

Shabbat Chol HaMo'ed Sukkot 5780

Where Blessing Begins

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Did any of you see the harvest moon last Sunday night? It really does light up the dark sky. It is easy to imagine farmers harvesting late into the evening as they close out the season of growing before Winter. I think I would enjoy sleeping out in the field in a little hut, tired, dirty, yet also innervated by the thrill of the harvest--all of that sustenance coming up from the earth in all of its shapes, colors, textures, and tastes.

The first time *Sukkot* appears in the Torah, it comes to us as an agricultural festival: "Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the Lord to last seen days" (Vayikra 23:39). Our celebration of nature's bounty becomes a religious celebration of thanksgiving to the Source of all Life.

When our holidays are all laid out for us in the Book of *Vayikra*, *Sukkot* is the one holiday when we are commanded to rejoice--"*u's'machtem*"--you shall rejoice. Indeed, this holiday is referred to as "*heh-chag*"--the festival, for it is considered the most joyous of all of our holidays. Anyone who makes a practice of celebrating it can validate that, especially, I admit, when it comes in warmer weather. Basically, we have a week-long Thanksgiving with funky 4,000-year-old rituals and lots of outdoor time.

*Sukkot*, like the other two pilgrimage festivals, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, has both agricultural and biblio-historical roots. The historical connection, or Judaization, if you will, of the harvest festival, also comes from Torah, 4 verses after the earlier verse: "You will dwell in booths (or huts), in order that future generations will know that I (God), had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt..." (Vayikra 23:43). But in the case of *Sukkot*, unlike with *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, the historical connection includes an agricultural component: once our biblical ancestors finally settle the land of Israel, they partake of their first, amazing harvest. Now they can really enjoy a sustainable, national ownership of their place and their life as a thriving people.

All of that is background to what I'd like to think about with you today.

Here we are, reviving our ancestors' joy, in Madison, Wisconsin, and our rabbis have determined that on this Shabbat, we should read a Torah narrative that is at once disconcerting and redemptive, one that is completely out of sequence with our regular Torah reading cycle. There, our ancestors finally are about to enter the Land of Israel. But today, we read about Moshe's anxiety and the making of the Second Tablets of the Covenant following the Sin of the Golden Calf. Admittedly, today's reading also includes the commandment to observe the *Shalosh R'galim*, the 3 festivals--*Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*, but the *Sukkot* reference is only 4 words. The bulk of our reading today is

not about this holiday, and there are other sections we could be reading that have more to say about *Sukkot*.

My sense is that today's reading intentionally takes us to a needed place of vulnerability on both communal and personal levels, because vulnerability is part and parcel of dwelling in a sukkah this week, just when it would make more sense to cozy up indoors.

I'd like to think with you about the notion of place, how we can use where we are to tap into who we are and where we really need to be, and then offer an idea that I hope will deepen our sense of what we are to be joyful about on Sukkot.

Moshe spends little time with his people in today's Torah reading. He spends more time up on the mountain with God. There is one place where he goes that I find particularly interesting, and that is the cleft in the rock where God puts him. Despite the Torah telling us that "The Lord would speak to Moshe face to face, as one man speaks to another" (Sh'mot 33:11), Moshe feels that he needs to know God better. He wants to know God's ways, and he wants to see God. Moshe tells God of this yearning, and God, obligingly, tells Moshe: "I will make all My goodness pass before you, but you cannot see my face...Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you will see..." It's not clear exactly what Moshe will see (Sh'mot 33:19-23), but we can discuss that another time.

I am taken by the idea of Moshe having an intimate encounter with God in the particular cleft of mountain rock where God has put him. It is the closest encounter they experience in the Torah, short of Moshe's death. I would like to think that their encounter shapes Moshe's leadership afterward. After their encounter in the cleft, God has Moshe carve two new tablets, on which God will inscribe a new version of what was on the previous pair that Godself had carved. He is now a co-creator of the tablets. I am not the first to be taken by the power of Moshe's encounter with God in that particular place. The prophet Elijah--*Eliyahu*--seems so inspired by it that when he is desperate for his life and cannot see his purpose, he flees to the same mountain where Moshe stood. *Eliyahu* seeks out a cleft of his own there, where he hopes for his own encounter with God. And God does meet him there, but it is a different kind of encounter from Moshe's. This encounter comes in the form of a still, small voice, murmuring to *Eliyahu*, "Why are you here?" God has not put him there, and it is not where he should be. But he takes what there is to learn from that place to discover his next calling. In that place, *Eliyahu* learns that he needs to return to the north, anoint a couple of kings, and anoint a new prophet as his successor.

Moshe is in the right place, and *Eliyahu* is in the wrong place, but in each case, being where they are becomes a catalyst for moving their narrative forward. **It seems that the important thing about being somewhere is what what the place brings to our**

**awareness about where we should be, when we make ourselves receptive to the message.**

Which brings me back to Sukkot, and the *sukkah* in particular. When we sit in the *sukkah*, we are more in touch with our fragility and vulnerability as well as the awe and blessing of being part of a world that has a natural order and in which God moves and guides. The Chasidic masters teach that the required 3 walls of the *sukkah* are like God's arm, embracing us and gathering us into God's home. The *sukkah* is a place where we can make ourselves receptive to the still, small voice of our lives. When we make ourselves vulnerable, outside of our familiar comforts and the more stable structures of our homes, we may be able to hear the inner point of our freedom, the place within us where God dwells, murmuring truths about how we are living our lives, what is shifting, where we might be moving, or where we are called to go.

**I want to suggest that there is a germinating that happens in the *sukkah*, at the season of ingathering, which mimics what the winter crops just being seeded are also beginning to do. I want to offer the possibility that the beginning of awareness of our next becoming is a sort of germinating that we are doing at this time. My message today is that the beginning of awareness, that spiritual germinating that happens within us, is the source of a deep sort of joy at this season, one that is less obvious than the pumpkins on the table, but profoundly important. And now I will share some textual support for that idea.**

When we read the blessings and curses back in *Parshat Ki Tavo*, we encountered the following: "God will cause blessing to accompany you in your storehouses and in all of your undertakings. And God will bless you in the land that HaShem your God gives to you" (Devarim 28:8, translation by Dena Weiss, based on JPS and R' Jason Rubenstein, and by me). That sounds like a simple enough blessing on the surface, basically saying that there will be financial success through farming and whatever industries in which the nation invests. I learned an interesting commentary on that blessing from Dena Weiss of the Hadar Institute: The word "storehouse," "*asam*," does not appear anywhere else in the Torah. It is an unusual word that is noticed by the sage Rabbi Yitzchak, who teaches a tricky midrash on it. Dena Weiss ends up understanding Rabbi Yitzchak differently from how I understand him but I want to acknowledge that she pointed me to him and to the source that will follow.

Here is what I want to teach: Rabbi Yitzchak connects the word "*asam*," storehouse, a similar word, "*samuy*," which means "hidden." Then he says that the blessing of a full storehouse is found in what is hidden.

Try to follow me on this. When a person would enter the threshing floor to measure grain, they would ask God to send blessing on their undertaking, and when they would begin to measure, they would say, "Blessed is the One who sends blessing to this pile

(the pile of grain).” The blessing had to be recited *before* measuring. If a person recited the blessing after the grain was measured, it was too late, and the blessing would not count, because--and this is the key--”blessing is not found in what is weighed, measured, or counted. Rather, blessing is only found in what is hidden from the eye” (BT Ta’anit 8b). In other words, blessing lies in potential. Once we begin counting what we have, we also begin to scrutinize, to qualify, to critique, and to worry. **A blessed crop is a crop that is good in and of itself, when it is pure potential, before it becomes a commodity.**

Now, I will build on that idea. The *Akeidat Yitzchak*, a chasidic commentator, offers a way for us to link the idea of blessing found in the potential of our property to the *human* experience of blessing. Blessing, for him, is not about property, but about spiritual growth. He teaches that true blessing is when a person achieves spiritual success, which is something we cannot see. Spiritual success, by its nature, is hidden from the eye (R’ Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494, Spain, in *Akeidat Yitzchak* 67:5). I think what he is saying is that our blessings are not to be found in new competencies or spiritual achievements, like learning to read Torah, leading a service, or keeping kosher. Those are the outcomes of blessings. The real blessing is the moment when we set that potential in motion.

I have a feeling that we often miss the moments that could be opportunities for personal insight. **We are not always attuned to internal shifts that could spark important, forward-moving decisions in our lives. When we are able to capture those generative moments, it is a great blessing. Sukkot can be a time for us to experience and celebrate the blessing of what is just beginning to burst from its seed *internally*, when we put ourselves in a place of spiritual openness and vulnerability.**

For Jews, that place is the sukkah. The lulav and etrog, and an awareness of newly seeded winter crops, reinforce the notion of a personal experience of germinating our own transformation as human beings. And that, I want to suggest, may become a fundamental aspect of our joyful celebration.

I do not mean to say that we can only find the blessing of inspiration and the seeds of new growth on *Sukkot*. But *Sukkot* is a ripe time, and the sukkah is a quintessentially fertile place to seek them, if we go there.

Whether in our out of *sukkot*, I pray that this season inspires all of us to attune ourselves to the still, small voice that speaks to our potential and moves us toward our finest and most flourishing lives.