

Wherever He Leads

by Rabbi Reuven Mann

Succot is one of the most intriguing Holidays on the Jewish calendar. There is no doubt that the purpose of Passover is to commemorate the story of the Exodus from Egypt. It is unanimously agreed that we celebrate Shavuot because of the Revelation that took place before the entire Jewish People on Sinai. However, things are not that simple when it comes to the Chag of Succot. What is the rationale for dwelling in the flimsy huts which Jews retire to on the first part of this Holiday?

It is also strange that this Yom Tov culminates with Shmini Atzeret which is considered a separate holiday in its own right and yet is connected to Succot. On this day we abandon the Succah and return to living in our ordinary homes. If the basic theme of Succot is to take up residence in minimal dwellings why is an extra day added in which we resume residence in our regular abodes?

To add to the complexity there is disagreement in the Talmud as to the underlying purpose of the Succah. One Rabbi maintains that it commemorates the physical huts in which Hashem "housed" the children of Israel when "He liberated them from the land of Egypt".

However another Talmudic Sage disagrees. He says that we must understand the Succah in a symbolic sense. It represents the "clouds of glory" with which Hashem enveloped the Jews during their extended trek in the wilderness. This refers to the special Divine Providence which was extended to the Jews in their desert sojourn. This is a most tantalizing Rabbinic dispute which requires elucidation.

At first glance, it seems easier to understand the second position. The purpose of the three pilgrimage Festivals is to remember and celebrate the major miracles which Hashem performed for His chosen nation. First, He freed us from an oppressive and hopeless enslavement. Then He provided for all our needs and kept us totally safe when we traversed through a treacherous place in which there was no sustenance. Finally the purpose of the Exodus was realized when He gathered the entire Nation on Mt. Sinai and revealed His Torah.

The theory that the Succah represents the "Clouds of Glory" is fully commensurate with the themes of the other Pilgrimage Festivals. However, we need to understand the view of the Rabbi who held that the Succah signifies the actual huts in which the Jews dwelled on their journey to the Promised Land. Why is this particular fact of our history so important? What are the great lessons that are imparted by reliving this aspect of our past?

I believe the answer can be found in a passage from Scripture. The Prophet invokes Hashem as saying, "I remember the kindness of your youth the love of your marriage ties, following after Me in the Wilderness in a land not sown".

According to this the journey of the Jews in the desert is not only testament to Hashem's miracles but to their spirit of absolute faith and courage. The willingness to follow Hashem wherever He leads, no matter how fearful, uncomfortable and contrary to our need for the basic amenities is central to our religion.

Thus Hashem's first command to Avraham was to take leave of his land, his birthplace and the "house of your father" and travel to the "Land which I will show you". Avraham had no sense of where he was headed and how he would be sustained on this treacherous journey. He put himself completely in the Hands of the Creator. He "surrendered to the A-mighty" just as he did when he embarked on the lonesome journey with Yizchak to the Akeda on Mt. Moriah.

The Jews, as a nation, had to duplicate the courage and absolute faith of their forefathers. They were prepared to relinquish all of life's pleasures and comforts and ordinary means of security in order to assume the mission to be a Holy Nation. Thus the willingness of the Jews to enter into the wilderness represents a glorious moment in the history of our People.

We must be on guard not to become corrupted by enslavement to excessive pleasures and comforts. We can't become addicted to the superficial Divine service which always accompanies a life of ease and material indulgence. We must never lose sight of the Divine challenge to rise to the occasion and be willing to sacrifice everything when we are called upon to follow Hashem "into the wilderness".

We can now understand the reason for Shmini Atzeret. Hashem does not want us to embrace a life of deprivation. We should be comfortable and happy and make use of the life enhancing inventions that can further our service of Hashem. The moments of "Lech Lecha", of uprooting ourselves from of our normal habitations are rare and temporary not permanent existential states. But our level of faith and inner fortitude must be such that we are always ready to abandon everything and find refuge in the Succah of Hashem.

There are very practical benefits associated with relinquishing our ordinary comforts and reliving the Spartan existence of our ancestors. The Rambam says, "The moral lesson derived from these feats is this: man ought to remember his evil days in his times of prosperity. He will thereby be induced to thank G-D repeatedly, to lead a modest and humble life. We eat, therefore, unleavened bread and bitter herbs on Passover in memory of what has happened unto us, and leave (on Succot) our houses in order to dwell in tabernacles, as inhabitants of deserts do that are in want of comfort. We shall thereby remember that this has once been our condition as it says, "I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths".

Both explanations of Succah are relevant. We must develop the inner courage and fortitude to withstand the storms of hatred and condemnation that assail us. And may we thus become worthy of the "Clouds of Glory" which protected and sustained our ancestors from all who sought to consume them.

Shabbat shalom v'Chag sameach.