

Overcoming Spiritual Laziness

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The Significance of Sukkot and the Wilderness Experience

The Holiday of Sukkot is the last of the Pilgrimage Festivals and takes place five days after Yom Kippur, the fast that concludes the Ten Days of *Teshuva* (repentance), which began on Rosh HaShana. Sukkot is described as the “Time of Our Rejoicing,” and therefore we need to understand the reason for its proximity to Yom Kippur.

The basic *Mitzva* of Sukkot is to transfer residence from our comfortable homes to the temporary, flimsy structure known as the *Sukkah*. This living quarter generally lacks most of the creature comforts we associate with our domiciles. The proper fulfillment of this *Mitzva* is not limited to merely taking one’s meals in the *Sukkah*; it is equally important to sleep there as well. Unless there are valid reasons for an exemption, it is Biblically forbidden to sleep outside the *Sukkah*.

In this regard, it should be noted that women are exempt from the *Mitzva* of *Sukkah* because it is a positive commandment that is based on time. However, the good news is that, in this area, women have a choice—i.e., if they wish to, they can perform the *Mitzva* and receive the requisite reward.

[The question whether they recite the blessing when they perform optional Mitzvot is a *Halachic* (Jewish Legal) dispute, and the prevailing custom is that Sephardic women do not recite the *Beracha*, while Ashkenazic women do.]

The Torah openly states the reason for the commandment: “*In order that your generations shall know that I housed Bnei Yisrael in Sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt*” (VaYikra 23:43). We must ask, what is so important about the fact that the Israelites dwelled in booths during their sojourn in the wilderness that warrants a yearly reenactment of this experience?

There is a Talmudic dispute concerning the meaning of the “Sukkot” that are commemorated. According to one opinion, it refers to the physical structures in which Bnei Yisrael dwelled in the wilderness. However, a different opinion maintains that the booths are symbolic reminders of the “Clouds of Glory” that surrounded the nation on their trek to the Promised Land.

According to this latter view, the purpose of the holiday is to express praise and gratitude for the Divine protection that accompanied Am Yisrael as they made their way through the fearsome desert—a place lacking food and water and filled with all kinds of unseen dangers. Moshe said:

“I led you for forty years in the wilderness; your garment did not wear out upon you, and your shoe did not wear out upon your foot. Bread you did not eat, and wine or intoxicant you did not drink, so that you would know that I am Hashem, your G-d” (Devarim 29:4-5).

Gratitude, National Identity, and the Yetzer HaRa

According to this understanding, the objective of the *Mitzva* of *Sukkah* is to offer praise to Hashem for the great miracles He performed for us in the wilderness. By doing so, we fulfill the requirement of *Hakarat HaTov* (gratitude) and, in addition, renew our identity as Hashem’s Chosen People. For we must understand that all the good that Hashem did for our forefathers and ourselves is due to the fact that He chose us from all the nations to proclaim His Name to the entire world.

It must be said that many contemporary Jews find this concept uncomfortable. On a superficial level, it conveys the impression that we are asserting that Jews are a superior people, but this is not the case. The Torah explicitly states that G-d selected us because “*He delighted in our forefathers and chose their children after them*” (Devarim 4:37). So we can’t claim credit for being the offspring of exalted spiritual personalities.

The other position in the Talmud maintains that the Sukkot we dwell in serve to remind us of the physical structures that served as our habitats on our journey to *Eretz Yisrael*. According to this view, the purpose of the *Mitzva* is not to recall Hashem's miracles, but rather our own readiness to assume the challenges and deprivations of a wilderness existence. As Hashem says through His prophet, "...I remember for your sake the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days; how you followed Me in the wilderness, in an unsown land" (Jeremiah 2:2).

The Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim, Part 3, Ch. 32) puts it this way:

"It was the result of G-d's wisdom that the Israelites were led about in the wilderness till they acquired courage. For it is a well-known fact that traveling in the wilderness, and privation of bodily enjoyments, such as bathing, produces courage, whilst the reverse is the source of faint-heartedness."

From this, we see that we must sometimes look back and remember the exemplary deeds of our forbears as they provide inspiration for how we are to conduct our lives.

The Rabbis refer to our life on earth as the *Milchemet HaChayim* (War of Life). This means that our objective is not to pursue a life of ease and comfort. Rather, we must be like warriors engaged in the struggle for moral and intellectual perfection. This endeavor requires us to make great efforts to engage in learning and the pursuit of wisdom. It therefore emerges that we cannot merely cater to our emotional desires but must contend with and confront our instinctual impulses.

Hashem constructed us in such a way that the *Yetzer HaRa* (Evil Inclination) has a great influence over us. This idea is contained in the message G-d communicated to Kayin when he was distressed that his brother Hevel's sacrifice was accepted while his own was rejected:

"And Hashem said to Kayin; Why are you annoyed, and why has your countenance fallen? Surely, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven, but if you do not improve yourself, sin rests at the door; yet you can conquer it" (Bereishit 4:6-7)

The conquest of the Evil Inclination is a lifelong pursuit in which a person cannot be passive but must aggressively engage in spiritual growth. The biggest obstacle to self-improvement is the intrinsic laziness of man and his desire to be pampered and entertained without expending any effort. The Torah way of life is one of serious, challenging study and energetic implementation of the moral ideals that we uphold.

Lessons from Sukkot: Abandoning Comfort for Spiritual Perfection

Leaving the comforts of home and taking up residence in a simple hut expresses our willingness to abandon our creature comforts in pursuit of genuine spiritual perfection. This is why the holiday of Sukkot comes immediately after Yom Kippur. On that day, we "afflict" ourselves by depriving ourselves of food and drink and the other basic bodily refreshments. This teaches us that we can endure physical denial and subject our instincts to the control of the mind.

The lesson of Yom Kippur is that man is able to control his instincts and live a life of free-willed choice. Having learned this lesson, we are commanded to abandon the comfortable domiciles we live in and venture forth into the sparse, temporary abode of the *Sukkah* for one week. The goal is to recognize what is truly important in life and to develop the discipline to pursue it.

Judaism teaches the concept of *Bittul Zeman* (Wasting Time). We live in a world in which we are inundated with cultural distractions that provide no real benefit. Sukkot teaches us to keep things in perspective and utilize our time productively. There is enough time to fulfill our responsibilities and still be able to designate hours for intellectual growth.

Sukkot reminds us that we must strengthen ourselves spiritually and make greater efforts to achieve the true goal of our existence—the perfection of our souls.

May we merit to attain it.

Chag Sukkot Sameach