

"BY THE WAY"


The festival of Sukkot seems to come at the wrong time of the year. The weather is, more often than not, inclement -- chilly and sometimes wet. Even historically, it seems to be misplaced in the Jewish calendar. Sukkot commemorates the protection afforded by God to Israel when Israel left Egypt -- and that occurred in the Spring. By right, therefore, we should celebrate Passover, rest for a few days, and immediately celebrate Sukkot, for the divine protection was offered to us immediately upon leaving Egypt.

Indeed, this estimation is correct. The "Tur," in his introduction to the Laws of Sukkot, tells us that this is precisely why the Bible fixed Sukkot in the month of Tishrei instead of Nisan. In the Holy Land, Nisan introduces the Spring, and it is customary at that time for people to build little booths in the open so as to enjoy the cool air at the same time that they have shade from the sun. If, therefore, the law would require us to observe Sukkot in the Spring, it would be difficult to tell whether we are observing the festival as a commandment of God, or primarily going out to the booths for our own enjoyment and relaxation and only incidentally performing a mitzvah. However, in this month of Tishrei, with the weather turning cold and wet, people usually leave their summer booths, their private sukkot, and return to their regular residences. Therefore,

אנחנו יוצאים מן הבית  
בסוכה, ומצד מראה שיהיה  
פועל חן ושלום

By leaving our homes for the sukkah, at precisely the time that others go in the reverse direction, we demonstrate publicly that the reason for our entering the sukkah is exclusively to perform the will of the Holy One.

Our tradition thus discourages observance as an afterthought, as a mindless and half-hearted act. It demands that Judaism be practiced with intention and attention, not incidentally, not just "by the way." So we build a sukkah when there is no other reason for it. Convictions deserve concentration, not casualness.

The Halakhah in its entirety reveals this principle. There is some controversy as to whether a commandment performed without intention must be repeated or not. But all authorities agree that, to begin with, one must perform the mitzvah with kavvanah, with complete intention, and not just "by the way." Similarly, the sekhakh that covers the sukkah must be placed thereon specifically for the purpose of the mitzvah, and not be there by happenstance, just casually:  , it must be placed consciously and not be there from before without special intention. Mitzvot should not be performed "by the way."

Indeed, the attitude of "by the way" raised to the level of an ideology, becomes the essence of secularism. Secularism is not the denial of God, it is not agnosticism or atheism, but rather the privatization of religion, the reduction of religion to one's private business -- really its trivialization. The secularist

holds that religion is just another item on the stacked shelves of society's supermarkets. For secularism, religion is no longer the central fact or value of life. It is put into parentheses in the unspoken sentences that define men's ultimate ideals. Religion is taken only "by the way."

But this goes against the grain of all of Judaism. In fact, the Bible has no word for religion -- the word חב, which in modern Hebrew is used for religion, really means "law" or "regulation." By naming our orientation to God, we automatically reduce it, we push it off to "by the way," we put it into brackets. Judaism, which does not permit us to pronounce God's ineffable Name because this would reduce the Source of reality to just one element in it, similarly has no word for religion. Unlike secularism, Judaism insists that we cannot and dare not treat God casually.

The climax of Israel's sins which will bring on the tokha-  
chah, that horrible list of dooms, is expressed in the words ... חב

חב (Lev. 26:23,24) --

"if you will go with me in the way of keri, I shall go with you in the way of keri." What does keri mean? The standard translation renders it: "contrary." The new JPS translation carries "hostile." But both these translations are inferior to the interpretation of the Rabbis as quoted by Rashi: חב. The word keri means casually, incidentally, by the way. God says to Israel: If you will treat Me as just somebody else, with casualness and inat-

tention and half-heartedness and mindlessness, that is precisely the way I will treat you: without concern, without worry, certainly without love.

This is something that we must remember, most particularly in our synagogues. Our service must never be casual or by the way. I refer specifically to us who are known as American Modern Orthodox. We have had a long struggle for several decades in attempting to give dignity and decorum and order to our services. Essentially it was, in cultural terms, an attempt to Westernize our form of religious expression. That is all to the good, and it has won us many people who otherwise might have abandoned us. We have added, in greater or lesser measure, depending on the individual synagogues, an element of respect, of beauty, of esthetics. But now we must begin to worry about the other side of the coin. We must beware of the danger of sacrificing life for the sake of art, heart for the sake of beauty, sincerity for the sake of orderliness. It is good to "esthetize" the service -- but never to anesthetize it. We are in trouble if we reduce prayer to a spectator sport, instead of requiring the full participation and the heart and kavvanah of each worshipper. Then we reduce Jews to religious voyeurs, and we have lost the essence of prayer which is the feeling of every individual Jew that he is אדם לפני ה' אלהים, that he stands -- fully, totally, completely -- before the Presence. Perhaps this is the essential meaning of the halakhah that one must not make a לעצמך

-- קצת זמן

אכלתו

חייק לקני פארע

"I swear that I will

a reward for Abraham's offer of the sukkah to the strangers.

It is important to remember that Abraham was not half-hearted in his offer of hospitality. He did not simply look up from the newspaper he was reading, notice some strangers, and say to them: As long as you're here, rest for a while, I'll offer you a glass of soda or cup of coffee, and you can run on. Indeed not. He was an old man, quite sick after a serious operation, sitting at the tent door in order to soak in the healing rays of the sun. He went out of his way when he saw the strangers, pleaded with them to come in, almost pulled them in against their will, and proceeded to prepare a banquet while they were resting in the sukkah. And that is why sukkah was given in Tishrei: We too must make special efforts, and not do the will of God, not invite the *13'elc*, the entire spirit of Jewish history and Jewish faith, into the sukkah in a casual manner.

This is, in effect, an essential element of Hasidism. We know that Hasidism offered a re-emphasis of Jewish theology, a new dimension in Jewish culture, that it shook up and transformed Jewish society. What we do not often realize is that Hasidism also represented a psychological revolution. One great teacher of Hasidism expressed it in this manner: Whatever you do, do it with your whole heart, as if it is the only thing on your mind, as if there is no other task in the world left to you.

For this is indeed true: You cannot raise decent children in a half-hearted manner, training them just "by the way." You

cannot build a going business or succeed in your profession "by the way," or even succeed in winning friends and influencing people "by the way." Notice the person who charms you and wins your confidence: he looks at you when he is in conversation with you, he gives you his complete attention, his eyes do not dart to and fro, seeming preoccupied with something more important. He does not treat you just "by the way," as if you were a blob of protoplasm that happened to cross his field of vision when he is interested in something else.

So whether it is another human being or any task or especially Judaism: it must be intentional, not casual.


The dating of Sukkot thus contains a great teaching of universal significance.

Torah is not just another specimen of fine literature.

Judaism is not just another elixir in a medicine cabinet full of vitamins and tranquilizers.

God is not just another benign Being in the catalogue of VIP's.

Even your fellow man must not be treated casually, by the way.

All of this can be summarized in the interpretation -- the true peshat, I believe -- by the late, sainted Rav Kook <sup>of</sup> ~~in~~ three words that we read in Haazinu:  (Dt. 32:3), usually translated as: "give (or ascribe) greatness to God." What greatness can we give to God? Rav Kook says: this means, do not try to



conceive of God in petty concepts, in the trivial terms of everyday life, in the limited framework of normal conceptions. Do not react cheaply, absent-mindedly, half-heartedly to Him. For He is an infinite, unlimited Source of all existence. He deserves all your attention and all your concentration.

יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ , react with bigness and greatness to God and we will receive greatness from Him in return.