



Sukkos 2023

The Simple Things

2 minute read | Straightforward

Sukkos is the harvest festival. Nature and God have given their bounty; a year of stressful and messy work in the field has finally paid off, and the storehouses are full. In an agrarian society, it was probably the time of year where everyone got their best night's sleep on a full belly.

And yet Sukkos is the festival of Hoshana – literally, “save us!” – הושיע נא. Each day of the Sukkos prayers is marked by beautiful and moving liturgy tracing all the times and circumstances God has saved us, culminating in Hoshana Rabba, with the ultimate wish to please save us too. But it's the time of year we probably ought to feel most safe and secure!

But the Hoshana prayers seem like they would fit better at calendar moments we were at our lowest and needed God's salvation most. So why not say them on say, Pesach, when the Jewish People were mired in Egyptian slavery, or maybe the infamous day of mourning and loss, Tisha b'Av?

A recurring theme of the Torah is that challenging moments are obvious in the sense that we know how to respond. In a crisis, we know we have to do better, be better, pray harder, and perhaps fast. Don't tell the poor soul mired in those unfortunate circumstances to have faith and believe – it's unnecessary because that's all they have.

Someone whose family is well and whose well-paying job is stable doesn't feel the same desperation that the other guy does. How could he?

At the exact calendar moment of security, the Torah reminds us not to take our wins for granted, to count our blessings. We step outside our solid and warm homes into the flimsy and makeshift Sukka, which by definition, must be structurally defective for permanent habitation, reminding us how frail we are and how life is so temporary. That's not a bad thing – that's just what it means to be human. The Sukka is not built for inclement weather, and that's just fine. It's not supposed to. We don't control the weather outside the Sukka; we only control what happens inside the Sukka. It's not made of much, but the mitzvah is to make it as beautiful as possible on the inside.

We step away from the trappings of success to live in simplicity with God. We need to remind ourselves at the moment that we feel most blessed because that's when we are prone to forget. So we beg for help – save us... from ourselves, from our own complacency.



We can forget that the difference between the successful and unfortunate person isn't necessarily the effort and merit each puts in. We can forget that a whole lot of things we were desperate for a few years ago worked out quite nicely in the end. The Sukka is an excellent metaphor for the uncontrollable vicissitudes of life, a humbling moment amid proud successes.

It's not about saying thank you for finally getting what you wanted; it's about recognizing that you were always blessed. That maybe we don't need the trappings of success to see our blessings; that in the moments we have deemed to be blessed, we need to remember not to take for granted all the other blessed moments as well.

We don't control our circumstances, but we can find joy in life regardless.

Redeeming the Past

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After Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we have hopefully resolved to do better and be better, feeling invigorated and full of life.

Yet, in all likelihood, we return to the daily grind of everyday living with the same habits and routines we had as before. It's not like we press the reset button and walk out on our families and communities and jobs, and we shouldn't want to!

But what sort of change can we realistically expect to see if our lives basically stay the same?

Perhaps we can learn from the mitzvah of Sukkah that immediately follows.

The defining feature of a Sukkah is that the roof is made from unprocessed raw plant matter that creates sufficient shade. The classic example is the byproduct of the threshing floor and winery, what's left once you've extracted the useful resources. What's left isn't waste that is disposed of; the husks and stalks can be recycled and repurposed and used for the mitzvah of Sukkah.

And that's precisely what Teshuvah is.

It's not realistic to make a clean break from the past, to put mistakes wholly behind you and move on. Instead, you should carry the past forward with you; mistakes can become educational steps that help us climb and reach higher if we only learn and improve, and we can evolve.



There's an old Chassidic saying that highlights Sukkah as the only mitzvah a person does with muddy shoes; muddy shoes are the natural result of our journey through life. The dirt we pick up along the way is intimately interconnected with who we are and wholly inseparable; people who have made mistakes are welcome in the Sukkah.

This may also explain why the Zohar calls the Sukkah the shade of God – God is with us in our dark moments too – צילא דמדימנותא. It may also explain why of all festivals, Sukkos, in particular, is the time of joy – the debits can turn into credits – זמן שמקהתנו –

There is a mystical element here as well. The Hebrew word for husks and rind is קלפה. In Kabbalistic symbolism, souls are shining lights, and sins cloak the soul in layers of קלפה, sort of like an onion. Instead of discarding the קלפה, Teshuvah transforms it from a bad thing into a good thing.

It's not a magic trick – sins and transgressions are treated differently based on Teshuvah's motivation. The way you adapt your past mistakes materially affects the way you incorporate the lessons learned to be a better person.

The Esrog reflects this concept as well; it the choicest of the four species and a symbol of the ideal human who is great in deeds and wisdom. Yet if you cut one open, the edible fruit is tiny – the inedible rind makes up most of the mass; but that's still what an ideal person looks like. The best of us builds up plenty of rind over time, and that's simply part of what makes a beautiful Esrog.

Perhaps that's why Sukkos comes right on the back of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We shouldn't just sink back into the same routines as before, but Teshuvah doesn't need to look like such a radical departure from the past. Change is incremental – it doesn't have to be so different from past habits and routines; maybe it's quite similar, but with small improvements and modifications.

Sukkos teaches the holistic view of how we change.

We all make mistakes.

The only real mistakes are the ones you don't learn from.

The God of All

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Judaism has several core beliefs that have been adopted by mainstream culture. Some of them were once radical beliefs that we take for granted today, such as introducing the concept of monotheism to a pagan and polytheistic world.

The ramification of one God, as opposed to many gods, is that the one God must be the God of not just everything, but also everyone.

Unlike almost every other chag, particularly Shemini Atzeres, Sukkos has a pervasive characteristic of inclusivity that reflects this.

The Gemara teaches that the biggest celebration in the Jewish calendar was the famed water drawing ceremony that marked God's judgment of rainfall for the entire world, for the entire year.

The Gemara also notes that the Sukkos sacrifices had a sequence of 70 animals, corresponding to the 70 nations of the world so that greater humanity might also enjoy a year of abundant blessing.

We may be the conduit of God's blessing to the world at large, but we are not the exclusive beneficiaries.

Unsurprisingly, the God of all also has compassion for the most distant and lost Jews.

When we wave the lulav and esrog, the different species traditionally correspond to different kinds of Jew, from the most observant to the least. But even the least observant Jew is part and parcel of the Jewish people, and both the mitzvah and the Jewish people are deficient if the apparent "undesirables" are not actively included. Hoshana Raba has a dedicated ceremony specifically constructed around a bouquet of the undesirables.

The Sfas Emes reminds us that the God of all necessarily loves us all. God's love and compassion is elemental; it is not reserved just for worthy Jews, or Jews at all. On Sukkos, all humans gather under God's protection – חג האסיף. Sitting in a sukka acts out the simplicity of our relationship with the God of all – צילא דמהימנותא

Of all Judaism's special occasions, Sukkos is called the festival of celebration, perhaps because of the simple joy of God's love for all human life.

Recreating Egypt and Sinai

2 minute read | Straightforward



One of the more forgotten laws is the mitzvah of Hakhel.

On the first day of Chol HaMoed Sukkos, two weeks after the end of the Shemitta year; every man, woman, and child would assemble to hear a public Torah reading from his personal Sefer Torah:

מקץ שבע שנים, במעד שנת השמטה – בחג הסוכות בבוא כל-ישראל, לראות את-פני ה' אלהיך, במקום, אשר יבחר: תקרא את-התורה הזאת, נגד כל-ישראל – באזניהם: הקהל את-העם, האנשים והנשים והטף, וגר, אשר בשעריך – למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו, ויראו את-ה' – Every seventh year, after the Shemittah year, on the festival of Sukkos... in the place that He shall choose, read the Torah before all of Israel, so they will hear it. Gather the nation – men, women, children, the stranger among you... so that they may learn and fear Hashem your G-d. (31:10-12)

It's an unusual mitzvah, in that it is fulfilled by everybody – young and old, men and women, Kohen, Levi, and Yisrael. Children aren't typically expected to observe the Torah like adults – yet the Torah not only includes them but adds additional emphasis that they are a part of this ceremony:

– וּבְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ, יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלָמְדוּ לִירֵאָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם – The children who do not yet know will hear and learn to fear Hashem your God... (31:13)

Why is it important that children are a part of this mitzvah?

The Gemara says that while a child does not have the mental capacity to technically fulfill a mitzvah, there is a pedagogical benefit to their inclusion nonetheless.

The reason children must attend is simple and powerful: the Torah is for everyone – even the king, and even the children. Today, we call this principle the rule of law.

R' Shai Held considers Hakhel an orienting event that re-enacts the redemption and revelation the foundational moments of Egypt and Sinai that Judaism revolves around.

It takes place after the Shemitta year because Shemitta releases slaves and debts, and discharges mortgages and pledges.

It takes place on Sukkos because it is the time of year that everyone leaves the illusion of security and trappings of life behind, living with simplicity and vulnerability together – צִילָא דמהימנותא –

It is not enough that everyone attends; they must be there “together”.

The Shem Mi'Shmuel notes that to achieve the level where we can accept the Torah once more, it takes a whole year of living in liberty and equality, free from the obsession of increasing our private property.



The Sfas Emes teaches that the effort parents have to make to bring their kids teaches the children how important it is to understand this. While it may be difficult to explain to a young child that something is important, they will understand when you show them.

The Hakhel ceremony reaffirms that beneath the details and minutiae of our lives, we cannot help but acknowledge our shared common identity and fundamental dependence on God. Accordingly, it is entirely fitting that the experience of the children is front and center.

The Torah belongs to everyone. The buildup to the moment at Sinai where the Jewish People could accept the Torah in sacred unity with one voice is reenacted every calendar cycle at Hakhel, and the Torah calls for a similar process to break the barriers down.

To build a community, you need a longer table; not a higher fence.

The Joy of Water

2 minute read | Straightforward

In the times of Korbanos, Sukkos meant the festivities of Simchas Beis HaShoeiva. People celebrate it's memory today with ecstatic parties, with music, singing and dancing.

It's origins are from the time of the daily Tamid sacrifice, which was brought with wine. On Sukkos, it would be accompanied by water as well, the Nisuch HaMayim, to mark the beginning of the rainy season and it's prayers. The water was drawn from Shiloach, a nearby spring. Before that, the people would celebrate through the night, and the water would be drawn at daybreak for the morning sacrifice.

It is said that someone who didn't see the festivities of Simchas Beis HaShoeiva never witness true celebration.

What was so special about this celebration, and what was the meaning of the practice?

The Midrash teaches that Simchas Beis HaShoeiva is related to Genesis. The lower waters would be distanced from God and the upper waters, from which land emerged. For this apparent indignity, the lower waters benefit from a covenant that they would take pride of place in the happiest service at the Beis HaMikdash, the Simchas Beis HaShoeiva.

The Midrash is idiosyncratically cryptic. But broadly, it speaks of a distance between God and another, and the longing for closeness, which is bridged once a year.



How much of a consolation is this really; does a one off ceremony compensate for a lifetime of distance?

The Sfas Emes frames the Midrash differently. The ceremony is not a compensation at all. The fact that it's place is in the Beis HaMikdash, at the happiest moment, indicates that the indignity of the distance is a mistake of perception. If it belongs on the Mizbeach, there was no issue to start with. It is this insight that was worth celebrating wildly.

Sometimes there is a dissonance between the things we see and how we think they ought to be. Simchas Beis HaShoeiva bridges the gap. Even the things we least understand are sacred and meaningful.

Why Sit In A Sukka?

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The mitzvah of Sukka requires that for 7 days, a large part of living, particularly eating, takes place in a somewhat flimsy hut, with some plant material as the roof. The primary reason is stated in the Torah:

בַּסֹּכֹת תָּשִׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יָשֹׁבוּ בַסֹּכֹת. לְמַעַן יָדְעוּ דִרְתֵיכֶם כִּי בַסֹּכֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – Every resident of Israel will sit in huts for 7 days; so that the generations will know that I had Israel live in huts when I took them out of Egypt. (23:42,43)

What specific import does this have to us, other than recalling an ancient memory?

Arguably, it is a natural progression from Yom Kippur. We profess multiple times on Yom Kippur that we did not act in private the way we did in public. Perhaps the Sukka brings the two into synthesis. The Sukka is closed, yet anyone outside can hear whatever happens within it's walls; a Sukka is not private. Perhaps sitting in a Sukka is a commitment to acting in private more like we are in public.

The Rambam explains that the exposure to the elements reminds us of the miracles experienced in the wilderness, the stated reason in the Torah. At the beginning of nationhood, when our people's history began, and before anything remarkable occurred, we were completely looked after – just like we are surrounded completely surrounded by the Sukka. God is good to us just because, without qualification. Sukka reminds us that we are each taken care of in our own, personal way.

The Chagim all have an agricultural element to them, which is somewhat anachronistic today – yet the themes remain relevant. Sukkos is the harvest festival, a time of celebration and plenty – a farmer



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would literally reap what he had sown, finally seeing the fruit of his labour. Rav Hirsch notes that in this time of achievement, we are to walk away, and remember that in a physically and spiritually barren wasteland, we were helpless, yet cared for nonetheless. We retreat from our comforts and securities to a greater or lesser degree. Sitting in a Sukka is a mitzvah of simplicity.

This was more obvious when everyone had to journey to Jerusalem as part of the mitzvah. They would have to leave wherever they were from, whatever their professions, and the roads would be packed with people doing the same thing. By getting there, away from their busy lives, sharing with people doing the same thing, there would be a strong and shared sense of common identity.

The simplicity of Sukka reminds us that we are each taken care of in our own, personal way, no matter the circumstance or whether we deserve it. This realisation ought to cause a deep sense of gratitude for all the goodness we experience, as well as feelings of modesty and humility. Thinking about all this may even get us to act more like it too!

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond.

If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Neli

PS - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. My business, Hendon Advisors, allows me to dedicate time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I source and broker the purchase and sale of healthcare businesses; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers. If you are a buyer of healthcare businesses or can make introductions to healthcare operators who might buy or sell, just reply to this email to get in touch.*

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.