

"MAN IS MORE THAN SEKHAKH"

I

Moral instruction is available to us Jews not only in the Humash, not only in Agadah and Midrash, but, sometimes, in Halakhah. If we look closely and carefully enough, we will discover the grand themes of human destiny even in legal technicalities, profound human wisdom even in halakhic discourses. All it requires is imagination, a sense of allegory, some homiletic license, and a readiness to find beautiful insights in unlikely places.

With this in mind, I commend your attention to the halakhic requirements of the sekhakh, the boughs and branches we use to cover the sukkah. The Halakhah lays down three conditions for the sekhakh to be kosher, or valid. The first of these is, that it must be שֶׁלֶחָדָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה : it must grow from the earth. Thus, it must be an item such as branches or wood, but not metal or plastic. Second, it must be עַל־פֶּתַח, cut off from the ground. Hence, one may not build a sukkah underneath the overhanging branches of a tree, attempting to use those branches and leaves as sekhakh, for they are connected to the tree which is connected to the earth. Third, the sekhakh must be אֲבִיכָה שֶׁלֶחָדָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה : it must be such that it cannot contract ritual defilement. According to the Halakhah, only such objects can become טָמֵא (impure) that are artifacts, that have specific functions, such as vessels or pots or pans or ladders. For that reason one may not use for sukkah such items as ladders, grass mats, or wooden doors or frames, even though they are made of material that grows from the earth and is severed from the earth because, as functional objects, they can contract impurity.

II

Now, the sukkah symbolizes transience, impermanence, the weak and the feeble. It is the sparse and provisional roof of the wanderer's hut in the great desert. The three laws of sekhakh, therefore, are associated with mortality and finitude, with that which cannot survive.

But man is more than sekhakh! Man seeks permanence and endurance. All of life is, in a sense, the effort to overcome death. So much of life is a disguised attempt to achieve immortality, whether in healthy ways or in sick ways, whether in the form of great contributions to scholarship and philanthropy, or simple social climbing and publicity seeking. We want to continue, to survive, to conquer the temporary and the ephemeral. Hence, to accomplish this, we must strive for the very opposite of the three laws of sekhakh. If, indeed, man is more than sekhakh, he must go beyond אֲבִיכָה שֶׁלֶחָדָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה, עַל־פֶּתַח, שֶׁלֶחָדָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה.

III

Unlike sekhakh, man must transcend *phile*, earth, the symbol of purely material existence. Now, I am not arguing for the medieval notion that humans are caught in the vise of an enormous conflict between Matter and Spirit, and that they must choose Spirit and reject Matter. (That theme really goes back beyond the Middle Ages to ancient days, and the ancient movement known as Gnosticism.) It is not an idea I would recommend to moderns or to anyone. Judaism by no means considers this material world as all bad. But neither should we submit to the equally mistaken and even more disastrous idea that has seized us in modern days, that there is nothing more to life and existence than this material world. This is a stifling and stultifying idea. It is based upon an immature skepticism that distorts the meaning of science when it insists in its name that only that is real which can be proved experimentally. We have been brainwashed with the theory that man is nothing more than an aggregate of molecules. For our contemporary materialism has indoctrinated us with a fallacious set of equations: that man equals animal, and animal equals machine, and machine equals chemicals, the kind that are found in the earth. Man, we are told to conclude, is exclusively a *phile* *phile*, nothing more than a product of the earth, with no additional dimensions to him.

However, if we are going to submit to this kind of scientific reductionism, we must go the whole way and ask: and what are chemicals made from?, and so on. And the answer would be: chemicals are atoms, and atoms are a form of congealed energy, and energy is, after all, simply an abstraction, a set of mathematical formulae. So, in a way, we have this terrifying pseudo-scientific conclusion: man is just a set of abstractions. Or, if you will: man is nothing! Not even sekhakh!

A brief sermon is not a place to subject materialistic concepts to critical analysis. But it is important to note that the philosophy of man as *phile* *phile* is on the wane today. In Russia, the authorities are alarmed at the reemergence of signs of religious interest after six decades of state materialism and atheism. In the United States, where materialism is always officially disavowed, but where it is effectively the underpinning of "the American way of life," the younger generation is revolting against the endless money-mania and possessions-obsessions of their elders and their cult of affluence. In Israel, the children of Kibbutzniks who exchange their Judaism for an idealistic Marxian materialism, are now rejecting materialism and searching for something

deeper and higher; they are going beyond *הכל* and looking for that which points to *אלהים*, to heaven. And social thinkers and philosophers of the first rank in the Western world, have developed a new interest in an respect for transcendence, for that which lies beyond immediate sense experience, beyond this world alone.

IV

The second requirement of sekhakh is that it be ~~detached~~ *עליון*, severed from the ground, cut off from its origin. By the same token, if man is more than sekhakh, then his redeeming quality must be that he remain *גשמי*, rooted and fixed in a framework of value and meaning, in a ground of Weltanschauung. For man to be human, he must recognize himself as a link in an ongoing chain, he must see himself as part of the continuum of human history. He must remember the legend on certain coupons and tickets: "No good if detached!"

Change there must be -- but change in something, relative to something, out of something. One of the failures of the counter-culture, the "now generation," is its rootlessness. It is not based on and rooted in and attached to a past or a tradition. The counter-culture considers this a virtue, it holds itself free and liberated and emancipated because of its lack of connection to the past. But in truth it is as free as a piece of straw floating in the air; or, as David said of the *לוי* (evil man) in his first Psalm, *לוי* *ידיד* *אלהים* *לוי* *ידיד* *אלהים*, "like chaff driven by the wind." Its rejection of the whole of the human past and inherited culture leaves it without any cultural equilibrium, without any psychological or spiritual rootage, and therefore incapable of making a creative contribution to human development. It is merely adrift. And instability is a symptom, not an ideal.

I remember a story (that is probably apocryphal, but nonetheless contains a great deal of truth) that was told shortly after the first session of the United Nations. According to this story, the delegation from Yemen was housed in a hotel, and after they left at the end of the session, the manager of the hotel discovered that all the faucets were missing. Upon investigation he discovered that these men of the desert were fascinated by these contraptions called faucets which, when turned on, magically allow water to emerge in full force. They therefore decided to take the faucets home with them to the desert, so that they can turn them on and thereby allow water to flow freely in the very desert.

What I am trying to say is that man, to be human, must be *גשמי* to a reservoir of culture and tradition and history, lest his currents of life run dry.

This is, after all, the sum and substance of what we mean by Jewish education. Jewish education contains such elements as learning Hebrew or learning Humash or learning the Talmud, and these are very important, but they are not the most significant object of Jewish education. Our central purpose is to give growing young Jews and Jewesses the feeling of a rootage in a great Jewish past, an awareness of being אבות -- connected to and growing out of -- the greatness of Jewish history, so that even if they stray from the path they will know what it is they are leaving, and they will recognize that to which they ought to return.

V

Finally, the third qualification for sekhakh is that it be אבות (sanctity), not capable of contracting impurity. Hence, by the criterion we have established, a man should be אבות (sanctity), capable of contracting impurity. I take this to mean that man must be ready to risk and dare in order to achieve and accomplish.

The Kabbalists have taught us that only that can achieve אבות (sanctity) which can contract אבות (impurity). So, man himself is the main source of sanctification in the world; but when he loses his soul and returns it to his Creator, his body is a corpse which is considered halakhically אבות (impurity), the most potent source of -- defilement.

There is a powerful and dangerous idea on the loose here: that only by risking אבות can you achieve אבות; that only by daring to lose can you win; that only by taking chances with failure can you succeed. The gambler's instinct can, of course, be taken to an extreme and turn into a disease. But without some element of hazard and risk, we are paralyzed and inert and can never make any progress.

The State of Israel would not be here today if those men meeting in Tel Aviv in 1948 at the session of the אבות did not hazard monumental failure in declaring independence -- as a fledgeling group without any experience in statecraft and any of the appurtenances of statehood. It was only because they were אבות, willing to embrace the possibilities of catastrophic failure, that Israel was created and became a אבות, a public and historic sanctification of God's Name.

A leader -- of any kind of group -- must venture beyond the limits of caution and occasionally dare to speak out and declare his vision of the truth, even if he runs the risk of losing some of his followers. The alternative is to be a

consensus leader, who merely does what the people want; but such a person is not a leader, merely an administrator. All progress, all change, involves the possibility of failure. But without it we are as good as dead. To be truly human, we must act responsibly -- with equal emphasis on both: act, and responsibly. Young people are usually more active, frequently without a sense of responsibility. Middle aged and older people are most often responsible, but usually fail to act when they should. The wise person is both -- active and responsible. And if man is more than sekhakh, he must be אדם אחר, be ready to embrace defeat in order to try for victory, for triumph, for conquest.

So, there are times when we should strike out boldly. Think about it: the lesson of sukkot that man must be more than sekhakh, does not say that you should do things merely for the sake of novelty or to chase away boredom. But there are times when we want to do something which we think is right and proper, and we have assessed the possibilities of success and the possibilities of failure, the desirability of the former and the consequences of the latter, and logically we know we ought to take a chance. But we are frightened, we are apprehensive, we are too comfortable, we prefer our inertia. At such a time, Sukkot calls out to us and says: risk אדם אחר, go ahead and innovate, experiment, make the move, go on aliyah, emigrate, change your job, speak out, change your mind, do that which is new -- and do not be afraid of failure, of risk, of danger, of criticism or derision! Take a chance!

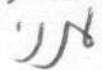
The great achievement of man is to be אדם אחר (pure) while he is אדם אחר (capable of becoming impure).

VI

These, then, are the three qualities that are requisite for man in order for him to be more than sekhakh, but to endure meaningfully. First, he must acknowledge more than material existence, more than אדם אחר, but be open to the transcendental and the spiritual. Second, he must be rooted in a great past and see himself as a link in the chain of history and culture and tradition. Third, he must be willing to be אדם אחר, that is, to venture and hazard and risk and dare.

That is how man can become more than sekhakh, more than the weak and feeble and temporary sekhakh. This is so according to the Rabbi of the Talmud who considered our Sukkah to be the physical counterpart of the huts that were used by our ancestors in the desert. But man becomes more like the sukkah according to the opinion of another rabbi of the Talmud, who maintains that our sukkot are symbols not of the physical huts used in the desert, but of the אדם אחר, the divine cloud of glory

which protectively covered our ancestors during their entire peregrinations in the great desert.

In this sense, man becomes more like the sukkah and its sekhakh: by raising his head above the ground of materialism, by locating himself in a great past, by striving for greatness while willing to risk failure, he becomes worthy of being enveloped and covered by אֲבָלִים , the clouds of glory.