

Sukkot I – 5767
Celebrating with Trembling

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah.

Monday was a long day. Intense and powerful, but long. In case you forgot, it was Yom Kippur!

It does happen this way every year, but it seems to surprise me anew each time. What is the point of this tight schedule? Why does Sukkot come right after Yom Kippur?

I try to work around the conflict. This year I figured I could build the Sukkah on Sunday afternoon, and some of you told me you had planned to do the same. But the rain came, and I could only manage to complete the frame. Luckily, Wednesday's summer-like weather provided an opportunity to complete the task in the late afternoon and evening.

It was then that I realized that there is a great value in having Sukkot come right after Yom Kippur – in fact, right after this entire high holiday season, the season of repentance. The two flow into each other, teaching us how to engage in the world.

Let's rewind a bit. Over the past couple of weeks, we have been engaged in repentance, reciting additional prayers, contemplating our actions and behaviors over the past year, and trying to envision and prepare ourselves to be better in the coming year. This is a process that began in the middle of the summer with Rosh Hodesh Elul. At the beginning of the month of Elul, we sounded the shofar, recited Psalm 27 each morning and evening, and prepared ourselves for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

The culmination of all this is, on one level: Yom Kippur. We spend the entire day in, as it is known, a *yom tefillah*, in a day of prayer in synagogue, without physical comforts. We remove our leather shoes, and refrain from washing, pleasurable activities, sexual relations, food and drink. We strip ourselves down almost to our souls and afflict our bodies in order to almost rid ourselves of the physical casing that surrounds our most basic spiritual essence.

I don't know about you, but for me there is a kind of Yom Kippur high that I get each year. By the evening, I have forgotten my hunger and begin to run on adrenalin. That's partially because I am a rabbi, and I'm engaged in a leadership role in the service, but there is also something about having fasted for a day that is very purifying and gratifying. Since I know that I will eat in a few minutes, I feel like a marathoner who can see the finish line. I have hopefully purged myself of the sins of the past year, preparing a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate with which to enter into this year.

While there is something fulfilling about leaving behind our physical selves to a certain extent on Yom Kippur, that is not who we are. We are physical creatures, and we engage in the physical world.

That to me is the great gift and the great insight of having Sukkot just days after Yom Kippur. It is a reminder that what it means to be a human being and a Jew is not Yom Kippur, as beneficial, as cathartic, as powerful an experience as it is. To be a human being and to be a Jew is to be engaged in the physical world. It is about mitzvot that engage and root us in that.

Today, Sukkot has two core mitzvot. The sacrifices and the pilgrimage to the *Beit Hamikdash*, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem that we read about in the Torah, have not been observed in two millennia. Today, we build Sukkot so that we may dwell in them, and we take up the lulav and etrog (except on Shabbat – come back tomorrow!).

We are required to eat our meals spending as much time as we can in the Sukkah - a fragile, impermanent structure that is a reminder of God's Shekhinah, the divine presence, that most imminent aspect of the *Kadosh Barukh Hu*, of the Holy One.

To me, Sukkot is the completion of Yom Kippur. If Yom Kippur is a day without, then Sukkot is a reminder of how to bring God into our physical lives. If Yom Kippur is a time without food and drink, then Sukkot is about bringing God's message of mitzvot back into eating. On Sukkot there is the custom of having *Ushpizin*, inviting special guests to our Sukkah. Each day we recall different ancestors who played critical roles in our tradition to metaphorically join us for a meal.

Similarly, we are also supposed to invite people to join us in our Sukkah, fulfilling the mitzvah of *hakhnasat orhim*, of welcoming guests. A couple of years ago, an Israeli film entitled *Ushpizin* came out and illustrated this in a most compelling and entertaining manner. If you did not see it, it's worth renting.

The Sukkah is also seen as different from any other of the 613 commandments. As the great Hasidic master, the Mezhbizer Rebbe taught: "During the High Holy Days in the month of Tishrei, a Jew serves God with his whole being: on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Remembrance, with his brain, since memory enwrathes the mind; on Yom Kippur with his heart, since fasting strains the heart; on Sukkot with his hands, as he grasps the etrog and lulav; and on Simhat Torah with his feet, when he parades in the hoshanot, the circles, and dances with the Torah."

Some have taken this even further and claimed that the Sukkah is the ultimate mitzvah, since it's the only commandment when we put our entire selves

into the mitzvah. To dwell in the Sukkah one must place one's entire self in the mitzvah!

This is the key – Sukkot helps us move from the mind and heart, the days of awe, to the hands and feet, to the rest of the body. Sukkot serves as the bridge, reminding us not to let the ideas and ideals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur remain distant. Sukkot helps us apply them to our physical lives through concrete physical actions and mitzvot that help us come closer to others, like welcoming guests.

And the lulav and the etrog? These also serve as critical reminders. One can express gratitude and appreciation through words, but actions can sometimes be even better. On the three pilgrimage festivals and Rosh Hodesh, we sing Hallel, Psalms of praise to God, but only on Sukkot do we add action to our words, waving these agricultural products to help us appreciate our many gifts from God. Similarly, encircling the congregation with *hoshanot* unites us all as a holy community in our experience of the Divine.

When we shake the lulav in all directions, we are making an important distinction. God is not synonymous with nature, but rather, the lulav and etrog are reminders that God lies beyond nature, providing us with a world filled with blessing and beauty.

Shaking the lulav and the etrog reminds me of the children's song, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is really everywhere," but it's really more than that - God is in fact beyond all the directions we can shake. Beyond shaking (as they are known in Hebrew, the *na'anu'im*), these movements are really about shaking our very selves. God is everywhere. God is beyond our physical expression and the waving in all directions.

So Sukkot is about rooting ideas in physical actions, but it is more than that: it is the wedding celebration of the union of God and the Jewish people.

According to the rabbis, after the sin of the golden calf, Moses went back up Mt. Sinai at the beginning of the month of Elul, the beginning of this season of repentance. Moses remained atop the mountain for 40 days and nights, descending on the tenth day of *Tishrei*, on Yom Kippur.

There is a wedding analogy here, the wedding between God and the Jewish people. There are actually many links between Yom Kippur and one's wedding day. There is a tradition for the bride and groom to fast before their wedding. We recite the same Amidah, the same silent standing prayer that we recite on Yom Kippur, the day or morning or afternoon before we get married, with the same *Vidui* – the *Ashamnu* and the *Al Het* – with the same confessional, the same prayers, asking God to forgive us for everything that has happened in the past, so that we can start anew with our loved one.

The wedding itself is held under a *huppah*, which, in a sense, complements the sukkah. Both structures are places where God's presence is heightened.

If there is a link between a wedding ceremony and Yom Kippur, the wedding celebration, the *seudat mitzvah* or mitzvah meal parallels the festival of Sukkot. Just as, traditionally, there are seven days of celebratory meals or *sheva brakhot* after a wedding, we have seven days of Sukkot. At these special meals, the same *Sheva Brakhot*, the same seven blessings recited under the *huppah* at the wedding, are recited each day.

Almost ten years ago, when Sharon and I married, we had the great blessing of holding these *Sheva Brakhot*. We held one for my father-in-law's friends and associates in his community. We held one for my mother's fellow professors at JTS. We held one for friends in another community, and we then spent Shabbat together with other friends. It was an incredibly joyful way to add to the wedding and make it into an entire wedding week of celebration.

To me, this is what Sukkot is all about. If the wedding day is Yom Kippur, then the seven-day festival of Sukkot is like these seven days of special meals. It is a week full of celebrating the new relationship. We have now taken the values we have prayed about, all the introspection and self-transformation, and brought them back into our lives, into a great celebration.

Sukkot is known as *hehag* – the holiday. It is the festival par excellence in our tradition. It is seen as the days of greatest joy. It is like the seven days of wedding celebration. We celebrate our relationship, our marriage, our renewed and strengthened relationship that exists between God and ourselves. We remember that our work is in this world, and we take a week to enjoy it.

There is a great teaching in the Talmud that brings all of these ideas together. The rabbis teach that when one rejoices at a wedding, we are supposed to *gilu b're'adah* – to celebrate with a sense of trembling. As my teacher at the seminary, Rabbi Bill Lebeau (who installed me here) taught both Sharon and me before our own wedding, at the wedding we celebrate like there is no greater celebration, but we also do it with a sense of trembling, with a sense of awe, aware of our own fragility and how broken the world is around us.

He utilized the breaking of the glass as the metaphor for this. When we break the glass, we recall the destruction of Jerusalem, but also we remember all the brokenness in the world and that we as a newly married couple must not isolate ourselves from that brokenness but be a part of helping to repair and to heal it. And finally, we also remember how we are to celebrate – how we are to be emotionally during the actual wedding celebration or the week-long celebration.

We are to celebrate and have great dancing and joy, but also remember the fragility of life. That is what it means to be a Jew. That is what Sukkot is all about, and that is the blessing that I wish upon each and every one of us.

May we appreciate the lessons of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the days of introspection and repentance, and through this week-long wedding celebration of Sukkot, bring them into the year.

May we all celebrate with a sense of awe.

Shabbat Shalom and Hag Sameah!