

SUKKOT - SHKAKH

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

'After you have gathered in from your threshing floor and from your wine press' (Devarim, 16:13). With these words the Torah commanded us about Sukkot and Chazal (Sukkah, 12a) explained that this referred to the waste of the grain crop and of the vineyards, and that if these are still connected to the ground they are not eligible to be used for shkakh. Sukkot is called *Chag He'Asif* the festival of the ingathering, *Chag He'Asif* (Shmot, 23,16), as this is the time that all the crops are gathered into the storehouses and granaries, after the harvests are completed. We should know that everything in the material world is meant to teach us something in the spiritual realm. So, parallel to the ingathering of the crops, there is, on Sukkot an ingathering of all our religious and spiritual actions. In the material world, all the crops are cleansed of all waste before they are stored. So, in spiritual matters too, of all the Torah we have learnt and all the mitzvot we have done, before they can be gathered into the Heavenly storehouse, they have to be cleansed and purified of actions that are not totally for the sake of Heaven and any impure thoughts that we may have had when doing them. The Avnei Nezer taught that this is what is done to us on Rosh HaShanah and Yom HaKippurim. Just as at this time the evil people are signed and sealed immediately for destruction, so too with each individual the evil portions are wiped out and with each mitzvah the *pesolet* is removed.

Now there are in agriculture two different sorts of waste, chaff and straw. The chaff is valueless and useless, so that in Eretz Yisrael it is simply strewn to the wind. However, in contrast, the straw and branches are of value to the farmer both as bedding for animals and other uses; it is only relative to the fruits, wheat or other grains that it is considered waste. So too, with regard to spiritual matters there are 2 types of shortcomings or *pesolet*.

Mitzvot, Torah and good deeds are sometimes accompanied by foreign thoughts or performed while we still hold on to our wrong deeds. Then these are serious sins and have to be cast aside quickly and thoroughly like the chaff. They are cleansed easily because they are basically foreign to the Jews and so do not become rooted within them, rather brushed aside like the burrs that settle on a bald person's head. This we achieve on Rosh HaShanah and Yom HaKippurim, like the chaff that is winnowed by the wind.

The Chovat Halevavot explains that every mitzvah consists of a material- physical part that is the actual performance of the mitzvah, that always involves the physical and a separate element that is the spiritual component contributed by our kavanah, joy and religiosity. For the actual performance

there is the reward of this world, not a reward of material things rather a reward that we will use the benefits we gain in this world in order to merit our place in the world to come. The Rambam explains that this is the goal and purpose of all the material-physical things we gain in this world (Hilkhhot Teshuvah, chapter 9.). The performance element of the mitzvot is like the straw for the farmer, in that while of itself it has a value as we have seen, yet relative to the kavanah, spirituality and spontaneity required for a mitzvah it is actually pesolet. Without them our mitzvot cannot take us into the treasure house of the world to come together with the kavanah, just as the straw isn't gathered into the farmer's silo, but is used for other purposes.

The straw and branches cast aside after the harvest, that are pesolet relative to the grain and fruit, the Torah commanded us to use as skhakh, so too after cleansing ourselves of our actual sins on Rosh HaShanah and Yom HaKippurim, the spirituality of that skhakh and of the Sukkat will cleanse the material- physical performance of our mitzvot of the defects caused by our lack of kavanah and by the mechanical and routine way that we performed them. Then the Torah we have studied, the prayers we have said and the mitzvot we have performed will truly carry us to our merits in the world to come.

Now we can understand the halakhah that s'khakh that is still connected to the earth is pasul, invalid. Such skhakh is not religious nor is it spiritual, since it is still connected and joined to an inanimate object, the earth in which it is rooted. The material-physical element in the performance of mitzvot must not be done without religiosity, without ecstasy or mechanically merely as a matter of habit. When performed in these ways, our mitzvot remain rooted and entwined in the inanimate and the purely physical-material and therefore are pasul, unable to carry us to the world to come.

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