

Sukkot 5781
Take a Lulav
Rabbi Betsy Forester

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur just past, we were at peak attunement to the “still, silent voice” whispering the truth of our lives. It would be understandable, now, to feel a little adrift after the highly structured Days of Awe. But Sukkot offers a different kind of opportunity to access what is pure and true about ourselves and our world. We leave the warmth of our homes to dwell in the dual realities of living in a world filled with wonder and living in a world in which we are vulnerable and exposed. The right spiritual synthesis of those polarities becomes an altar on which we offer gratitude on the festival is intended to be the most joyful holiday in the entire Jewish year.

Less than a week ago we prayed for the ability to change. On this day the angels come to cheer us on, reminding us that no building, no system, no government, no theory or belief can escape transformation. Life constantly changes, bringing new challenges, opportunities, and possibilities. Spending a lot of time outdoors this week heightens our awareness that we live in a world of change.

The Sfat Emet teaches that when we shake the lulav and etrog in all six directions, we engage our understanding that we stand at the center of ever-expanding possibility. The four species that make up the lulav and etrog help each of us to see ourselves as unified with every type of soul. Just as they are joined together for the ritual of blessing and shaking, we, too, are joined to one another and to God in every direction. This is how we might understand one of the names of Sukkot, “*chag ha’asif*,” the “Festival of the Ingathering” (5:236). On these days we reap not only the Fall harvest, but also the harvest of unity--the at-one-ment we achieved on Yom Kippur-- between ourselves and the Source of all Life and Spirit. And that unity is, itself, always moving.

This has practical implications. The lulav is a fertility symbol. When we grasp it and wave it we remind ourselves of our generative potential and our power to plant and nurture what we believe should grow. When we link that idea to our ancestors’ desert wandering, as the Torah does, we discover that our mission is to build structures in our lives that support, strengthen and nourish us, that help us adapt, evolve, and heal.

We have always been called to respond to the challenges of the day from a place of faith that we can renew our lives and take part in the ongoing renewal of Creation. The current moment commands us to act from the belief we have held for 4,000 years-- that truth and compassion, justice and love will exist in our world as long as they endure in us, and as long as we manifest them and demand that our social policies and

institutions support humanity's noblest intentions. Sukkot takes us out of our comfort zones and says, "You can thrive in this world with the good values that ground your life. And, you will have to work at it."

We are lucky to live in a democracy in America. Our Jewish sages grew out of the Pharisaic tradition which sought to democratize the learning of Torah so that all people--or at least all men--could study it and interpret. They set up a system by which anyone can be a player, a person who sets policy and shapes cultural norms. The rabbis would meet--and still do meet--to discuss and vote on policies and practices. The State of Israel's founders carried that value to form the only democracy in the Middle East. Jewish civilization and Jewish people favor and benefit from democracy.

I am concerned that our democracy, here in America, is in grave danger, and if it is, then the exercise of our Jewish values and principles hangs in the balance. I am gravely concerned that we have an incumbent running for re-election who repeatedly refuses to denounce white supremacists and instead tells them to "stand back and stand by." When he directs that message to the Proud Boys, an anti-semitic, white supremacist group, during a presidential debate, we as Jews must recognize the danger not only to our principles and moral values but to our very lives. I cannot trust a person if I cannot take their word seriously. That is how authoritarianism happens. I cannot trust a person to take care of us when his response to a direct request to denounce white supremacists is to tell an anti-semitic organization to "stand by." For what, exactly? I shudder to think.

Friends, take a lulav in your hands. May our actions boldly manifest our sacred responsibilities. That is how we honor our blessings.

[Here, the Rabbi acknowledged that normally she does not speak from so directly a partisan perspective but she felt it was important to speak out when our community is threatened. She then spoke briefly about how Jews respond to news that a person they feel is harmful had become ill. She wished *refuah sh'leimah* (full recovery) to all who suffer and prayed that adversity may give rise to compassion.]

Mo'adim l'simchah. May we find joy in this season, and may it give us strength.