

A Holy Connection

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

The Jewish world has undergone a tremendous change since Sukkos ended last year. It was as if once the Yom Tov that celebrates Hashem's protection of the Jewish people in the midbar and throughout the ages ended, Hashem, for reasons unknown to us, removed His protection for ten hours and a terrible massacre resulted.

By the time it was over, 1,200 of our brothers and sisters were killed, bombed, burned, and mutilated in a historically horrific manner. Over three thousand were wounded and 251 were taken hostage.

Those who believe saw the Yad Hashem at work. When He protects us, nobody can touch us, but when He removes the protection, the highly respected army is inept and impotent in the face of our enemies.

What can we do to earn Hashem's protection? We know that the study of Torah creates protection for Am Yisroel, as Chazal say (Sotah 21a), "Torah magna umatzla – Torah protects and saves."

Mitzvos do not necessarily protect as Torah does, but they make us holy and bring us closer to Hashem's embrace. Rav Chaim Volozhiner writes (Nefesh Hachaim 1:6) that as soon as a person undertakes to perform a mitzvah, it connects to its shoresh, its root in Heaven, causing the "ohr hamakif," the "holy light," to attach itself to him and for kedusha to hover over and surround him. He explains that this is the reason that we recite the brocha of "asher kideshonu b'mitzvosav," thanking Hashem for making us holy through His mitzvos.

The mitzvah of sukkah, however, protects those who sit in it.

The Ramchal (Derech Hashem, Avodas Hazeman, Sukkah) discusses the Ananei Hakavod that protected the Jewish people in the midbar. He says that they consisted of six clouds that surrounded the Jewish people on all sides and a seventh cloud that paved the way for them, straightening out the ground they were to traverse and killing all matters of pestilence on the way.

While the Ananim appeared to offer only physical protection, directing the nation as they traveled to Eretz Yisroel and keeping their enemies at bay, there was also a spiritual shield. As the Ananim surrounded them, the Jews were able to understand that they are a chosen people and separate from all the nations of the world. The Ananim thus signified for the Jewish people that they lived on a higher, more spiritual plane than everyone else. That awareness helped them live up to their potential to serve as a holy nation.

While we no longer have the Ananim to protect us physically, their spiritual protection is still present for those who are worthy. There is a spiritual light that emanates from Shomayim and

surrounds the tzaddikim, separating and raising them from the others. Tzaddikim, though they are with us in this world, are removed from many of the physical aspects of our lives and operate on a higher, spiritual level.

The Ramchal writes that on Sukkos, all of Klal Yisroel is surrounded by the walls and roof of the sukkah, which are reminiscent of the Ananei Hakavod that surrounded the Jews in the midbar, setting them apart. When we sit in the sukkah under the tzeila demehemnusa, we are on a different level, separated from everyone and everything.

To understand the depth of this statement, we quote the Maharal (Chiddushei Aggados, Rosh Hashanah 16b), who discusses the difference between the life of a tzaddik and the life of a rasha. A tzaddik is connected to Hashem, the Source of all life, whereas a rasha, even when he is alive, is disconnected from Hashem. A tzaddik is therefore referred to as alive even after his neshomah has passed into the other world, because he remains connected to Hashem as he was in this world. A rasha is referred to as dead, because even in this world he is not connected to the Source of life.

With this, we can understand what the Ramchal writes in his peirush to the Rosh Hashanah machzor. He states that when we say "chaim," it refers to those upon whom the kedusha shines and connects to, for they are the ones who are connected to the Source of all life and are thus considered living.

On Sukkos, everyone who enters a sukkah is connected to Hashem on the level of the great tzaddikim, as the Zohar says that when we sit in the sukkah, we are in Hashem's shadow. In the sukkah, the light of kedusha shines upon us as it shines upon tzaddikim all year. On Sukkos, we have a special connection to Hashem.

This is why on Sukkos we are joyous, as the posuk (Devorim 16:14-15) states, "Vesomachta bechagecha vehoyisa ach someiach." Sukkos is Zeman Simchoseinu, because on these days, we can attain the highest levels that man can reach.

The Tur (625) asks that the sukkah mentioned in the posuk (Vayikra 23:42-43) refers to the Ananei Hakavod, which protected the Jews upon their exit from Mitzrayim. Therefore, it should follow that the Yom Tov of Sukkos, which commemorates the Ananei Hakavod, should be during Nissan, the month the Jews left Mitzrayim, and not during Tishrei, following the Yomim Noraim.

Many quote the chiddush of the Vilna Gaon (Shir Hashirim 1:4) that the Ananei Hakavod we commemorate on Sukkos are not those clouds that surrounded and protected the Jewish people when they left Mitzrayim. Instead, he says, what we are celebrating on Sukkos is that Hashem returned His Shechinah, via the Ananim, to the Jewish people following the sin of the Eigel. When the Jews sinned, Hashem had removed His Shechinah and the Ananim from them.

Moshe Rabbeinu went up on Har Sinai to plead for forgiveness for the Jewish people and returned when they were forgiven on Yom Kippur. The next day, 11 Tishrei, he addressed the

Bnei Yisroel and informed them of the mitzvah of constructing the Mishkon. He appealed to the people to donate the materials necessary to build the Mishkon, which would, so-to-speak, be the home of the Shechinah in this world.

The Torah relates (“baboker baboker,” Shemos 36:3) that the people brought their donations for the next two days, the 12th and 13th of Tishrei. On the 14th of Tishrei, the builders of the Mishkon weighed, measured, and accepted the gold and other materials from Moshe. On the 15th, they began to build the Mishkon. The clouds returned as the construction began.

Sukkos, says the Vilna Gaon, celebrates the return of the Shechinah cloud that was dependent on the construction of the Mishkon. That happened on the 15th of Tishrei, the first day of Sukkos.

His explanation answers a question posed by the Chasam Sofer, who asked why we only commemorate the Ananei Hakavod on Sukkos, despite the fact that they protected the Jews every day of the year in the desert. Now that the Gaon has taught us that our celebration is not for the daily protection the clouds afforded us, but rather for the return of the Ananim altogether, Sukkos is the perfect time to commemorate that, as that was when it happened.

Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 23:16) strengthens what the Gaon says, stating that prior to the deliverance of the second Luchos (Shemos 23:16 and 34:22), the Torah refers to the Yom Tov as “Chag Ha’asif.” It is only later on (Devorim 16:13) that the Torah refers to the Yom Tov as “Chag HaSukkos.”

Observing Sukkos during Tishrei following the Yomim Noraim has the added benefit of bringing us to the level the Jews were on following Hashem’s acceptance of their teshuvah after the chet ha’Eigel. Just as Hashem returned His Shechinah to them and shined the light of His countenance upon them, so too, following our teshuvah, Hashem shines His light upon us b’tzeila demehemnusa, in the sukkah.

Additionally, Rabbienu Bachayei writes in his sefer Kad Hakemach that proper observance of the mitzvah of sukkah leads to ruach hakodesh.

This may also be why on Sukkos we merit visits from the Ushpizin. Because we are on the level of great tzaddikim, with the special ohr shining upon us, we have a direct connection to kedusha, and if we are zocheh, we have a bechinah of ruach hakodesh. It is only on Sukkos that the avos can visit with us mortals.

Since the sukkah envelops us with kedusha, we perform the mitzvah of sukkah with our entire body, unlike other mitzvos, such as tefillin, which we do with our arms and head.

With this, we can understand the ruling of the Mishnah Berurah (639:2) that when inside the sukkah, we should discuss Torah and holy matters and minimize mundane and silly talk. He adds that we must be careful not to speak lashon hara or rechilus there.

When we sit in the sukkah, we are b'tzeila demehemnusa, with Hashem's light shining upon us as we are connected to Him. Since lashon hara causes the Shechinah to depart, we are cautioned to abstain from speaking lashon hara in the sukkah. Also, in order to maintain the special, rare, and holy connection, we must prove ourselves worthy of it.

We hope that the new year will prove to be an improvement over the year that, thankfully, has ended. Our brethren in Eretz Yisroel are still living in the shadow of a war being fought on seven fronts. It is obvious once again that Eretz Yisroel is the proverbial sheep among seventy wolves. Jewish boys and men are fighting and dying to protect the country. We see that when Hashem assists them, they are victorious, but when we don't merit the Divine protection, anything can happen. We daven that the zechus of Torah protect our people and that we merit peace for Eretz Yisroel.

On Sukkos, we proclaim our faith in Hakadosh Boruch Hu and leave our comfortable, protected homes to live outside in a very temporary fabrication. The Sefas Emes (654) writes that just as those who sit in the sukkah earn the protection of the Ananei Hakavod for placing their faith in Hashem, so too, those who forsake the trappings of Olam Hazehe and cleave to Hashem and His mitzvos earn kedusha and the shield of the Ananei Hakavod.

The Vilna Gaon said that the most difficult mitzvah to perform is the obligation to be happy on Yom Tov: "Vesomachta bechagecha vehoyisa ach someiach." The mitzvah obligates us to be in a state of happiness for the duration of Sukkos, even in the face of troubling or tragic situations that may befall us and cast a specter of gloom.

In prior generations, observing the mitzvah of sukkah didn't always come easy. In der alter heim, Sukkos weather was often inhospitable to being in a sukkah. When coming to this country, many were not able to build their own sukkah and had to shlep their food to a communal sukkah. Shabbos complicated the situation even more. Zoning laws banning the construction of "sheds" were used to deter Jews from building a sukkah, and that was just one of the easier problems. In the concentration camps, everyday life hung by a thread, and a sukkah presented its own challenges. Jews literally risked their lives for the opportunity to partake of their meager rations b'tzeila demehemnusa.

As they sat on the floor of their humble sukkos, they felt the warm embrace of the holy light. Despite their privations, with intense simcha shel mitzvah, they joyfully recited the brocha of "asher kideshanu b'mitzvosav v'tzivonu leisheiv basukkah," thanking Hashem for sanctifying them and giving them the mitzvah of sukkah, despite the difficulties involved. And then they made the brocha of Shehecheyanu, thanking Hashem for being with them and keeping them alive during that awful time.

Things may be rough, but nothing any of us is going through compares to what Jews experienced throughout the centuries leading up to ours. Nothing is comparable to being in a Nazi concentration camp, confronted by a pogrom, the Inquisition, the Crusaders, or the rabid

anti-Semitism of the church, the communists, and the socialists. Yet, during all periods, Jews observed the mitzvos of sukkah and daled minim with devotion, fervor, and inner joy.

When we see a sukkah, we are looking at proof that even today we are not alone. The Shechinah is with us. When we see people surround the bimah, holding aloft their daled minim, we are witnessing proof that “netzach Yisroel lo yeshakeir.” Life can be tough, but there is no reason to be down.

We are never alone. Hashem is always with us.

Yogeil Yaakov is a 13-year-old boy who was taken captive last year on Shemini Atzeres. He was held as a hostage for 52 days and then freed in an exchange. He wrote about what happened when he came out.

“When I returned, I right away told everyone that I wanted to start wearing a kippah and tzitzit. They laughed in my face and said to me, ‘What, are you crazy? What do a kippah and tzitzit have anything to do with you getting out?’

“When I was held in captivity, what kept me going was that I felt I was not alone. I believed that Hashem was with me the whole time I was held. He was watching over me.”

This is what a secular boy wrote. The truth is that Hashem watches over all of us. If we go through our day, year, or specific experiences and contemplate them in retrospect, it becomes obvious that whatever happened was because Hashem willed it so. Wherever we are and whatever is going on, we are never alone and should never feel alone.

Sukkah reinforces the feelings of Hashgocha Protis, and through that lens, we are better able to appreciate ourselves, our lives, and what happens to us personally, collectively, and to the world.

As we sit in our sukkah and recite the Shehecheyonu, we should reflect on our blessings, on all the good we have, and how blessed we are to be living at this time, when we can freely observe mitzvos and hear the footsteps of Moshiach getting increasingly louder as they get closer to us.

Have a good Yom Tov.