

Sparks

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Sukkot and Simchat Torah Celebrating Wholeness, Spontaneity and Anticipation

Off to a Right Start

The holiday of Sukkot reminds us of the huts of the Israelites as they wandered for forty years in the desert after their miraculous Exodus from Egypt. It would stand to reason, then, that Sukkot should be celebrated right after the holiday of Passover. However, the Talmudic sages explain that since Passover is in the spring, living in the *sukkah* would not be anything special. It is common to be outside during the warm months of the year. After Yom Kippur, however, when it starts to get cold, people generally take shelter inside. We go outside, only because G-d commands us to do so.

Leaving our homes precisely when we are not naturally inclined to do so, internalizes one of the important lessons of Sukkot-G-d is our only true shelter, and we must trust in Him. We often transgress the will of G-d, because we mistakenly think we know what is best for us, rather than trusting in G-d. This was the mistake that Adam and Eve made when they ate of the forbidden fruit. They thought they knew better than G-d as to what would best serve their interests and accomplish their life goals.

Trusting G-d is a vital truth to internalize especially after the High Holiday season, just before we return to the challenges of our everyday lives.

There is another advantage to celebrating Sukkot at the start of autumn rather than after Passover in the spring. Autumn is the season of the harvest, which is the time when we are subject to the tricks of the ego. It is too easy-after reaping the fruits of our labor-to take pride in our accomplishment. Pride and ego make for fertile ground in which the seeds of evil can grow; they were two reasons why Adam and Eve disobeyed the will of G-d. Sensing the G-dliness within themselves, they aspired to become all-powerful and all-knowing, just like G-d. Therefore, they were easily seduced by the snake's claim that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge would empower them to become G-ds and allow them to determine for themselves what is good or bad.

Therefore, on Sukkot, as we step into the new year, we protect ourselves from returning to our wrongdoings of the past year by embracing the message of the *sukkah*-in G-d we trust and before Him we are humbled.

Inner Peace

In addition to living in the *sukkah* and waving the four species, it is customary on Sukkot to read the Book of Ecclesiastes written by King Solomon. The Talmudic sages tell us that King Solomon was inspired to write this book when he realized that the Temple that he built would be destroyed in the future. Lamenting over that excruciating truth he wrote, "Futility of futilities, of what worth is the work of man under the sun."

It seems odd to read this apparently depressing book on the holiday of happiness. However, King Solomon's brutal confrontation with the transience of life and our temporary accomplishments on earth actually reveals the key to true happiness and security. He concludes, "In the end, obey the word of G-d and do His bidding, because this is everything."

Sukkot teaches us how to find security and permanence in what seems transient. We embrace the perishable four species and dwell in a make-shift hut covered with biodegradable materials, as we acknowledge that

happiness and security are not based on what we possess but who we are in relationship to G-d. When we serve G-d here and now, we infuse the finite world with infinite meaning and connect the fleeting moment to eternity.

When you understand this truth, we will never be in a rush to get to some other place and get to some future time, because you realize that the joy of life is to serve G-d and there is no better time than now, and no better place than here-so what's the rush? If not now, when?

We often do wrong and sacrifice our integrity in the present, because we are anxious to secure our future. Sukkot, however, teaches us that we can find security even in the temporal and transient when we focus our attention on serving G-d here and now.

Adam and Eve also transgressed because they were impatient. They intuited that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad was essential to fulfilling their purpose on earth. And they were right, but their timing was wrong. According to the Kabbalah, G-d wanted them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, but not then. The right time to do it would have been on Shabbat. Had they patiently waited, trusted G-d and ate the fruit as a humble service to Him-rather than as a rebellious act in defiance of Him-they would have accomplished their ultimate goals. They would have actualized their G-dliness by experiencing G-d's love and their oneness with G-d.

Sukkot sets us off on the right foot into the new year by teaching us how to protect ourselves from sadness and evil: trust in G-d, humble yourself before Him and only concern yourself with fulfilling His commandments-here and now.

The Circle of Love

Each morning of Sukkot, near the end of the festive prayer service, we carry our four species, marching in a circle around the cantor (the leader of the service), who holds a Sefer Torah, the Torah scroll.

On the last day of Sukkot, which is referred to as Hoshanah Rabah, we encircle the Torah seven times. This number is reminiscent of the seven times the Israelites circled the city of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down. But the day after Hoshanah Rabah- when we celebrate the holiday of Shemini Atzeret also called Simchat Torah-we dance in a circle around an empty space hugging the Torah in our arms. Why?

During the seven days of Sukkot, when we circle the Torah, we remind ourselves that Torah must be the center of our lives. If we are self-centered, we cannot love others nor can we love G-d. To achieve true love, we need to move ourselves out of the center and put the Torah-which contains the will and wisdom of G-d-in the center.

Some people, however, claim that the laws of the Torah are actually obstacles to achieving true love. They argue that the rituals, formalities and minutiae of Torah law, interfere with experiencing a warm, personal, individual, spontaneous and loving relationship with G-d and other people. They believe that the commandments build walls not bridges.

This is never true as long as we remember that the laws of the Torah are the will of G-d and express what G-d asks of us. True love means doing for your beloved what he or she asks of you-not what you feel like doing even though it is against his or her wishes.

But, even when you understand this basic truth, the commandments could interfere with your loving relationship to G-d if you perform them mindlessly. The richness of ritual depends on the measure of intention you invest in it. Imagine that you decide to tell your beloved three times a day that you love her. If you don't mean it at all but simply repeat like a parrot, "I love you," then this mindless routine will become obstructive and destructive to your love.

This is a danger only when we consider the commandments of G-d to be peripheral of our daily lives. However, when we put the Torah in the center of our lives and acknowledge that it is the axis upon which our lives revolve then, over time, the Torah will actually break down the walls that divide us and separate us from G-d. This was the message that G-d communicated to us through the Prophet Isaiah, "It is only your wrongdoings that separate you from Me." The Torah and its commandments, however, break the barriers that divide us and build bonds of love.

After we succeed in making the Torah the center of our lives during Sukkot, and the wall and barriers to love are broken down, then we celebrate the holiday of Simchat Torah by dancing with the Torah around an empty space.

Of course, we know that there is no such thing as an empty space because G-d's presence fills the earth- there is no place void of G-d's presence. On Simchat Torah, we acknowledge that putting the Torah in the center of our lives empowers us to find the true center, core and soul of our lives-G-d.

The celebrations of Sukkot and Simchat Torah prepare us to dance our way into the upcoming year in a circle of love, embracing the natural, holding the hand of our fellow Jew, hugging the Torah and feeling close to G-d. And we experience all this in the very midst of our everyday lives in this transient world.

Rain, Rain Come Again

Each day during the Sukkot prayer service, when we march around in a circle, we pray that the New Year be blessed with rain. This is also an appropriate way to celebrate our renewed relationship with G-d. What makes the prayer for rain so special?

In Jewish tradition, G-d is described metaphorically, as desiring-and even needing-our prayers. The Book of Genesis describes how, in the process of creation, G-d had not sent rain which would cause vegetation to grow, because there were no one to work the field. The Midrash explains that there was no human being to recognize the goodness of rain and thus pray for it. In other words, G-d needed a human being to want rain and ask for it, before He could send it pouring down. This story captures the meaning of prayer, the power of humanity and the nature of our relationship to G-d.

Even something as fundamental to life as rain, which seems programmed into the nature of the universe, needs our prayers. Why? Because G-d cannot pour blessings upon us until we want to receive those blessings.

For example, our will for health is the receptacle to receive the blessings of well-being. Our will for livelihood is the receptacle to receive the blessings of prosperity.

Prayer is not a passive supplication to G-d for help. Prayer is a powerful force. Through prayer we make things happen, because we want them to happen, and G-d, so to speak, is waiting to hear what we want. Prayer taps us into the motor of our lives-will power. On Sukkot, as we prepare ourselves for the adventures and challenges of the upcoming year, we need to exercise our basic right to the power of prayer. And we need to realize that if rain needs our prayers, all the more so does everything else in our lives.

On the last day of Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabah, after we complete the seventh circle in our march, we put down the four species and take five separate willow branches. We then recite more prayers for rain and sustenance, and we hit the ground five times with the willows. As mentioned earlier, the willow has no taste or fragrance and, therefore, represents a person who is unlearned in Torah and does no good deeds. The message of this custom is this: by the end of Sukkot we realize that even if we are unworthy of G-d's favor, bereft of Torah and good deeds, His love for us is unconditional and He will take care of us. All we have to do is ask.

Now, I bet you are wondering, "What about the beating of the willows against the ground five times? What is that all about?"

This was a custom not found in the Torah but instituted by the prophets. Tradition tells us that this custom is filled with much mystical meaning but these secrets are known only to the greatest of sages. I would suggest that topping off our Sukkot celebration in this mystical manner also teaches us an essential lesson, necessary to carry with us into the year. After all the explanations for the meaning behind Judaism, whether you understand the will of G-d or not--Just Do It!

Building the *Sukkah* of Faith

When we take a bird's eye view of the holidays that inaugurate the New Year, we see a collection of diverse images of G-d.

The predominant image of G-d on Rosh Hashanah is as King and Judge who is writing us into a cosmic Book of Life and Death. On Yom Kippur, we encounter G-d as a compassionate forgiving Father. Sukkot features G-d as a Lover, and we feel close to Him and hugged by Him. And on Simchat Torah, we reach the height of intimacy and complete union with G-d. What are we to do with all this imagery? Are we really supposed to believe all this?

Surely all these images are only metaphors for a higher divine truth that is beyond spoken words and conceptual images. We can only know the Divine truth experientially. Anyone who believes that G-d is literally a King, Judge, Father or Lover is making graven images of G-d and committing spiritual idolatry.

What then is the meaning and value of all these metaphors?

According to Kabbalah, these conceptual metaphors are vehicles to access the transcendental truth of G-d. These are the metaphors that can take us to the threshold of the immediate and direct experience of G-d that is beyond all words and concepts. Any other metaphors wouldn't even get us close to the truth.

Our task and goal on these holy days, is to use these metaphors of King, Father and Lover towards building our consciousness and awareness of G-d, so that we can receive and experience G-d's guiding power, forgiveness and love.

With every word of prayer and every detail of the holiday rituals, we are constructing the necessary channels to bring the Divine truth into our life. Think of these metaphors as the code number to a great combination lock. The Torah gives us the right combination of metaphors necessary to unlock the vault and get to the real treasure of Divine truth.

We need to believe that G-d is like a King and Judge, who stands over us and judges us on Rosh Hashanah. We then need to believe that G-d is also like a forgiving Father, who picks us up, supports us and forgives us on Yom Kippur. And on Sukkot, we need to believe that G-d is like our Lover, close to us, holding us in His loving embrace. All these images in combination unlock the door to our intimate communion with G-d on Simchat Torah.

This is the true meaning and power of faith. Faith is not a collection of ideas that we adopt. It is an orientation to life and to the Source of all life-G-d. Faith is a way of seeing. Unlike the popular saying "Seeing is believing"-the Kabbalah teaches, "Believing is seeing." In other words, the greater our faith is in G-d, the more G-d can become manifest in our lives. The more we believe that G-d is like a King, the more Divine power and guidance can enter in to our lives. The more we believe that G-d is like a compassionate Father, the more compassion and forgiveness can become manifest in our lives. And the more we believe that G-d is like a Lover, the more Divine love, intimacy and oneness can fill our lives.

Our major life's work is to build-with proper ideas, words and actions-a *sukkah* of faith, a perceptual dwelling that we can take with us even in the desert- like barren times of our lives.

The more we believe in G-d's guidance, forgiveness and love, the more we can receive them.

Anticipation

The mood throughout Sukkot can be best described as the joy of anticipation for the ultimate. Each day of the seven-day festival brings us closer to complete intimacy with G-d, which we finally experience on Simchat Torah.

On Simchat Torah, we celebrate finishing the yearly cycle of Torah readings and start over again from Genesis. On this great day, we dance with the Torah in the most joyous display of affection.

While Simchat Torah is the ultimate realization of our connection with G-d, the sense of anticipation of this union that we feel during Sukkot is even more thrilling than the joy we actually feel on this day.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, in this and other instances, we find that Judaism puts anticipation ahead of realization. The Midrash teaches, for example, that when we finally get to the World to Come the angels will ask us whether we anticipated the redemption. This is because the anticipation for the redemption itself is considered the greatest joy.

Another example of the weight the Talmudic sages put on the joy of anticipation can be seen in the Simchat Beit HaShoeva ceremony. This ancient ceremony of drawing water from the earth and pouring it on the altar was the highlight of Sukkot celebrations in Temple times. Interestingly, the sages describe the festivities surrounding the drawing of the water for the ceremony as the time of ultimate joy even though it was only the preparation for pouring of the water on the altar. The anticipation of doing the mitzvah was actually experienced as greater than the fulfillment of the actual mitzvah. The Simchat Beit HaShoeva also expressed the joy of anticipation of the ultimate experience of oneness with G-d that was achieved on the final day of celebrations-on Simchat Torah, when the celebrants embraced the Torah (which is referred metaphorically as water since its teachings are as fundamental to life as water).

When we think about it, we see this dynamic at work in other aspects of life. Very often people feel that their wedding was not as joyous as their anticipation of the wedding. The best part is the planning and the dreaming, the talking about it, the choosing of the dress, the flowers, etc. The wedding itself can be a blur. People claim I was at my wedding; there are photographs to prove it, but I really was not there. I remember getting out of the taxi, and then I was gone. I was too overwhelmed to be mentally present.

In our thinking and dreaming and hoping and planning, we feel incredible joy. But afterward, we often find ourselves saying, "It could have been a little more this, a little more that...."

This is one of the reasons why the water drawing ceremony-Simchat Beit HaShoeva-was the height of joy, because it stimulated our anticipation of achieving complete intimacy with G-d on Simchat Torah.

The Talmud teaches that G-d gave Himself to us in writing. In other words, the Torah embodies the presence of G-d. When we dance on Simchat Torah hugging the Torah, it is as if we are dancing and hugging G-d. And since the Torah is the will and wisdom of G-d when we learn the Torah we are completely one with G-d.

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