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Parshat Sukkot

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T"OZ

October 3, 2020

GOOD MORNING! On this upcoming Friday night, October 2, begins the seven day holiday of Sukkot (though outside of the Land of Israel an extra day is added). This holiday is unique in many ways, not the least of which is that it is known as *zman simchateinu* – “The time of our joy.” Although the word “joy” is sometimes used interchangeably with the word “happy” they really are very different.

Happy is a description of a momentary state of being. At any particular moment a person may be happy, sad, angry, jealous, etc. These emotions are generally outcomes caused by a specific event or occurrence. I am reminded of the quote: “Some people bring happiness wherever they go; and others whenever they go.”

Joy, on the other hand, is very different. Joy is a state of mind that comes from lasting relationships, working towards meaningful goals and achievements, and living with a set of values and ideals.

Of course, a person who is in a state of joy will also experience being happy more often. But this happiness is derived from being able to focus on the simpler pleasures in life like a great cup of coffee, a walk on the beach in the early morning, or truly experiencing a spectacular sunset.

Many people (perhaps even the majority of our society) believe they will be happy when they get rich, marry the right person, have an expensive car, or have a ten million dollar home. Obviously, this is terribly wrong.

Research shows that the “sweet spot” for being able to experience happiness with income is somewhere between \$60,000-\$95,000. Likewise, if you are unhappy when single, you won’t be happy in a relationship. Being happy doesn’t come from external “things,” it come from within. This is the true message of Sukkot.

The Torah tells us, “*The festival of Sukkot shall be to you for seven days when you gather from your threshing floors and your wine cellar. You shall rejoice in your festival [...] for the Almighty will bless you in all of your produce and in all of the work of your hand and you shall be completely joyous*” (*Deuteronomy 16:13-15*).

The name “Sukkot” is derived from the Torah mandated obligation to live in a “sukkah” – a temporary outdoor hut, which symbolizes that the Almighty sheltered the Jewish people when they left Egypt:

“So that your future generations will know that I sheltered the Children of Israel when I brought them out of Egypt” (*Leviticus 23:43*).

The word *sukkah* comes from the materials that we use as a temporary roof to cover these huts – the *schach* – which means to shelter. We are enjoined to live these seven days in our *sukkah* – we eat in it, sleep in it, and try to spend as much time in it as possible.

Sukkot is celebrated as a harvest festival; a time when we look at all the “fruits” of our labors. In other words, it is the time of year when we step back and appreciate all that we have achieved through our hard work. But it is also a time to appreciate all the good that the Almighty has bestowed upon us.

It is no accident that farmers – people who work the earth – are amongst the most religious of people; trusting in the benevolence of the Almighty. They take a perfectly good seed that could be eaten and they stick it in the ground not knowing whether there will be rain or drought or floods or pestilence. They put forth hard work not knowing the outcome. They trust in the Almighty for their food and their very existence.

The mitzvah of dwelling in the Sukkah teaches us that our lives our totally intertwined with God. We often lose sight of this key element of our existence. We tend to think that our possessions, our money, our homes, our intelligence, will protect us.

But during the holiday of Sukkot we are exposed to the elements in a temporary hut. Living in a Sukkah puts life into perspective. Our corporeal bodies are even more transient than our possessions.

Life is vulnerable. Jewish history has borne out how our homes and communities are fleeting. No matter how well-established, wealthy, and “secure” we have become in a host country, in the end it too has been a temporary dwelling. Our trust must be in the Almighty who sheltered us when He took us out of Egypt and continues to do so every day of our lives.

Sukkot is one of the *Shelosh Regalim*, Three Festivals (the other two are Pesach and Shavuot), where the Torah commands all Jews to leave their homes to come to Jerusalem to celebrate at the Temple. For the last 2,000 years since the destruction of the Temple, we’ve been unable to fulfill this *mitzvah* (may we soon be able to fulfill this *mitzvah* once again in its entirety!).

In the times of the Temple, during the Festival of Sukkot, seventy offerings were brought -- one for each nation of the world -- so that the Almighty would provide for them as well. The Talmud tells us that if the nations of the world understood the value of what the Jewish people provided them, they would have sent their armies to defend our Temple in Jerusalem to keep it from being destroyed!

Aside from the *mitzvah* of eating and sleeping in a sukkah, we have another unique *mitzvah* on the holiday of Sukkot. The Torah informs us in *Leviticus 23:40* of a special commandment for Sukkot -- to take the *arbah minim* – the Four Species. The four different species that we are commanded to take are 1) *etrog* – citron, 2) *lulav* – a branch from a date palm, 3) *hadassim* – myrtle branches, and 4) *aravot* – willow branches.

Being a harvest festival, it is only natural that we collect different things that grow and incorporate them into our prayer services for this holiday. In the prayer section known as *Hallel* we gather these four species in our hands and wave them in the four directions of the compass as well as up and down. The waving is symbolic of several things, including a reminder that the Almighty's presence is everywhere.

Still, we must try to understand why these four species are specifically designated for this *mitzvah*.

Our rabbis teach that each one of these four species represents a different type of Jew. The *etrog* (citron), which has both a fragrance and a taste, represents those Jews who have both Torah wisdom and good deeds. The *lulav* (date palm branch), which has a taste (from the dates) but no fragrance, represents those Jews who have Torah wisdom but no good deeds.

The *hadassim* (myrtle branches), which have a fragrance but no taste, represents those Jews who have good deeds but no Torah wisdom. Lastly, the *aravot* (willow branches), which have neither a taste nor a smell, represents those Jews who are lacking in both Torah wisdom and good deeds.

I once heard from my father a beautiful lesson related to this concept. My father pointed out a very interesting contradiction to this teaching. According Jewish Law, if one is present at the precise time that another Jew passes away one is obligated to do "*kriah*" – a several inch tear of the outer garment which is over the heart (generally a shirt). This is similar to the *kriah* that mourners typically do after burying a loved one.

The great medieval commentator known as Rashi explains the reason for this. Says Rashi "There is no Jew who passes away that doesn't have some Torah knowledge or *mitzvot* for which their soul is credited." Therefore, when a Jew passes and one is present at the very moment that the soul leaves the body then a sign of grief is required, which is fulfilled by *kriah*.

"If this is true," asked my father, "How is it possible that the *lulav* represents the Jews without *mitzvot* or that the *hadassim* represents Jews without Torah knowledge or that the *aravot* represents Jews that have neither Torah knowledge or *mitzvot* – Rashi just explained that every Jew has some Torah knowledge and some *mitzvot*?"

My father explained the contradiction with a fundamental principle of Judaism: "It's absolutely true that every Jew has at least some Torah knowledge and some *mitzvot*. But the message that we learn from the four species is that there is also a taste and a smell related to the study of Torah and the performance of *mitzvot*.

Taste and smell are attributes that relate to how an item impacts something else, positively or negatively. Unfortunately, there are many Jews who have Torah knowledge but they don't impact others in a positive way. They may be very knowledgeable, but don't take others into consideration.

Likewise, there are many Jews who rush to do *mitzvot*, but sometimes it comes at the expense of others (I often see people rushing to prepare for Shabbat while double parking in the middle of the street and inconveniencing everyone else because they are in a hurry).

These people may have Torah knowledge and fulfilled many *mitzvot*, but they don't have the pleasant "taste" of the Torah or the fragrant "smell" of the *mitzvot*. Consequently, a person may actually have significant Torah knowledge and a multitude of *mitzvot*, but on the whole they are still represented by the "lowly" *aravot* – the one species with no taste or smell.

But even with all our shortcomings as a people, on Sukkot we are commanded to bring all these four species together as a single entity. In other words, to complete the *mitzvah* we need all four of them and they need to be held together at the same time when making the blessing for this *mitzvah*. Likewise, if any are missing there is no *mitzvah*.

The message here is very clear. We must recognize that each and every Jew is integral to the unity of the nation. Whether a person is as big a scholar as our teacher Moses, or as ignorant as a child who never even went to school, all are a necessary component of the "body" of the Jewish people. If either one is not included in the group, we as a people are incomplete.

We symbolically bind together and recognize every Jew as an integral and important part of the Jewish people. Whether or not we agree with everything they do or how they comport themselves, if even one is missing, the *mitzvah* is incomplete.

Our people are one; we must do all we can to bind together the Jewish people and work to strengthen the Jewish future!

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 Jo'Burg 5:50 LA 6:16 London 6:19 Melbourne 6:07 Mexico 7:05 Moscow 5:43 New York 6:17 Singapore 6:38 Toronto 6:37

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": I have seen great intolerance shown in support of tolerance.

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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Sanford D. Altman



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