

For a Greater Purpose

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A basic human desire is to be happy. There is no one in this world who doesn't seek joy. The goal is the same, though different people have different ways of going about achieving that goal.

Though we seek to bring joy into each day and the Torah demands that we be joyous in our service of Hashem, Yomim Tovim are singled out as periods of joy, when one of the obligations of the day is "vesomachta bechagecha," to be happy. While that is so for all Yomim Tovim, Sukkos has the distinction of being a particular time of happiness and Chazal define the chag as "Zeman Simchoseinu – Our Joyous Period."

Pesach, the Yom Tov that celebrates our freedom from Mitzri subjugation, is aptly described as "Zeman Cheiruseinu – Our Time of Freedom." Shavuos, which celebrates the day when we received the Torah at Har Sinai, is suitably referred to as "Zeman Matan Toraseinu – The Time of the Receipt of the Torah." Their appellations define them. Why, then, is Sukkos referred to as "Zeman Simchoseinu" and not something that references the sukkos in which Hashem provided protection for us in the midbar, or at least something that makes mention of the daled minim associated with the holiday of Sukkos?

What is it about Sukkos that creates and mandates so much joy amongst the Jewish people to the degree that it defines the Yom Tov?

Perhaps we can explain that the reason Sukkos is the chag of simcha is because it demonstrates that we, humans, have the ability to transform the mundane into the spiritual and holy. We think about our lives and life in general, and we wonder what it is all about; to recognize that we can bring about holiness gives our lives meaning and purpose. And what can be more joyous than that!

People can get into a rut as they go about their daily lives, running errands, doing carpool, and working at a job to be able to buy food and put a roof over their heads. Sometimes it can be very overwhelming and we wonder: What is the purpose of all this? What value is there to a life spent performing myriad manual tasks? How can anyone enjoy the actions that make up so much of the grind of life?

The answer is that we are not merely animalistic creatures whose days revolve around foraging for food and a comfortable place to sleep. Rather, everything we do is for a higher purpose. We aren't simply performing mundane, senseless tasks. Rather, we have the ability to raise the level of everything we do. We are masters of the universe. Everything we do has the ability to affect the entire world. When we work and earn money to be able to perform mitzvos, we are bringing value to our lives and, at the same time, strengthening the world. We are raising ourselves and giving our lives meaning, making the mundane holy, making our actions holy, and making ourselves holy as well.

When you are taking your child to yeshiva and are stuck in traffic, you aren't wasting your time. You are fulfilling your obligation of chinuch and teaching your child Torah; what could be more important than that!

When you are standing on a long line in a supermarket on Erev Shabbos and Erev Yom Tov, you need not be upset that you are wasting your time. You are doing the mitzvah of oneg Shabbos and simchas Yom Tov. And if you are on line buying food for a regular weekday and have in mind that you are doing this so that you and your family will be able to eat and have strength to do mitzvos, then you are doing a mitzvah just by standing there. And mitzvos are what make the world go round. They make life worth living and earn us eternal reward.

On Sukkos, we take a simple fruit and turn it into a cheftzah shel mitzvah with so many deep spiritual meanings that we don't even remember that it is a fruit. Who thinks of an esrog as a fruit? We view it as a holy object, which it is because we made it so. We took a simple, inanimate object known as a citron, which grows on a tree and most of the world has no use for, and we transformed it into the most prized of the daled minim. We carefully select it, spend a mini-fortune on it, and with a huge smile bring it home, wrap it carefully, and place it in its ornate silver box purchased specially for this once-a-year purpose.

We are overcome with joy when we finally find the esrog we were searching for, and we are then confident that we will be able to complete the mitzvah to the best of our ability. Perhaps more than any other mitzvah object, the esrog is handled with such pride and joy because it shows us that if we have the proper frame of mind, we can reach the heavens with the simple act of holding a fruit.

We do the same with the lulav, hadasim and aravos. On Yom Tov, we march with them to shul, demonstrating our joy that we were found virtuous during the yemei hadin and are prepared to live life on a higher plane. We are no longer creatures of the yeitzer hora, viewing everything in creation as tools for physical gratification. We recognize that our mission here is to serve Hashem by utilizing the goodness with which He surrounds us and the strength and abilities he gave us to live in this world and raise ourselves to a higher, loftier plane.

We begin with the esrog and the daled minim and continue with the sukkah itself. We collect items that grow from the ground and are not mekabel tumah and place them atop a few walls. We thus fashion for ourselves another vehicle with which to raise our level of spirituality to that of anshei Elokim, G-dly people. We leave our year-round home and enter a temporary structure, enveloping ourselves in the tzila demehemnusa, the shadow of the Shechinah. We utilize ordinary everyday objects as tools to achieve this state of G-dliness. We become filled with joy. We make a brocha on the sukkah and thank Hashem for keeping us alive so that we can enjoy this special moment, basking in the glory of Hashem.

The Gemara in Maseches Sukkah (9a) derives from the korban chagigah that just as an animal becomes sanctified when the person who intends to offer it to Hashem says, "Korban laShem," so too, the walls and covering of the sukkah become sanctified and forbidden for mundane use for the duration of the Yom Tov of Sukkos. We take wood, fiberglass, canvas, bamboo and pine branches and turn them into a holy room, fit for the avos and Hashem.

The Vilna Gaon (Shir Hashirim 1:4) teaches that the sukkah alludes to the status of Klal Yisroel after Moshiach's arrival, at which time we will all sit betzila demehemnusa, as we did while we traveled through the desert on our way to the Promised Land. Just as the sukkah symbolizes the Mishkon in the midbar where the Shechinah dwelled, so does it symbolize the Shechinah's return to the rebuilt Bais Hamikdosh.

The Maharal, in his Shabbos Hagadol drosha, expresses a similar thought and states that it is in the merit of the Yom Tov of Sukkos that the Third Bais Hamikdosh will be built to house the Shechinah.

This theme, that the sukkah is reminiscent of the construction of a resting place for the Shechinah, is taken to a much higher level by the Zohar (Vol. 3, 103a), who states that when a Jew sits in a sukkah, he basks in the shadow of the Shechinah – betzila demehemnusa.

These ideas are not just allegorical and homiletic, but real and tangible. The Kav Hayosher (95) states that the reason we are careful to keep the sukkah clean and to ensure that our behavior there is refined and proper is for this very reason: the sukkah is a home for the Shechinah and is a mikdash me'at.

With such lofty thoughts and accomplishments, how can we not be joyous on Sukkos? We place four temporary walls together and cover them with a leaky roof, leaving us with an unheated and unprotected, albeit nicely decorated, room, and we are then able to sit in the shadow of the Shechinah. We see that we have the ability to raise our lifestyle from being ordinary and commonplace to Divine and G-dly. Through our actions, we can bring the Shechinah into our homes, very literally.

The kedusha of the sukkah is so real that it obligates us to behave differently while we are in our temporary home than the way we behave in our permanent homes all year long.

An example of the elevated level of conduct demanded in a sukkah appears in the Mishnah Berurah (679:2), who writes that due to the holiness of a sukkah, it is proper to refrain from idle talk, lashon hara and rechilus there.

Rav Dovid Cohen, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivas Chevron, in his sefer Zeman Simchoseinu, attaches great importance to the Chofetz Chaim's warning about speaking lashon hora in a sukkah. He quotes the Nachlas Dovid, who states in the name of the Vilna Gaon that the mitzvah of sukkah subjugates the yeitzer hora of lashon hora. He explains that this power is due to the fact that Sukkos mirrors the final redemption, when the sin of lashon hora will be rectified.

Rav Cohen references Rav Chaim Palagi, who says that the sukkah is emblematic of unity, for when the Ananei Hakavod enveloped Am Yisroel, they were considered as one. As such, lashon hora, which is the root of rivalry and machlokes, has no place in the sukkah. Since every Yom Tov brings with it the spiritual powers that it represents, and since Sukkos parallels, and bears the strength of, the Ananei Hakavod, we merit that when we sit in the sukkah, we are betzila demehemusa. Thus, actions that are incompatible with achdus have no place in the sukkah.

With this, we can also understand the simcha of the Bais Hashoeivah, which the Mishnah (Sukkah 5:2) and Gemara (Sukkah 52a) famously describe as the greatest simcha ever witnessed by man. Water was drawn from a spring and brought to the Bais Hamikdosh. Nothing is more available than water. Not only is water abundant, but it is also odorless, shapeless, and easily accessible. The lesson is that Jews can take simple water and raise it to the highest level of kedusha as an offering in the Bais Hamikdosh. Recognizing that they could bring about the transition of one of the simplest forms of creation to the highest brought unparalleled happiness and joy to the Jewish people.

So often, we get overwhelmed by olam hazeh. We ponder the purpose of all that we experience and endure. We work hard and don't always see our plans to fruition. We can easily get frustrated. Too often, the mundane humdrum of life wears us out because we don't comprehend the purpose of it all.

But on Sukkos, we take a fruit and a stick and they become cheftzos shel mitzvah that are mashpia bechol ha'olamos. We cobble together boards and branches to create a home where the Shechinah rests. We then see that our actions have positive effects and create heavenly places for us to live in. Our feelings of futility disappear, as our inner thirst for spirituality is fed and nourished.

We sit in the sukkah and bask in its warmth and holiness. We welcome our friends, family and the Ushpizin, and recognize that there is a greater purpose in all that we do. Our actions can bring Moshiach. It is not just a good drosha. It is real.

And it is not only Sukkos. Rav Chaim Volozhiner writes in Nefesh Hachaim (1:4) that no Jew should ever say to himself that he is useless and has no power to accomplish anything with his daily activities. Every action we undertake, every word we utter, and every thought we bear can accomplish great things in the upper worldly spheres.

Rav Yisroel Elya Weintraub, in his peirush Yiras Chaim, explains this idea and says that at the root of human failing is a person's feeling that his actions have no intrinsic value. It is such insecure thinking that leads man to forsake the proper path and engage in sin. If people would be secure in the knowledge of the impact of their actions, they would not sin.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that this is the meaning of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (2:1) that states, "Da mah lemaalah mimcha – Know what is above you." Know, the Mishnah exhorts us, that what transpires in the heavenly bodies is a result of your actions in this world.

Perhaps we can apply that Mishnah to our lesson from the sukkah. Know what is above you. As you sit in the sukkah and look up, know that your actions have caused the Shechinah to hover above you. Know that what you do has significance. Know that you have the power with your actions to dwell in the shadow of Hashem. Know that you have intrinsic value. Remember that you can cause world-altering changes. Know that nothing you do is wasted. It is all for a good purpose.

There is nothing that brings more joy to a person than recognizing that he has value, that his internal battles have heavenly ramifications, and that he can accomplish more than he ever dreamed.

Pesach is when we got our freedom, Shavuos is when we got the Torah, and Sukkos is when it all comes together and we realize that our lives have meaning and there is value and importance in everything we do. Zeman Simchoseinu, indeed!

Chag someiach. Have a very happy Yom Tov.