



SUKKOT 5776

An easy MITZVAH

Hashem uniquely
tailors His command-
ments for us to tap into

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



THE TALMUD TEACHES! THAT HASHEM CALLS THE mitzvah of sukkah: “An easy mitzvah.” And, if we think about it for just a moment, we’ll see why. After all, it’s not meant to be an expensive mitzvah: the walls of the sukkah² can be made out of literally anything. Visit Brooklyn, New York, sometime and you’ll see walls made from two-litre Coke bottles, cold drink crates, Lego, you name it. And the walls can even be pre-existing. In other words, the walls of the sukkah don’t have to be built specially for the sukkah. The schach, the ‘roof’ of the sukkah, is actually meant to be taken from the leftover husks that would be found on the threshing room floor after the harvest, which conveniently occurs at that time of year.

Even more importantly, we don’t have

to do very much to fulfil the mitzvah of sukkah!

The Shulchan Aruch, the famous *Code of Jewish Law*, authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo, asks³: “How does one fulfil the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah?” And he answers: “A person eats and drinks; sleeps and rests; and lives in [the sukkah] all seven days, both day and night just like he lives in his home during the rest of the year.” In other words, Hashem wants us to do what we normally do each day – we can even do it in the very same way – we just need to do it in a different place!

And the amazing thing is that the mitzvah is, in large part, one that’s entirely dependent on our own choice to fulfil it. Although sukkos lasts for seven days, we’re actually only obligated to have one

meal in the sukkah⁴ – on the first night, which is why we always hope that it won’t rain that night and, in the event that it does rain, it’s why we have to wait until a break in the rain to at least have a portion of our meal in the sukkah. Barring the consumption of certain types and quantities of foods, however, we can actually avoid being in the sukkah the rest of the days of sukkos!

C’MON GET HAPPY

I think the mitzvah of sukkah serves as a perfect example of just how much Hashem loves us and how He expresses that love by tailoring His mitzvos so they make the most of things we would be doing anyway; for example, eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. And He even times



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these mitzvos so that we're able to easily channel our energies and even our emotions into them.

Believe it or not, there's actually a mitzvah⁵ from the Torah just to be happy on each of the festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot! Simply amazing, the Creator of the Universe cares about our feelings; He actually commands us to be happy and to enjoy His festivals. So how do we fulfil such a mitzvah? Our Sages teach⁶ that included in the mitzvah of rejoicing on the festivals is: eating meat and drinking wine, wearing new clothes, and having fruits and sweets. In other words, a man fulfils this mitzvah by making the members of his household happy and he does this by giving to each person what suits him. The Talmud says that for men, this is meat and wine, and for women, this is beautiful clothes, and for children, this is fruits and sweets. And the Talmud⁷ actually notes that the women in Bavel (Babylonia) preferred one style of garment, and the women in Eretz Yisroel (the land of Israel) preferred another. In other words, the women had different tastes, and this had to be taken into account in order to ensure each received what would actually make her happy, meaning the happiness in question is subjectively measured, not one-size-fits-all. Dressing up for yom tov is something that makes a person happy! Our Sages teach that we should have what makes us happy, so if a person prefers fish to meat, then he should have fish on yom tov rather than meat. And this mitzvah actually extends beyond our own households and includes making orphans, wid-

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ows, poor people, and converts happy as well, which is why almost every yom tov sees a push for an increase in tzedakah to help make this possible.

We can't understand why Hashem commands what he does, but we can perhaps get a ta'am – a taste, a flavour. In the same way that when an expert tastes a gourmet dish, he can take note of some of the flavours – is that ginger? Orange? Cinnamon? – but he can't possibly perceive everything that went into the dish or its measure, or even the reason for it, so too we can get a sense, some inkling of what Hashem may have had in mind, even though we can't fathom everything He had in mind behind any particular mitzvah.

The Sefer HaChinuch explains⁸ regarding this mitzvah to rejoice on the festivals that our nature requires us to rejoice at times, just as we need food, rest, and sleep, so too a person needs to rejoice, to celebrate. L'havdil, this is largely why the non-Jewish world created things like the coliseum, a place where people could go and safely channel their pent-up energies in a way that wouldn't be harmful – well, provided you weren't the guy being served up to the lions.

G-d wished to give us an opportunity to rejoice in a way by which we could earn

merit, so He commanded us to rejoice for His sake and He set aside certain times of the year for festivals, in order for us to remember during those time periods the miracles and goodness that He did for us. And He commanded us to provide our physical selves with things that our physical nature needs to rejoice. In other words, we connect the satisfying of our need for rejoicing with remembering Hashem. If a person fails to bring joy to himself and his household and the poor on each of the annual festivals, then he actually transgresses this commandment. Stunning!

IT'S EASY – ALBEIT CHALLENGING – TO BE A JEW

Our view of G-d and His Torah has unfortunately been largely influenced by the non-Jewish religions and cultures that surround us. As we can see, the Torah actually takes into account our nature. One of the claims of Christianity is that G-d erred, chas v'shalom (G-d forbid), by issuing so many commandments, by creating a Torah that was, in fact, impossible to keep in its entirety. The irony is that it actually is impossible to keep all of the Torah's commandments, but not for the reason given by its critics! We have 613 commandments, but very few apply to any in-





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dividual person; some apply only to women, some apply only to men, some apply only to Kohanim, some apply only to our leaders (judges, kings, etc), some apply only at certain times or only in certain places. In other words, there is no one person who is obligated in all of the Torah's commandments. Moreover, G-d realised when he charged us with these commandments that we would make mistakes, both unintentionally and even intentionally. And he included among these 613 commandments the commandment to confess to Him when we do something wrong, as well as the great gift of Yom Kippur, an annual day specifically set aside for atoning for where we've fallen short each and every year.

On top of the bad rap that G-d and His Torah get from non-Jews, we have also suffered from the horrendous public relations job done by prior generations of Jews; those who were fond of saying things like, "It's tough to be a Jew." Granted, there have been times when it was more difficult for some to earn a living, but, make no mistake, to be a Jew has always been a blessing – a blessing that, like any blessing, comes with great responsibilities and challenges.

The Jewish view of man's physicality and the physical world in which we live also stands entirely at odds with almost every other major religion. If you think about it, most religions focus on transcendence from the physical world – either by focusing, for example, on such things as meditation to help one tran-

scend all things physical, or by focusing almost entirely on the value of the next world – Christianity's City of God. Most sects of Christianity consider the physical world and man's physical body, as well as his actions, to be completely corrupt and without any possibility of redemption, with only the spirit capable of any sanctification and salvation.

From a Torah perspective, man is obligated to elevate, to improve, and to strive to perfect his physical nature and his world. We believe that physical things – places, objects, animals, and even human beings – can actually be sanctified, made holy. For the Jew, even the most physical of activities, for example, those focused on reproduction, and the most physical of places, for example, the slaughterhouse, can be elevated for a higher purpose. And there are many such examples:

- We take wheat (or one of the other four grains), grind it, add water to it, knead it, and bake it into matzah, and with it we can fulfil the Torah mitzvah of achilas matzah, eating matzah on the first night of Pesach.
- We take the horn of a ram (or other qualified kosher animal), hollow it out and with it we can fulfil the Torah mitzvah of tekias shofar, sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.
- We take a cow, slaughter it as we are commanded, and from the skin, we can make the parchment that will be used to write Torah scrolls, tefillin and mezuzos, as well as make the boxes for the tefillin themselves.



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The many mitzvos which follow closely on the heels of Yom Kippur are also an example of how Hashem tailors His mitzvos out of His love for us. Yom Kippur amounts to a fresh slate; Hashem has wiped our record clean and allows us to start a new reckoning. So what are we meant to do with this fresh start? As soon as we've finished the meal that serves to break our fast, the custom is to begin work on constructing the sukkah. From Yom Kippur through Sukkos, the entire Jewish people are meant to busy themselves doing mitzvos: building the sukkah and obtaining the arba' minim, the four species – the esrog, lulav, hadassim and aravos, otherwise known as the citron, date palm branch, myrtle branches and willow branches.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Of all of our holidays, Sukkos is very special. It's quite literally known as z'man simchaseinu, the time of our rejoicing! So what's so special about this time of year? Historically, it's connected to Hashem forgiving us and beginning our relationship anew. Each date in the Hebrew calendar is profoundly connected to that same date in the past, regardless of the year, like a channel running through time flowing with a singular spiritual energy. It's our job to tap into each of these time periods and make the most of it by doing the particular avodah (service) that is unique to it.

It was on 15 Tishrei, the day on which Sukkos begins, that the construction of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle) began in the Midbar



(wilderness). But, perhaps even more than that, it was the day on which the ananei hakavod, the clouds of glory which surrounded and protected the Jewish people and which we actually commemorate with our sukkahs, returned to the Jewish people after having been withdrawn following our sin with the golden calf, for which we were forgiven on the very first Yom Kippur.⁹ Thereafter, the clouds of glory remained with the Jewish people throughout the rest of their 40 years in the wilderness. And we see that the clouds of glory didn't just return immediately following that first Yom Kippur, but waited until we began the construction of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), that is, until we had embarked on new mitzvos, mitzvos which would enable Hashem to dwell among us.

Sukkos also falls out at the time of year when crops are gathered; in fact, one of the names of Sukkos is "Chag Ha'Asif", the harvest festival. When a person reaps the fruits of his labour, he experiences tremendous joy. And similar to the general mitzvah of rejoicing on the festivals, G-d here gives us an opportunity not only to rejoice, but to do so in a way by which we can earn merit.

Think about it for a moment: when did the Jewish people dwell in sukkahs for the very first time? When we left Mitzrayim (Egypt). And in what month did we go out from Egypt? Tishrei? Nope! Nissan. And Tishrei is positively as far from Nissan as you can get – check the calendar. In other words, G-d commanded that we make a festival at this time when we're experiencing happiness in our lives, so we could take this natural reaction and channel it into our service of Him, thereby earning merit for something that we would naturally be doing anyway. And this is part and parcel of how Hashem designed the mitzvos to work: to harness our existing desires and emotions and to enable us to choose to channel those desires and emotions towards His service.

CHANNELLING OUR NATURAL INCLINATIONS TO SERVE HASHEM

This concept is actually expressed in the well-known Mishnah¹⁰ that we often say at the end of a shiur in order that a congregant can say Kaddish: "Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya said: Hashem wanted to give merit to Israel, therefore he [made] abundant for them Torah and mitzvos, as it's said: 'Hashem desired for the sake of [Israel's] righteousness that the Torah be made great and glorious.'" What does it mean that Hashem wanted to reward us, so He made His Torah and mitzvos abundant, ie, larger as opposed to





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smaller? How is that a reward? “Gee, son, I’m so proud of your schoolwork that I’d like to reward you – now cut the grass, take out the rubbish, eat your broccoli, and get to bed early.” This is a reward?

Our Sages explain that Hashem made things into mitzvos that we would naturally be inclined to do or naturally inclined not to do. For example, people do not normally have a desire to eat the blood of animals. So Hashem took something that we would normally not be doing anyway and made it into a negative commandment in order that we could be rewarded for not doing it; all we have to do is change the intention behind why we don’t do it. Instead of refraining from eating the blood of animals because we’re repulsed by such a thing or have no desire for it, if we just have in mind that we are refraining from it because Hashem said not to do it, we will be rewarded. So too in other areas, such as what are known as Mishpatim (the laws dealing with relationships between men); people naturally want to establish civil laws to govern their associations, laws like “do not steal”, etc. If we have in mind the proper intent – that we’re following them because G-d said so and not just because someone, somewhere enacted these things as law, we can be rewarded for doing things we would have done anyway. This is one aspect of what it means to say that Hashem wanted to reward us so He made His Torah and His mitzvos abundant.

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And, it’s the same idea here: Hashem is providing us with an opportunity to serve him through joy by commanding us to be joyful precisely at a time of year that we are naturally inclined to be so.

A WEEK-LONG PARTY

It may be hard to imagine, but in the times of the Beis HaMikdash (the Temple), Sukkos amounted to being a seven-day, non-stop celebration, where no one had a proper night’s sleep the entire week! In fact, the Talmud teaches¹¹ that a person who never witnessed this rejoicing, known as the simchas beis hashoeva (the festival of the water drawing), has never seen joy in his life! Never. Ever. And yes – the logical jump is correct – we simply can’t know true joy in the absence of the Temple. Same reason why we break the glass at the chuppah; no matter how profound our joy in this world, it’s always missing something so long as we lack a Temple.

So, how did it work? Just before the start of Sukkos, they would erect a balcony in the Temple which was designated for women,

and they would designate an area for men just below it. At the end of the first day of the festival and thereafter on each and every day of chol hamoed (the intermediary days), they would begin to rejoice following the afternoon offering and they would rejoice the rest of the day and all of the night. The Talmud explains that no one had a proper night’s sleep throughout this time, as between the daily offerings, the daily prayers, the daily Torah study, the eating and drinking, and the rejoicing all night long, they only managed to doze on each other’s shoulders here and there!

And the entertainment was provided by none other than the Sages themselves,

with the rest of the nation watching them. There was music, singing, and incredibly elaborate dancing. The Talmud describes how certain of the Sages would juggle things such as eggs, torches, knives, and even glasses of wine to entertain everyone. It was a profound expression of joy at a time that Hashem commands us to be joyful.

May we all merit to fulfil the mitzvos of Hashem b’simcha (with joy) and, please G-d, live to see true simcha, to witness personally the festival of the water drawing in the Temple speedily in our days! **III**

¹Avoda Zora 3a

²See Shulchan Aruch O.C. 630:1

³See Shulchan Aruch O.C. 639

⁴See Shulchan Aruch O.C. 639:3

⁵See Devarim 16:14 “And you shall rejoice on your festival...”

⁶See eg Sefer HaChinuch 488 citing Pesachim 109a

⁷Pesachim 109a

⁸488

⁹See the Gra’s peirush to Shir HaShirim 1:4 (close to the end of that long comment)

¹⁰Makkos 23b

¹¹Succah 51a