

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin*

There is a school of design called "Minimalist." The perceived beauty of this style is its simplicity. There are no elaborate carvings, just plain, functional lines. Those who extol this type of design say it wipes away all life's clutter and brings things into sharper focus. Minimalist design, they say, brings out the essential, the beauty without the frills. A word to the wise: Not only will your house be unencumbered by decorating in this style, but your bank account as well. With this style, everything becomes simple and uncluttered except the designer's wallet.

I'm far from an expert about such things, but I can understand where they're coming from. Once a year, we Jews all over the world go into their backyard and build minimalist abodes. We don't add much inside in the way of furniture, perhaps a sturdy table, some chairs and a folding bed. It must be the original minimalist housing, and it preceded the big name designers by some two thousand years or so. In fact, the true designer of these small, uncluttered homes is the Creator of the world, for it is in keeping with His mitzvos that we build them.

In certain areas, though, we do permit a measure of extravagance: sukka decorations. They can actually take on a sophistication that would turn those fancy designers green with envy. There is a certain science to decorating of a sukka; certain rules to follow. Before you can start, you must know customs the sukka's owner adheres.

Like most things Jewish, the world of sukka decorations is replete with options about should and shouldn't be used. Some say not to hang anything from the schach; others say, "Why not?" One sukka will have a few apples and nuts dangling from ancient string, while its next-door neighbor will be festooned with glittering bulbs that twinkle and turn. It's all part of the rich tapestry that makes up Torah life.

Family Rubin, like most families, has inherited several customs. Postwar America saw people from different communities coming together as no other generation had in the past. Litvish, Chassidish, you name it, they all joined together, and with this came a whole new understanding of which family customs were vital and which could be sacrificed in the name of shalom bayis. Of course, there is always the third way, the way where one tries to mix everything together, giving each part of the family some comfort. My rebbetzin is the product of razor-sharp, sharfa Polish Chassidim, combined with the dignity of Litvish rabbanim. This has been welded to yours truly, third generation Yankee who studied in Bobov. After all these wonderful years together, we have gotten sukka decorating down to perfection.

We let the grandchildren do it!

One thing the kids do that I find very inspiring is they hang up pictures of tzaddikim. Let me explain why I find this so special. The sukka is where we go after the soul cleansing of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We enter its plain environs with a clean slate, and we sit down and find ourselves gazing at the stars as they peep through the chinks in the schach. All is calm. We can face our inner selves and ask where we want to go. We are able, for these few days, to communicate the aspirations of our souls. There is nothing cluttering up our view because all the furniture of our everyday lives has been left inside the house.

People, as we know, think in pictures, not words. Our mind envisions what we want and what we fear. Sitting in a sukka, what better vision is there to keep in front of our eyes than that of a Gutte Yid from past times? It is often said that such visual input is vital for the young. Their minds are not yet set, and the stimulus of seeing holy faces can give them a positive example for their own identity.

However we don't speak enough about how important such visions are for adults as well. It may not sound very mature or rabbinic, but I can look at pictures of our holy leaders all day. In our home, we have several pictures of my Rebbes hanging in every room. They are usually pictures that were taken by photographers who did so surreptitiously, often as not in the midst of the tzaddik's avoda. While looking at their faces, I find a certain calm come over me, a calm mingled with a deep desire to be a better Jew. There is no better starting point than in the sukka, where new beginnings can start with visions of those who inspired our past.

There is yet another dynamic at work. We live in times where there is great pressure on each of us to be impressed with those who seem to be prosperous, despite their cleaving to a path that is contradictory to our Torah. The materialism of this world screams out at every corner and at every turn. What can we do? We can run into the sukka, live in its beautiful yet basic environment, and gaze at the image of those tzaddikim who led Yidden out of the morass and into the oases of our Torah.

This kapitel speaks to the soul of any sukka dweller. Let's embrace its words and conjure with their intent.

*Do not compete with evildoers or be jealous of wrongdoers.* My sweet Yiddele, don't get distracted over the seemingly successful evildoers in our world. Theirs is a hollow existence, not worthy of your grief and pain.

*For like hay, they will soon be cut, and like green grass, they will wither.* Sure, when the sun shines and the rains fall, the grass always seems to be greener on the other side of the fence. But this is an illusion, for once the grass is cut from its roots, it is condemned to wither and fade. Those who seek to do wrong and who strive to corrupt this world have no real roots. Their nourishment comes from others, and when they are separated from those sources, they cannot have any life of their own.

*Trust in Hashem and do good so that you may dwell in the land and be sustained by your faith.* Doing good despite the evil all around is an act of faith, but it brings in its wake true nourishment. Sitting in the sukkah epitomizes this. The Jews who left Egypt did so fueled by faith. They didn't know where they were going or what would be asked of them. They lived in temporary quarters, and did so for an entire generation. This faith led to even more faith. The earliest acts of belief were the seeds for each consecutive one that followed.

*Take pleasure in Hashem, and He will give you your heart's desires.* When we become focused on Hashem's will and only seek to do that which brings light, then our only true pleasure is found in Hashem. If we reach this level, our desires will be G-dly as well, and will certainly be granted.

When I said earlier that people think in pictures, I myself was envisioning how a person could imagine himself living a life as focused as the one our kapitel describes. The sukkah is a good place to dream such dreams. Look around. There are no distractions. On all sides are the images of those tzaddikim who ploughed a path for us. We say the words of invitation to the ushpizin, the holy Forefathers, who developed our essence as a people. All is possible if we only remain true to our actual needs.

*Commit to your approach to Hashem and trust in Him, and He will act on your behalf.* When we commit ourselves to the path that has been cherished by Yidden from our beginnings, everything that follows is seen from the right perspective. We no longer wonder at what seems to be unfair. Hashem will grant us the greatest of gifts: the realization that He is with us at all times.

*He will make your acquittal and your integrity as obvious as the light of day.* In the world of falseness, evil works only in the darkness of the heart. If we do good the will of Hashem then our personal integrity will become visible to all. We will be enabled to stand tall at any reckoning, never fearing the light of day. Those who dabble in darkness can never stand such light, and this in itself is ample reward for those who choose to follow Hashem's will.

The kapitel touches on this theme repeatedly, in vivid terms. King David knew that one of the most difficult trials is remaining steadfast in the face of the wicked man's unseemly success.

This is one of the secrets of the sukkah. We sit in a shaky fragile hut while all around us are the sturdy homes of those who reject Hashem's mitzvos. Are we foolish? Don't we want what others seem to come by with such ease? But we have a vision. Look at those loving images of people so holy and pure who lived in huts like these before us. They too had to grapple with these questions, and their positive answers are written in the walls that surround us.