (which took place on the ninth of Av in August, according to Jewish tradition), they were somehow no longer worthy of the same level of protection, needing instead to dwell in actual huts or booths ("*Sukkoth Mamash*").

Think about it: If everything had gone according to plan, the Jews would have already been in the land of Israel. Forty days after receiving (what turned out to be the first set of) the Ten Commandments, on the seventeenth day of Tammuz, Moses came back down after receiving the rest of the Torah. He found a people reveling in the sin of the Golden calf, and the rest is history. But what would have happened if the Jewish people had been waiting with bated breath, as planned, to receive that Torah?

According to our mystical tradition, we would have gone straight into the land of Israel, crossing the Jordan River surrounded by clouds of glory. And we would have built a kingdom, with Moses (who did not enter for reasons that occurred much later) that would have lasted forever. Indeed, this is the hidden pain of the seventeenth day of Tammuz, when Jews fast to commemorate the day, on which, nearly two thousand years ago, the Roman legions breached the walls signaling the beginning of the end of the Temple and the Jewish commonwealth in Israel.

To quote Longfellow: "*No sadder words in pen than these: 'Oh! What might have been!'* The seventeenth day of Tammuz is the day of *what might have been*."

And more important for our purposes, if Moses had brought the Jewish people in to the land of Israel as planned, they would not have been in the desert at the end of the summer, building their homes instead in the land of Israel. So there would have, indeed should have been no Sukkoth at all!

The difference between commemorating the actual Sukkoth, and the clouds of glory, then is quite simple:

The Sukkoth represent what actually was; the clouds of glory represent what might have been. And this is the essence of Sukkoth, celebrated almost immediately after Yom Kippur. On Sukkoth we are challenged by who we are, and by the dream of who we could really be, not only as individuals, and not just as a nation, but also as a world.

If on Yom Kippur we come to terms with who we really are, on Sukkoth we begin the fulfillment of the dream of who we could become.

What are these four species that we bind together? Jewish tradition notes that the **Etrog** or Citrus fruit has both a wonderful taste as well as a magnificent fragrance. The **Lulav** or Palm branch, comes from the Palm Tree whose fruit, the date, has a wonderful taste, but no fragrance. The **Haddasim** or myrtle branches, on the other hand, have an incredible smell, but no taste. And the **Aravot**, or willow branches, have neither taste nor fragrance.

This, suggests Jewish tradition, represents all the different kinds of Jews: Those Jews who sit in the Yeshivot and devote their lives to Torah study and the transmission and preservation of the intricacies of Jewish tradition, as well as those Jews more focused on Jewish community and action, who may only enter a Synagogue once or twice a year, but who fill the boards of all the Jewish charities and foundations or patrol the borders of Israel ensuring a home for the Jewish people. There are those rare Jews, who, like the Etrog,

have both the fragrance of Jewish action and ethics, as well as the taste of Torah, which is constantly on their lips. And there are even those Jews who, so distant from their heritages, with no taste or smell, are almost undetectable amidst the foliage.

On Sukkoth, we hold all these Jews, represented by the four species, together. In fact, our service, and indeed the entire festival, is incomplete without any one of these four species, just as the Jewish people is incomplete without any one Jew, any where in the world.

We can only become the people we are meant to be, when we become one, binding ourselves together in pursuit of the destiny and the dream of a better world as envisioned by the festival of Sukkoth.

And this is partly why Sukkoth is so bound up in joy: because true joy is togetherness. Only when we are one and together, can we experience true joy. All of the things that bring us joy are really no fun when we experience them alone. That is why no one wants to be alone on their birthday, even though they'd get the cake all to themselves. Because joy is in oneness born of togetherness.

But it's much deeper than that; what is joy and happiness really all about?

As we have mentioned in the past, joy is really about connecting with purpose. The reason we experience such joy when we stand under the chuppah, the wedding canopy, is because finally, the long journey of dating and all the pain that is experienced when a person's love is not reciprocated, not to mention the weariness of struggling to find the right person, all makes sense. All of a sudden, when you are with that special someone and at long last have committed to a lifetime of building together, it all makes sense. Every person you ever met, every experience you ever had, was really just teaching you who you were looking for, and who you weren't looking for. All those challenging moments were all part of allowing you to become the person who is ready to stand under the chuppah and make that commitment, and the entire journey makes sense.

And that is true joy: when it all makes sense. That is the joy of birth, when the long months of pregnancy, and all the morning sickness and especially all the pain and challenges of labor itself, all make sense, because now there is a baby.

And this is the secret of the festival of Sukkoth.

"Be 'Ospechem Et Te'vuat Ha'Aretz Tachogu'..." (Leviticus 23:39)
"When you gather in the harvest (grains) of the land shall you celebrate...."

Sukkoth represents the gathering in of the harvest, on many levels. Agriculturally, this is the season of the harvest, when all the hard work of preparing and cultivating the fields finally 'makes sense' and the purpose of harvesting the crops is revealed.

Historically, if Pesach represented leaving Egypt, and Shavuot represented receiving the Torah in the desert, Sukkoth is the festival of entering the land of Israel. And in the end, coming home to the land of Israel is the purpose of the entire Torah. Hence the verse suggests that true joy is when you gather in the harvest at home, in the land of Israel. Because what's the point of the harvest if it's not really mine? So the harvest anywhere else but in the land of Israel is just not the same joy.

Lastly, one of the most important steps in being able to achieve true joy in this world is to let go of those illusions that prevent us from both recognizing, as well as achieving our true purpose.

We sit in our flimsy huts, next to our beautiful and well built homes, because once a year, especially during this season of the harvest, when it is so easy to get caught up in how much I have, and all that I have built, we need to remember what an illusion that really is.

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

“HaRachaman Hu’ Yakim Lanu Et 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. And it is interesting that specifically on Sukkoth it is referred to as the structure (Sukkah) of King David, even though it was not David who built it, but rather his son, Solomon.

Perhaps this is because even though David, having been a warrior, was not permitted to build this House of Peace, it is nonetheless called his Temple, because it was his dream, bequeathed to his son Solomon, which ultimately gave birth to the Temple. And it is in the dream that we find the purpose of a thing, which relates again to the theme of *Simcha*, joy, on Sukkoth.

The *Beit HaMikdash* 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: Perhaps the message here is that even the *Beit HaMikdash*, meant to stand forever, can be a Sukkah. You think the Temple is forever? Even the Temple can be a temporary hut, here today and gone tomorrow. In the end, the foundations of the Temple are not in the ground, but rather in the hearts of the Jewish people.

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.

This is why we build the roofs of our Sukkoth with foliage that ideally allows us to see the stars, because they remind us we are in the end in the hands of Hashem, whose Sukkah covers us all. And this idea, that this world and all the things we deem to be ‘forever’, are really just huts in the wind blown away in an instant sets us free to explore what our real purpose in this world must be, which is the path to discovering true joy.

We get so stuck in the things that hold us down, but if we were truly connected with the fact that Hashem, who created us and everything else along with us, loves us so much that we are always in His hands, then we would always be in a state of joy. Because if Hashem created us and guides us, then there is purpose in every moment that we are here, and true joy is when we connect to what that purpose might be.

And this, perhaps, is why there is no *Mah Nishtana* on Sukkoth; because this idea, that we are only temporary dwellers in this world, and that true joy is in the discovery of purpose, and that only coming together as one people can help us arrive at true joy, is not something which should be different during this week. Rather, this should be the norm all year round.

This is what Maimonides is referring to when he suggests that all of the pain and destruction is born of this lack of joy in mitzvot. Because if I am fulfilling the letter of every mitzvah, but I have no relationship with the underlying purpose of the mitzvot, then my relationship with those mitzvot will not last.

Judaism without joy and meaning will not last, and this is perhaps the greatest challenge of our generation. Seventy years ago, a generation of Jews crawling out of the ashes of the Holocaust, built a state of Israel. Today, most Israelis, while connected to the existence of that State, have completely lost touch with its meaning.

There are many Jews who wear tefillin, but how many of them really experience the joy of this mitzvah, which comes from connecting to its purpose and meaning?

And ultimately, when the Jewish people are connected to the body of Jewish tradition, but have lost touch with its soul and its meaning; when there is no joy in Judaism, then like a marriage of convenience, the relationship will wither and die.

May we all be blessed to rediscover the joy of who we are. And may we all merit, in this coming year, to connect with the joy of purpose in meaning in all that we do, and all that we are.

Best wishes for a wonderful and happy Sukkoth,

Shabbat Shalom, and Chag Sameach,

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