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"SEEING STARS"

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1. Our Sages made a most astonishing observation on the commandment to build a Succah when they declared that EIN ~~BEN~~ MELECH HA'MASHIACH BA ELA LE'LAMED LE'UMOS HA'OLAM SUCCAH (...ve'lulav...) (Midrash Shochar Tov, 21), that one of the chief functions of the Messiah will be to teach the non-Jewish world the Mitzvah of building a Succah!
2. Imagine - here we Jews have awaited the arrival of Mashiach for 2½ thousand years, longing for him, expecting him "BE'CHOL EIS SHE'YAVO", at any moment, holding him out as our only hope in the midst of the misery to which we were submitted by the anti-semites of all generations. When Rome tried to crush our independence and strangle our religion 2 thousand years ago in ancient Palestine - it was the Messiah whom we awaited to save us, and R. Akiva even thought that he had arrived in the person of Bar Kochba! In the midst of those blood-baths called pogroms, slaughtered, martyred, butchered by a cruel and hostile and sadistic populace, we never gave up hope, and our fertile imagination even pictured the Messiah as straining the chains in which he was locked in Heaven as he tried to come to the rescue of his persecuted brethren. And here our Rabbis tell us that all our hopes, all our waiting, all our longing - has been to teach the GOY to build a Succah!!!.
3. Could they not find a better mission for the Messiah? Living in a state of perpetual war, when men's blood flows like the rivers, when hatred is the rule and hostility a normal attitude, when Peace is only a catch-word of the propagandist, would it not be more appropriate to assign to the Messiah the mission outlined by ~~Micah~~ Isaiah? - to teach men to beat their swords into plough-shares and their spears into pruning foerks? When ignorance and cruelty and godlessness and dishonesty and ridicule at the Jewish conception of G-d abound, at a time of this sort would it nit be more proper and fitting to expect that the Messiah would accept the role assigned to him by ~~Micah~~? - of re-erecting the Temple atop Mt. Zion so that the peoples might stream to it and learn the word of G-d and announce: come, let us go in the light of the Lord? Jews were always great visionaries. They foresaw universal peace and universal knowledge and universal G-dliness. Here, certainly, is something worth having a Messiah teach a recalcitrant and unrepentant world. But no, our Rabbis would have this glorious, super-historical figure teach the peoples of the world how to wield a hammer, gather four walls and build a little Succah! Certainly, they must have something important in mind, something which reflects the universal importance of the particular object which is the theme of this festival.
4. What they meant - and it is extremely improtant - can be understood only when we learn what kind of symbol Succah really is. Our Talmud tells us, ijexplaining this Mitzvah, YETZEI ME'DIRAS KVA VE'YIKANEISS LE'DIRAS ARAI...it means leaving your permanent residence and, for this week, living in this temporary, make@shift hut. So that the Succah is the symbol of transcience, of impermanence. Or more accurately, it is the symbol of a special kind of imperanence - the kind that comes from transition. The first Succoth were the ones used by our ancestors in the great Sinai Desert - theuwere the huts and tents they found shelter in as they lived through the transition from slavery to freedom, from Egypt to Israel, from a heterogeneous society of broken and immature Semites to the society of staunch, self-respecting Jewish freemen. That Succah has always remained the symbol of transition, of CHANGE.
5. And change, transition is no simple thing. Ask any psychologist what is the most critical period of a person's life and he will tell you that it is adolescence - the time of extreme physical, mental and emotional change, the transition from boyhood to manhood. And what a dangerous, critical time this is!. Any parent of an adolescent will agree - for in a time of transition and severe change, both great good and great evil are possible.

Marriage counsellors, similarly, will point to the first three or four years of married life as the time most bound to be rocky and unstable, for it too is a time of change, of transition from single life to a smooth-functioning married life. These are the Succoth of life, the times of shaky, unstable and sometimes even violent impermanence, change, flux and transition.

6. And what our Rabbis expected Messiah to do was no less than to teach the world how to survive and emerge safe from times of transition and change. For it is just that which the Jew has been able to do - to survive the Succoth, to emerge safe from the change and transition. *the period of transition from Joshua to Saul, from accepted spiritual-political leader to official king, was exceedingly unstable one (KOL ECHAD HA'YASHAR BE'EINAV YAASEH), one of near-anarchy. Yet we survived it. **from self-government and homeland life in Palestine to exile and semi-autonomy in Babylon - survived it and even grew stronger. ***Inquisition - a time of change for Spain from one state religion and culture to another was terribly violent, and many Jews perished either physically or religiously - but we, as a people, survived. ****change in 17th century Poland and Ukraina from one type economy and religion to another was one of highly unstable and hysterical change. As usual, Jew was scape-goat - but we survived. *****The transition from Machine Age to Atomic Age - World War II, saw 1/3 our people pay price...but as a people, we survived and won our Land.
7. The UMOS HA'OLAM have not been nearly as successful. In these changes, it is they, not we, who spilt the blood and aroused bigotry and opened up all the hidden wells of hatred in the human heart. They produced the Torquemadas and Crusaders and Chmelnietzkys and Hitlers. In their transitions, as in the French Revolution which signified the change from a feudal to a more industrialized society, they failed and failed miserably. And if you examine the matter more closely, you find two facts:
 - a) that all periods of great world-activity - - such as great wars and great history-making events of allsorts - -were times of change of one sort or another; and
 - b) very few periods in history are stable - most of the time we are in transition periods, and the faster our progress, the more rapid and frequent these changes and transition-periods. And, hence, the more dangerous and hysterical the times we live in.
8. So that when our Rabbis assigned to the Messiah the task of teaching the world the secret of the Succah, they knew very well what they were saying. They were appointing the Messiah to the most difficult task possible - the task of saving this world from the inhabitants of it; the task of saving man from himself; the task of seeing the entire world through its violent and frequent change-overs. There will come a time in history, our Rabbis meant to predict, when without the Messiah, without the lesson Jews have to offer, without the secret of the Succah, the world simply will not be able to survive its constant flux and change. A time, when, in the words of the late Albert Einstein, the world will have one war with atom bombs and the next with wooden clubs. EIN MELECH MASHIACH BA ELA LELAMED LEUOMOS HAOLAM SUCCAH means that Jews must teach the rest of the world how to survive their current predicament, the most severe crisis mankind has yet faced - the crisis of world-wide instability and universal unrest and impermanence.
9. Well, in order to teach, we cannot only preach. We must show how, and demonstrate how. Why was the Jew able to survive the transition - even as in present-day Israel he has learned to survive the Succah - and this literally, for Israel is just now emerging from a great transition period when many of its citizens had to live in MAABROT, in virtual Succoth. What is our secret, that we must share with the world?
10. That secret is one of the Halachot, one of the laws concerning the Sechach, or roof, covering of the Succah. The Law holds that it must not be too dense, too well-packed. And the sign of properly-laid Sechach is: that we must be able to discern the stars thru the Sechach; thru the cracks in the branches which cover the Succah we must be able to spy the stars shining in the heavens above. We must be able to see the stars.

11. What does that mean? It means that in the midst of all the change and flux, in the very Succah, symbol of impermanence and temporariness, we must always be able to keep our eyes on that which is fixed, stable, unchanging, permanent and immovable. If we change with the world, and fail to keep ourselves anchored in the permanent and unchanging - in other words in G-d, in Torah, in the eternity and permanence which is Judaism - then we are lost in the constantly moving waves of time. Like the mariner who sails his ship through the high seas and has no ~~real~~ way of knowing where he is and how he is being tossed about by the shifting tides and moving waves, looks up at the skies and finds himself - and safety - by constantly referring to the stars which are fixed and permanent in their course, so we in our way through the changing times and shifting winds and ~~the~~ moving tides, must keep our hearts and minds glued to the star in the ~~constell~~ skies of our lives - and that star is Torah, that unchanging and permanent guide for every Jew, that unfailing guide without which we merely drift aimlessly through life, and lose ourselves in it. When one lives in a Succah, he can only survive if he has a star to guide him. When the painter Van Gogh was asked about his famous expressionistic painting, "The Starry Night"...he said, "I felt a need of - shall I say the word - Religion, and so I went to paint the stars." The Messiah will point to that kind of star when he will come to teach the world how to survive the Succoth of life.
12. The Jew today must teach the world that secret. For the vision that Isaiah saw - the vision of Universal Peace - depends on how well we can see the stars thru the Succah. If in our rapidly moving times our world leaders will be able to do nothing more than consider the day-by-day problems as they arise, and improvise their policies by referring to their own selfish and personal wants, then we shall again be unable to survive the crisis. If there is an "angle" and ulterior motive and absolutely no higher principle, no star in the international firmament, then the world is again headed for the catastrophe of transitions improperly faced. If however, we can always keep our minds on a star - on G-dly decency, on international integrity, on respect for the dignity of human life - then survival is possible. Otherwise we have merely locked ourselves in a "pussele Succah" and we have no way of knowing what lies ahead, except to know that it ~~is~~ cannot be too good.
13. But before the Jew sends his Messiah to teach that to the non-Jew, he must learn that fact himself - otherwise he might not ever see the Messiah come. He must learn that the changes wrought in his social and his economic life must not cloud his vision of the star in the Jewish sky; that his religious affiliation must not shift with every wind in his status. Sociologically, most American Jews now are in a state of transition - from lower middle-class to upper middle-class. It is a real fact, and it involves many side-changes in his whole way of living. If, in the course of this transition, he loses sight of the star that has shone for Jews for the last 3,000 years, the Torah, if he loses his grip on that unchanging and permanent part of life, then his transition had doomed him to the obscurity that comes from gradual assimilation: a gradual shift to less tradition and more so-called religious liberalism, to the point where there is little difference between his "Judaism" and the liberal Protestant's "Christianity", and ultimately to the point where he becomes an unbaptized Christian...and even more. I am not being a prophet of doom. I am merely predicting a pattern that has already been observed. Live in Succah where you can't or won't see the stars, and that is just what is bound to happen. Anchor yourself in Torah, don't allow the corrosion of change to affect that part of life, keep that as your unchanging reference, and you will find your way out of the troubles of transition and the various problems attendant upon every major change in life.
14. If we Jews will be able to apply that lesson of the Succah to our own lives, we will be in a position to teach it to the world. Otherwise, if LO ICH'SHAR DARA, if our generation is unprepared for it, we are withholding the Messiah, and there is no reason for the world to learn the secret of the Succah. Let us resolve then, that though our lives be spent in a Succah of impermanence, we shall never fail to keep the star of Torah in our sights and, having thus fixed ourselves in the constellations of G-dliness, may the Heavens open to our prayers and may the Messiah come, so that all the world will learn how to survive, and how to implement the great visions of the prophets and seers of Israel.

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