

FINDING THE REAL YOU

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In huts (Sukkos) you shall dwell for seven days. (Vayikra 23:42)

Sukkos, the Festival of Huts, commemorates the shelters Hashem provided for the Jewish nation when they left Mitzrayim (Egypt) and entered the Wilderness (Midbar). Yet we may ask: What is really so noteworthy about these temporary booths that they deserve everlasting recognition? Normally one commemorates an event of distinction or inspiration, perhaps a miracle, but why commemorate the seemingly insignificant huts used by the 'leavers of Mitzrayim'?

To understand this, we must realize that Yetzias Mitzrayim/the Exodus from Egypt is significant on two levels. Simply, Yetzias Mitzrayim was our freedom from bondage. As we say in the Pesach Haggadah, "And had the Holy One, Blessed be He, not removed us from Egypt, we and our children would [still] be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt."

Yetzias Mitzrayim, however, was more than just freedom from physical bondage. It was also our release from spiritual bondage. Not simply that the Jews in Egypt were not free to practice their religion openly - that is likewise a result of physical bondage. Rather the Jews in Mitzrayim found themselves so steeped in pagan culture that they were unable to free themselves from the throes of their own yetzer hara/evil disposition. As Chazal, our Sages, describe it: They had sunken to the 49th level of tumah/impurity. Hashem, in taking them out of Mitzrayim, removed from them the shackles and chains of their own immorality, so that they could begin to serve Him and receive the Torah.

Thus Yetzias Mitzrayim carries for us two distinct meanings: It commemorates our release from both physical and spiritual bondage.

This second type of Yetzias Mitzrayim is in fact somewhat of an ongoing process. Our release from physical bondage was a one-time deal - it has lasted to this very day. But spiritual bondage as we have explained it - the spiritual limitations one experiences through captivity to his own physical/material/base desires - is a slavery from which most of us have yet to attain our ultimate freedom.

Everyone's yetzer hara is different. But everyone knows that certain aspects of his character prevent him from achieving the spiritual heights to which he aspires. For some it may be laziness. For others pride, anger, lust, overindulgence, lack of self-confidence, shallowness, etc. We struggle with these and other types of spiritual bondage every day.

Then comes Yom Kippur. The one day of the year where everyone tastes a bit of freedom from his yetzer hara. We don't eat, drink, or indulge in other pleasures - basically all we do is daven (pray) and spend our day re-connecting with Hashem, from Whom we have drifted throughout the year. It is a day, if you will, of Yetzias Mitzrayim - each person's release from the bondage of his own disposition.

So what do we do after experiencing a day that so uplifts our spirits? A day of freedom from the physical desires and passions which so often cause us to sway from the straight path? It is written in Shulchan Aruch (624:5), "One should begin building his Sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur." We build a Sukkah. Simply explained, we do this to go straight from one mitzvah into the next.

But there's more. Sometimes, Yom Kippur sends us into an identity crisis: Is this the real me? I mean, this is all very well one day a year - a day devoid of all the physical pleasures and yetzer haras I'm used to - but that's all. It can't be the real "me". I am human, and have certain limitations and weaknesses which just can't be avoided. Aren't I?

Therefore, says the Sanzer Rav (Rabbi Chaim Halberstam z"l, Divrei Chaim p. 20), the Torah instructs us to build a Sukkah. The Sukkah is a temporary dwelling place; an abode devoid of all the luxuries and comforts to which we are accustomed. Yet this hut is to become our dwelling place. "Ba-sukkos teshvu, In Sukkos (huts) you shall *dwell*," as the Gemara describes it: One must dwell in his Sukkah as he would in his primary residence (Tractate Sukkah 27a). The Torah is sending us a message: This is where you really belong. This is the real you! The "you" of Yom Kippur. The "you" minus the bad habits and the focus on materialism. The "you" for whom a simple Sukkah - lacking in physical grandeur yet rich in spiritual qualities and infused with Hashem's Presence - is more than enough. It's where you really belong.

As we sit this Yom Tov in our Sukkos, surrounded by the "Shade of the Faithful One," perhaps it's appropriate to allow our thoughts to drift back to the sublime sanctity of Yom Kippur, to remind ourselves how right it felt to spend our day in total dedication to Hashem, without all the frills and luxuries of life in the Western world. And to absorb the holiness that permeates the wall's of every Jew's Sukkah. And to remember - this is where I really belong.

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