

THE JOY OF LIVING IN A SUKKA

by Rabbi Berel Wein

After the tension filled solemnity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the holiday of Sukkoth arrives with its many inspiring rituals and its message of joy and rejoicing in the service of God. It is regarding Sukkoth that the Torah instructs us "to be joyful on your holiday."

Now, joy, like almost all other emotions is not something that can be turned on and off like a faucet. A person either feels joyful or not. You cannot tell a person who is sad and depressed to just feel joyful and expect that that should somehow happen. The traditional commentators have already remarked that since we have just passed through the cleansing processes of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and feel relieved, forgiven and confident in our faith and in our relationship to our Creator, it is only natural to expect that we will feel joyful at this time of the year.

But, to a certain extent, this type of answer really only begs the question. It is quite difficult for anyone to feel completely satisfied with one's self and one's actions after undergoing a thorough, honest and often painful self-examination. We are now privy to our faults and failings and even though we are confident that Heaven's goodness has forgiven us, we are still well aware of the problems that remain within us and limit, if not even prevent, any feelings of overwhelming joy to take hold. And yet the Torah insists that we be joyful and of good cheer on this holiday of Sukkoth.

The rabbis have given a markedly different perspective to the emotion of joy and it is this perspective that I feel the Torah is speaking of when commanding us regarding the holiday of Sukkoth. The rabbis in the Talmud stated that there is no joy comparable to the joy one feels when doubts have been resolved and clarity and reality reign.

Much of the sadness that exist in life is based on its uncertainty, in the plethora of options and choices, the consequences of which are never clear to us and in the difficulty we face in placing our lives and their events into proper perspective. A flash of clarity, an insight of perspective, a moment of confident decision can truly bring about a feeling of joy.

Sukkoth can provide us with that clarity and perspective. It teaches us that our physical home and house is not quite as important as we may think it is. It instructs us in the beauty of nature, the necessity for Heaven's blessing of rain and productivity and in the realization that even though our lives and existence are indeed fragile, we should treasure every breathing moment and see it in the perspective of our immortality and eternity.

Sukkoth engenders within us the appreciation of correct priorities in our lives and the achievement

of a proper balance between the illusory and reality. It provides us with a most necessary dose of humility - one that can allow a person to see things in proper perspective.

The Jewish people throughout our long and many times difficult years and experiences have always realized that we are living in a sukkah. That realization alone was sufficient to allow individual Jews and Jewish society generally to function, survive and even prosper. By absorbing this lesson of the sukkah - its beauty, its fragility, its temporary nature, its serenity and its relationship to nature and the world we live in, we immerse ourselves in God's perspective, so to speak, of the world and our place in it.

That alone should awaken within us an emotion of joy and satisfaction. In Temple times, the libation of water on the holy altar of the Temple in Jerusalem on the holiday of Sukkoth created a national emotion of joy and rejoicing. It is interesting to note that water, which most of us take for granted, is not nearly as expensive a commodity as an animal sacrifice or an offering of gold or silver would have been. Nevertheless, it was the offering of water that occasioned the the great celebrations of joy in ancient Jerusalem.

Simply because it was almost a relatively mundane offering, it emphasized the perspective of life that Sukkoth was meant to convey. One can be joyful even with plain water if one realizes the blessings of nature and of the benevolence of God. In a world of excess and the pursuit of luxuries, Sukkoth comes to remind us of our true priorities and of the necessity of a healthy balance in our lives and behavior.

Chag sameach

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