

Shabbat Yom Tov Sukkot 5784
Abundant Rejoicing
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Like each of the shalosh regalim (pilgrimage festivals), Sukkot takes a pre-existing agricultural festival and adds a particularly Jewish valence connected to our national story. On one hand we are celebrating Fall harvest, which is the largest celebration of the entire Jewish year, and the reason that Sukkot is referred to simply as “He-chag,” The Holiday. This is the time of our greatest joy.

But not only because of the harvest. What else do we celebrate? Some think it’s that God provided for us during our desert wanderings, when we lived in temporary dwellings. Others agree that it has to do with God sheltering us in the wilderness, but in a more ethereal kind of way. In this view, On Sukkot we celebrate the cloud cover which protected us from the scorching sun and also served as our navigation system, settling over us when it was time to make camp and moving above us when it was time to march on. That cloud cover is called “*Ananei Kavod*,” meaning “clouds of glory.”

In the Talmud we are told that we experienced three great miracles in the desert: Food that fell from the sky in the form of manna, which fed us; water, and the *Ananei Kavod*—the Clouds of Glory. I learned a teaching just this week from Rabbi David Wolpe. Rabbi Wolpe brought a teaching from a scholar of the last century known as the Steipler Gaon (Rabbi Yaakov Kanievsky, 1899-1985). The Steipler Gaon asks, with regard to the three miracles in the desert, “Of all three desert miracles—food, water, and [GPS] clouds—why, *davka*, do the *clouds* deserve a festival? Why, if food and water *never* are mentioned as causes for celebration when we remember God’s care for us on this holiday, why should we remember *Ananei Kavod* in particular? He answers: while the manna and water were necessary for our survival—how could God lead us through a desert without making sure we could survive?—the cloud covering was an act of love. Just as the gift of liberation we celebrate on Pesach, and the gift of Torah we celebrate on Shavuot, the *Ananei Kavod* were a gift of presence and a constant reminder of Divine love.

We don’t need love in order to live but our lives are empty without it. Love, like the joy we are meant to experience on Sukkot, goes beyond sustenance. Love is boundless, and so too is meant to be the joy of this holiday. It’s about much more than enjoying the harvest. It’s about rejoicing in our ability to connect with God and with others in love and with love, and to do so now, newly reinvigorated following Yom Kippur, having scraped

away the detritus that covered our hearts, muffling and distorting the free-flowing connection between Divine love, or if you wish, unbounded love, and our innermost hearts.

On Yom Kippur we asked God to create for us pure hearts and a new spirit:

לב טהור בָּרָא־לִי אֱ-לֹהִים וְרוּחַ נְכוֹן חֲדָשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי: (Psalms 51:12) --and today we live into the joy of that new spirit we feel with Yom Kippur just past. We feel it in our bodies on this holiday of abundance, these days when we sit as if getting a hug from the Sukkah, flimsy walls standing in for Godself. Sitting encircled by the Sukkah, enjoying the earth's bounty, our eyes lift up through the *schach* to the Heavens, and we are reminded of the *Ananei Kavod*, of God's love and God's guidance.

The *schach*-topped, flimsy walls that we build outside stand in for God's love and guidance in the wilderness of life—both in the biblical desert and right here and now, providing a setting of transcendent abundance for rejoicing over encapsulating our enjoyment of the earth's produce.

Imagining the walls of the Sukkah as a hug from God, and the *schach* above as *Ananei Kavod* is a delightfully quaint image, but what does it mean for us to internalize those symbols?

To experience Divine love, to feel that we are directly connected to the source of abundant goodness, is to share in that Divine love and make it manifest in our relationships with those who share our world. That is why share meals with others in the sukkah, why every shul community goes outside and crowds into the sukkah for kiddush and hamotzi, and why we invite friends as well as symbolic guests from the past to join us through *Ushpizin* ritual in which we call in their presence. We bask in the blessings of being able to feel wrapped in grace and in love and to be taken in by it such that we feel how we are part of it and it is part of us. In that way we become conduits for the love and grace that flows through us to spread out, from the core of our beings and touch the real lives of others in this world along with the souls of those who have come before us.

Maimonides teaches—and we're gonna need to overlook the gendering here: "...How does one share the joy of this day? Give the children nuts and candy and buy the women as much nice clothing and jewelry as the household can afford. And the men eat and drink wine (I *know!*) since there is no happiness without meat and wine. **And when we eat and drink we are obligated to feed strangers, orphans and widows as well as all other needy people. But if we lock our doors and eat and drink with our own family and do not feed the poor and others going through hard times, this is not the rejoicing which was commanded, but merely the enjoyment of satisfying our**

stomachs. About such people, it is said, ‘...all who eat it will be contaminated, for their bread is for their own appetites.’ Such parties are disgraceful to those who participate in them...” (Mishneh Torah, Yom Tov 6:18).

There is a story about the early Chasidic Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. It was the custom in his time for rabbis to host the most “important” members of their community for Sukkot—which meant the wealthiest, most intelligent, and most respected. But Rebbe Levi Yitzchak did the opposite. He picked the needy people, the marginalized people, the people no one spent time with and invited them to his sukkah.

The important people got upset and interrogated the Rebbe about it. He explained: “After 120 years, when I get to the true world, I know that there will be a magnificent sukkah there, made from the skin of Livyatan, the giant sea creature. That is the sukkah where *Avraham Avinu* makes the *brachot*, *Moshe Rabbeinu* teaches Torah, and Aharon and all the great *Levi'im* play musical instruments during *chol hamoe'ed Sukkot*, and *David haMelech* sings songs.”

Rebbe Levi went on: “I once had a dream that I was in that true world, the world of God and the festival of Sukkot came, and I wanted to be in that prominent sukkah, the Sukkah of Livyatan. There were a number of people guarding the gate. They asked for my name and I could see that they began to hesitate. And they said, ‘Look, Rebbe Yitzchak, you’re a very fine person, but how can you compare to *Avraham Avinu*, to *Moshe Rabbeinu*, *Aharon Kohen haGadol*, and *David HaMelech*? After all, this is a very special, exclusive Sukkah.’”

“In my dream,” Rebbe Levi said, “I answered them: ‘In my sukkah, I did not invite the prominent people; I invited the little people, the marginalized and forgotten people. If I did that in my sukkah, I think you can accept me and the likes of me into this Sukkah of Livyatan.’”

“And I was admitted,” he said.

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak understood the essence of what our joy is supposed to be about. Real festival joy means sharing in and sharing out Divine love, grace, and blessing.

It gives me great joy to know that the morning after our holy season comes to a close, a week from Monday, a delegation of Beth Israel Center members will be going to Tucson in a rotation of volunteers, spanning three weeks, helping welcome refugees and asylum seekers who have just crossed the border from Mexico. I cannot think of a better expression of what this holiday of supreme joy, following the High Holy Days, is meant

to inculcate in us. There is much anticipation as we prepare for this work. I look forward to sharing with you what we experience and learn there.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. This holiday, this week, is for our individual and communal rejoicing. May we rejoice in it, a true and expansive rejoicing.