

SUKKOT
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In Talmudic tractate of Avodah Zarah there is a fascinating discussion in the Gemara between G-d and the nations of the world. Each nation is looking for a place in the world to come and testifies before G-d that they, like the Israelites of old, deserve a special place in heaven near the throne of G-d. Each pleads for its own welfare. In the ensuing dialogue G-d attempts to challenge them to fulfill the requirements of the Mitzvot that are incumbent upon the Israelites. At one point, the nations of the world plead: "Offer us the Torah anew and we shall obey it." G-d decides to test them and says:

"I have an easy command which is called Sukkah. Go and carry it out."

The Gemara then, in a further explanation, attempts to explicate what exactly G-d meant by calling Sukkah an easy Mitzvah. It finally comes to the conclusion that it is an inexpensive Mitzvah to perform; it does not greatly affect one's purse.

The Gemara then states that straightaway, everyone of them, "will go and make a booth on top of his roof; but the Holy One blessed be He, will cause the sun to blaze forth over them and everyone of them will trample down his Sukkah and will go away." In other words, they will not even live up to performing this easy Mitzvah and when inconvenienced will show their insincerity in their commitment to Torah and G-d's commands.

We can take away from this story a number of things. First of all, that Sukkah is supposed to be an easy Mitzvah because it does not cost a great deal of money and there is not a great deal of sacrifice. We can also learn that because it is a temporary hut, a booth subject to the wind, sun, cold and even snow in our climate; it is not always such an easy Mitzvah to fulfill. Yet, in our day, the Mitzvah of building a Sukkah has become more popular and more prevalent.

As we look around our neighborhood, I know that more people are building Sukkot today than there were 20 years ago when I came to this community. There are several generations that come together on this holiday to participate in this beautiful Mitzvah which extols the bounties of nature and our gratitude for its many gifts. It stresses the importance of the environment which has become a major issue in our day. It teaches us the simplicity of life and also its fragility.

But only in America could it become big business. Ten days ago, in the New York Times, there was an article entitled "Bless This Hut: The Rise of the Pre-Fab Sukkah." In the article the author, Michael Tortorello of Minneapolis decided to learn about the Sukkah and the process of building it. He states that it is now possible to go on-line and for a few hundred dollars order a holiday in a box. He then describes the experience of doing exactly that. Instead of ordering just one Sukkah, he ordered four of them from four different on-line sellers to try out the different range of pre-fab huts. He included a number of friends in the Minneapolis community to help set them up. He describes in

rather glib detail each of the four Sukkot he obtained over the Internet. One was called the Hermans' Tubular Sukkah; another the Kotel Sukkah (since on its outside was a print of the Western Wall in Jerusalem); a third - the New Panels Sukkah and finally the fourth - the SukkahSoul Sukkah.

I guess it is a rather easy Mitzvah since you can simply go on-line and order a Sukkah. However, it comes with an assembly kit and putting it together usually requires either a PhD in geometry or a few friends who are quite handy. But I'm very pleased to note that more and more families, many quite observant and many not so observant, are now participating in this wonderful Mitzvah. It has become a family affair and an opportunity to relish in the sanctity of Jewish rituals and participate as a family in this wonderful experience. Unlike Yom Kippur, which was celebrated last week in the synagogue, Sukkot represents an appreciation of the outdoors, an opportunity to rejoice with family and friends and a chance to see Judaism not in its austerity, but in its grandiose nature of living in the world. It is always fun to see the decorations created by young and old and to witness not only the beauty of the holiday but the harmony it brings to family and community members alike. Those of us who grew up with Sukkot recall the decorations of our youth and how we held on to them for so many years, until possibly they were destroyed. And now we can enjoy new decorations and new friends and family in this wonderful opportunity to fulfill a Mitzvah. It seems to be such an easy Mitzvah in which all of us can partake.

The holiday of Sukkot brings all of us together in a most remarkable fashion. It is a holiday in which there are many Mitzvot, supreme of which, of course, is the dwelling in the Sukkah. That Sukkah represents a sense of personal intimacy with the Divine and, at the same time, an opportunity to reach out to the community. We symbolically invite in Ushpizin, honored guests, past heroes of our history to dine with us as we recognize the richness of our heritage. We understand the fragility of life in a temporary hut which is subject to the vagrant winds of nature. We are reminded that though we may be blessed with the bounties of nature, there are others who are not and we have a responsibility to feed the poor, clothe the naked and be concerned about the less fortunate in our society. And, we have the privilege of creating community, one in which all of us can partner with others in a most relaxed manner.

If it is such an easy Mitzvah, one that is so enjoyable and relatively less costly than others, why are not all Jews involved in Sukkot as they are, for instance, in Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?

Rabbi Moshe DeLeon the 13th Century Kabbalist to whom the Zohar is attributed, in his book "Sefer HaRimon," describes a time when Jews left their community and moved close to Greek philosophy and theology. He recalls a time when these Jews scorned and ridiculed other Jews using the teachings of the Greeks and their cohorts. He writes: "I even saw them during the Festival of Sukkot, standing in their places in the synagogue watching the servants of the Lord with their lulavim circling the Torah scroll in the Ark and they were laughing and mocking them. And they said: 'You think we need to bless G-d, or He needs all this? It's all meaningless.'" He then goes on to describe other

occasions where they scorned the observance of the commandments by the Jews in their age.

We don't really live in that type of society where we are scorned for following the commandments and expressing our religious belief. People just show disinterest, choosing to fall away from Jewish tradition and not identify with our past heritage and history. Philosophizing and rationalizing with these people is usually not helpful. What is more helpful is bringing them into the experience. No holiday is more beautiful and more enticing than the holiday of Sukkot when we can be both Jews and citizens of the world, when we can appreciate nature and its gifts, when we can rejoice in our festivals and enjoy the benefits of our community. Perhaps that is the reason that we actually have a commandment to invite guests into our Sukkah to show them the beauty of Jewish tradition and to let them experience it rather than debate its efficacy and usefulness.

There are some who will always reject it as the nations of the world did when they were symbolically given this easy Mitzvah to do and decided to abandon it. There will always be those who will attempt to negate its observance and its beauty by finding, to their mind, answers which will satisfy their own purposes. Perhaps with easy access to having a Sukkah of our own in our society we should make the holiday of Sukkot the supreme holiday of the Jewish year extolling the beauty of Judaism and its universal message to all. Perhaps that is the reason that in rabbinic literature it is simply known as HaHag, the Festival, the holiday Par Excellence, greater than all the others.

Let us enjoy the Festival. Let us rejoice with our community, give thanks to our G-d for the bounties that we receive and let us invite into our Sukkah all the skeptics and nay sayers concerning the beauty of Jewish tradition so that they will see, and all of us will behold, the magnificence of our heritage and the lessons that it teaches.