



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Sukkot 5769 By Dr. David Elcott

Sukkot: A Celebration of Modesty

You shall dwell in Sukkot seven days. All citizens of Israel will stay in Sukkot, so that your generations may know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. (Leviticus 23:42-43)

In its cryptic fashion, the Torah lets us know that Sukkot has great meaning. But it does not tell us exactly what meaning we are to glean from our ancestors' experiences in the desert. We do not live in fragile booths, thank God. We are blessed with the stability of a land in which to live and permanent communities of which to be a part. So we turn to the medieval commentators to expand and deepen the words of the Torah.

They understood the movement from desert nomad to sedentary farmer or successful business person. At first, slavery and the desert experience must have been great equalizers – the Israelites lived off of what God alone provided and, as nomads, had no opportunity to accumulate wealth. Once our ancestors settled on the land, those who were successful worked hard, built up equity as they reaped harvests and acquired more and more. In the best cases, their children inherited great benefits from their parents' achievements.

Understandably, the most successful felt that they deserved what they acquired, the results of hard work and family connections. We recognize these feelings in ourselves as well – I may be grateful and even somewhat humble, but I really do deserve what I have. My parents gave me generous gifts, and the rest I earned on my own.

The Rashbam, a grandson and heir of the great Rashi, must have had similar feelings himself. Aware that the most successful often believe that “one gets what one deserves,” he explains the value of Sukkot described in the verses from Leviticus:

Lest you should say in your hearts, “My power and the might of my right hand has gotten me this wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:17), it is the practice to go out and dwell in booths in recognition of those who have no inheritance in the wilderness and no house to dwell in. For this reason did the Holy One fix the observance of the Sukkot festival at the time of the ingathering of the corn and wine, that people should not be guilty of pride in their well-stocked homes, saying “The might of our hands have gotten us this wealth.”

Whatever blessings we have, we do not deserve – they are gifts. We are all, in the natural state, like our ancestors who lived in the desert with no inheritance save freedom and no home except a fragile hut. Another commentator, the Arama (the Akedat Yitzhak) takes us even further into a simulated state of modesty:

The symbols and impressions of this festival are such that none can ignore them. On this festival, everyone leaves money matters, merchandise and produce and all that we understand as property. Everyone goes like a poor person into a tiny booth that contains but the meal for one day and usually nothing more than a bed, table, chair and lamp.

Mind you, food, bed, table, chair and lamp are not so bad, but his point is made. Sukkot does not call for the permanent ascetic abandonment of property nor its forced confiscation by the government. Rather, Sukkot is a

modesty lesson that lasts one week a year, not the lifetime of poverty and homelessness that are the lot of so many around the world. So it is a shame that few of us take advantage of the lesson it has to teach.

The *sukkah* in our home is truly beautiful. It seats forty people and boasts a brass chandelier, hanging oil lamps and a mini-kitchen. Family and guests fill themselves on the best wines, cakes and produce. Our *sukkah* is a self-assured and proud sign of the luxury and success of our lives. Sukkot in our home is truly *z'man simhatenu*, the season of our rejoicing.

But if the physical structure and the celebration within it were all there was to our family's *sukkah*, it would not reflect the Torah teaching about modesty. Ours would be a misguided perversion of what Sukkot is all about.

I am not prepared to compromise the beauty of our temporary dwelling, nor will I skimp on the food served. Rather, we have begun to develop other customs to ensure that the warnings of the Rashbam and the Arama are not forgotten. We place a barrel at the entrance of our *sukkah* and ask that all who enter bring a can or box of food. We tithe a percentage of our expenses for Sukkot to organizations that work to end hunger. We read stories that remind us that our temporary hut is more substantial than the permanent homes of so many human beings. And we study, each year, the wonderful Torah that our traditions offer us on *tzedakah*, on ways for us to improve this world until it is perfected.

May your *sukkah* be warm and beautiful. Fill it with the laughter and joy of friends and family. But do not forget that our wealth is not simply the product of our own hands. Find ways, through both study and action, to ensure that you and all who enter your *sukkah* learn a Torah of modesty and gratitude, and embrace a renewed awareness of the poverty that confronts almost two billion people around the world who are still wandering in the desert and cannot depend on God to provide for them. That is our task. Strive to lift our brothers and sisters up, and you will be fully immersed in the meaning of Sukkot. Then, yours will truly be *z'man simhatenu*, the season of our rejoicing.



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