

Sacred Slumber

by Rabbi Reuven Mann

The holiday of Sukkot is a very festive time. It is described in the prayers as the “season of our joy.” In ancient agricultural Israel, this was the time when the produce was harvested from the fields. It is only natural to rejoice when we enjoy the fruits of the work of our hands.

The theme of celebration finds expression in the observance of Simchat Torah, which is done on the last day of the *Chag* (holiday). On that day, we sing and dance with the Torah for hours on end. The message is that, on the highest level, Judaism extols the service of love. Thus, our most exalted form of divine worship, study of G-d’s Torah, should produce in us feelings of exaltation.

The most fundamental mitzvah of this festival is that of the *Sukkah*, a simple hut with a meager roof made of wood or branches, called *Schach*. On the surface, this mitzvah seems like an easy one to perform. Most people believe that all they need to do is to go outside and have a pleasant meal with family and friends in the Sukkah. However, this is not the complete story.

While it is true that one is obligated to take one’s meals in this temporary dwelling, that is not the sum total of the commandment. The verse states, “In *Sukkot* shall you dwell 7 days.” The Rabbis interpret this to mean that one must establish residence in the Sukkah and must use it for all the activities he would normally do in his home. The two most significant expressions of residence are taking one’s meals and sleeping. Thus, according to *halacha* (Jewish law), one is obligated to sleep in the Sukkah to perform the mitzvah properly.

While virtually everyone eats in the Sukkah, only the very meticulous actually sleep there. My own experience shows that one cannot get the full impact of the Sukkah without lodging there. On one level, the Sukkah is intended to diminish our material excesses. We clutter our dwellings with many things we don’t truly need. The sparsely furnished Sukkah drives home the point that happiness is a state of the soul. When we attain an inner sense of satisfaction, we do not need that many “things” to make us happy.

There is another dimension to this mitzvah. The activity of sleeping has great psychological significance. We are very particular about our nocturnal comforts and conveniences. There is also the element of security. We can’t relax unless all the doors are locked and the alarm has been set. In leaving the house to slumber in his humble booth, a person relinquishes his most intimate comforts and his belief that security can only come from physical protections. In the Sukkah, one experiences a certain closeness to G-d by placing his wellbeing completely in His hands.

The question arises, can a person serve Hashem and earn reward even while he is asleep? The Rambam says that a truly religious person organizes every aspect of his life in accordance with how it fits in to his overarching objective: perfection of the soul. Everything he does such as working and eating and exercising is calculated to enhance his ability to elevate himself through study and good deeds. Such a person is regarded as serving Hashem while he is engaged in the most mundane

activities and even when he is sleeping. Thus overnighing in the Succah transforms one's mundane sleep into a profound manifestation of Avodat Hashem i.e. "sacred slumber".

Sukkot lasts for 7 days and is followed by Shemini Atzeret, when we exit the Sukkah and return to our homes. According to Maimonides, that is because our joy cannot be complete while living in flimsy huts. We thus see that the Torah does *not* want us to lead a deprived, ascetic existence. Humans need basic comforts and, as the Rabbis say, a pleasant home affords a certain mental expansiveness.

Why then does G-d command us to reside in the Sukkah? In my opinion, this unique dwelling effectuates a spiritual transformation that enables one to put vital matters in perspective. The Sukkah dweller learns that material comforts are not an end in themselves, but only the means one uses to achieve his true purpose, the perfection of the soul through a relationship with Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Sameach