

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov, everyone.

Thank you to Sarah and Rick Bernard who are sponsoring this *drasha* in memory of Sarah's sister, Lee Ann Levinson, Leah bas Yaakov, whose *yahrtzeit* is the 14th of Tishrei. May her *neshama* have an *aliya*. May the sponsors be rewarded for their support of the *shul* with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

There is a peculiar rhythm to this Yom Tov season that deserves close attention. We spend the most solemn days of the year--Rosh Hashanah, the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, and Yom Kippur--standing before the throne of the King, pleading for our lives, asking for Divine protection, confessing what we have broken, and praying for a positive verdict. We focus, among other things, on מי יסלח ומי יתיר...who will have calm, and who will have turmoil? And then, almost before the sound of the *shofar* has faded from Ne'ilah, we walk outside and build a hut.

We leave behind the calm house we spent the whole year making solid, its four walls, its locked doors and windows, and its climate control, and we move, deliberately, into a dwelling that could be blown over by a strong wind. We trade permanence for exposure, security for *schach*. Why would a people who has just spent 10 days pleading for comfort and security immediately abandon a secure and comfortable house?

I would like to suggest that Sukkos is the first practical lesson of the new year, the answer to a question the Yamim Noraim were designed to provoke, but never to resolve on their own. That question is simple, though we rarely let ourselves ask it directly: Whose world is this, and what, exactly, is my place in it?

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, taken together, begin to answer that question with a single, humbling realization: We are guests in God's world. On Rosh Hashanah, we stand as subjects before a Sovereign in a universe we did not create, asking for a year of life we cannot create for ourselves. The great unanswered question of the day: מי יחיה ומי ימות--*who shall live and who shall die*--is not really a threat. It is a diagnosis: health, family, livelihood, even our next breath, are not entitlements we control, but a lease extended to us one day, one hour, one minute at a time at the will of Hashem.

Yom Kippur pushes this insight further, into the moral realm. We discover that even our capacity to repair what we have broken, to be forgiven, to begin again, *teshuvah* itself, is not something we produce out of our own resources. It, too, is a gift. We do not manufacture our lives. We receive them.

If that is true, if the last 10 days have dismantled the illusion that we are self-made, then Sukkos arrives right on schedule and asks the only question left to ask: If I am a guest, if I am a recipient of everything in my life, what do I do with all that my Host has given me? It is worth noticing that the Torah does not let us answer that question from a comfortable armchair. It moves us physically, out of a house that feels like ours and into a hut that reminds us how little was really ever ours, so that the question is not merely heard, but lived and felt for a week.

But there is another lesson in the *sukka* as well. Rav Yitzchak of Volozhin gives us a precise definition of the main goal of life. In his introduction to his father's *Nefesh HaChaim*, he records what his father, **Rav Chaim Volozhiner**, told him directly:

והיה רגיל להוכיח אותי על שראה שאינני משתתף בצערא דאחרים. וכה היה דברו אלי תמיד שזה כל האדם לא לעצמו נברא,
רק להועיל לאחרים ככל אשר ימצא בכחו לעשות

He would regularly rebuke me when he saw that I did not involve myself with the troubles of others and he would constantly say to me that this is all of what man is, that he wasn't created for himself but just to help others in all ways that he finds himself able to do.

That is not a sentiment tacked onto the end of a well-lived life. According to Rav Chaim, it is the definition of life itself, and the Torah gives us its *sukkos* connection. In *Parshas Vayera*, three strangers appear at the entrance of Avraham's tent in the heat of the day. He is recovering from his own circumcision, at 99 years old,

in the hottest part of a desert afternoon, hardly the moment anyone would expect him to notice three travelers on the horizon. But Avraham does not wait to be approached. He runs toward them, and offers them the most modest of gifts: וְהִשְׁעֵנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ ... וְקָח נָא מֵעֵט מַיִם.

"Let a little water be brought... and recline beneath the tree." (Bereishis 18:4)

Water to wash up. Shade. A place to sit. Nothing more. And yet the Midrash treats this small act as though it were the foundation of a future act of divine benevolence and an entire *mitzvah*. In *Bereishis Rabbah* (Parshah 48, Siman 10), Chazal imagine the Holy One turning to Avraham directly and explaining the great consequences of his actions:

אַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ וְהִשְׁעֵנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ, חַיִּיד שְׁאֲנִי פּוֹרֵעַ לְבָנֶיךָ וְכוּ' (תהלים קה) פָּרַשׁ עָנָן לְמִסְדָּ — הָרִי בְּמִדְבָּר. בְּאַרְצָךְ מִנִּין — (ויקרא כג) בְּסֻכֹּת תִּשְׁבּוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים. לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא מִנִּין — שְׁנֵאָמַר (ישעיה ד) וְסֻכָּה תִּהְיֶה לְצֹל יוֹמָם מִחֶרֶב

"You said to them, 'Recline beneath the tree' — by your life, I will repay your children accordingly: 'He spread a cloud as a covering' (Tehillim 105) — that was in the wilderness. From where do we know it in the Land?

'You shall dwell in sukkos for seven days' (Vayikra 23). From where do we know it for the future? As it is said, 'And a sukkah shall be for shade from the heat by day' (Yeshayahu 4)."

How does God repay Avraham? The Midrash names the *Ananei HaKavod* themselves, the protective clouds in the *Midbar*, as one part of the repayment and then the *mitzvah* of *sukkos*, בסוכות תשבו שבעת ימים, "you shall sit in sukkos for 7 days," when they entered *Eretz Yisrael*, as the second part of repayment.

It was certainly a reward. But perhaps it was also a reminder. Avraham sheltered others, and his descendants would spend a generation living beneath Hashem's shelter. And once you know what it means to be sheltered, you are asked to pay it forward; to become someone who shelters others.

Avraham understood something that motivated him when three strangers appeared on the horizon: The world he was living in, the shade of his own tent, the food on his own table, were never his in the first place. He had received them from a God who owned the world before he arrived in it. And because he understood himself as a recipient, he could not treat a stranger's need as someone else's problem. He understood, simply: I have been sheltered. I will shelter.

It is worth pausing on why shelter, specifically, is what he offered. Shelter says something: Whatever you are going through, you do not have to face this alone. You may rest here. You belong here. You do not have to earn that belonging before you are allowed to sit down. That, as it happens, is exactly what we have just spent the Yamim Noraim receiving from God Himself. That sense of belonging in His world.

What should strike us most about Avraham's hospitality is how unglamorous it is. He does not perform a miracle for his guests. He first offers water for washing and a patch of shade, nothing more. One of the Torah's foundational pictures of human *chesed* looks almost embarrassingly modest: Get out of the sun, come sit down, catch your breath. We are tempted to think that a life of giving requires grand gestures. Avraham's *chesed* teaches otherwise: Sometimes *chesed* is simply, I have shade, and you may use it.

That, not incidentally, is also the entire experience of the *sukkah* itself. We live most of the year in houses so effective at sheltering us that we forget they are sheltering us at all; walls, insulation, heating and cooling, a door and windows that lock. It is only when we leave that house and sit for a week under a roof sparse enough to see the stars through, that the ordinary miracle becomes visible again: I have a roof. I have a table and chairs and a bed. I have people who gather around it with me. The *sukkah* does not add anything to our lives. It simply reveals what was there all along, the same way a fast, for one day, makes us notice that we have been fortunate until then to be eating.

Even the *schach* itself makes this point. **Rav Hirsch**, commenting on the *pasuk* about the *kashrus* of *schach*--מִגֵּרֶנֶךְ וּמִיֶּקֶבֶךְ--notices what the Torah refuses to let us build with--not something still rooted in the ground, still in

nature's own domain; and not the grain or the grapes themselves, carried triumphantly into the house as the harvest you labored for, the crop you are counting on to secure your future.

רש"ר הירש דברים פרק טז פסוק יג (פרשת ראה): מ"פסולת גרנך ויקבך", מה שאיננו מקבל טומאה משום שאין עליו החותמת של גדולת האדם - ממנו תִּקְרָה את סוכת החג שתזכיר לך את הגנת ה' (עי' סוכה יב ע"א; וראה פי' ויקרא עמ' תלב ואילך).

The *schach* may be made only from "the refuse of your threshing floor and winepress"—the leftover stalks and cuttings that cannot even become *tamei*, because they carry no "stamp of human achievement." The Torah will not let even the roof over our heads on Sukkos testify to what we accomplished. It can testify only to what we were given.

Notice, too, that the Torah waits until after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to teach us this. Noticing a blessing and being grateful for it are two different acts, and only the second requires perspective. A person who has just spent 10 days confronting how little of his life is actually in his own hands does not walk out of Ne'ilah thinking, "I have exactly what I have earned." He walks out thinking, "Look how much I have been given, that I could never have guaranteed for myself." Only a heart primed by that recognition is ready for the question Sukkos asks next.

It is one thing to know this intellectually. It is another to feel it, and that is where the **Sfas Emes** takes over (*Devarim*, 5653). On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, he writes, we pray for God's kingship to become manifest in the world and Sukkos is the moment that request begins to be answered, as what we asked for in potential during the Yamim Noraim starts to become actual in the *sukkah* itself. He finds this in the Torah's own language. The *pasuk* says only, בסוכות תשבו שבעת ימים — "You shall dwell in *sukkos* for 7 days." But the Zohar hears an invitation buried inside the word *teishvu*: תיבו אושפיזין "Come, be seated, honored guests."

When we build the *sukkah* for the sake of Heaven, the Sfas Emes teaches, it becomes, briefly, a dwelling place for the Divine Presence, and it is into that Presence that we invite our *Ushpizin*, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, and the others.

Inviting the *Ushpizin* must not remain just a mystical exercise. It warns us not to sit down, eat our fill, and only afterward give whatever is left to the poor. Welcoming the human guest is part of welcoming the heavenly guest. In other words, the moment I discover that I am sitting beneath Hashem's roof and I appreciate His gifts, I am asked to look around and ask who else needs a place beneath mine.

Howard Schultz, who built Starbucks into a global company, has written of his encounter with **Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel**, the late Rosh Yeshivah of the Mir. By then, he was a frail man, his body ravaged by Parkinson's disease, who could barely speak above a whisper. Schultz recalls that Rav Nosson Tzvi met with a group of visiting businessmen and asked them a single question: What is the lesson of the Holocaust? Their answers, one after another, did not satisfy him.

So Rav Nosson Tzvi gave his own answer. "Picture the crowded barracks of a concentration camp, where a single blanket might be shared by six men on a freezing night. One man receives it into his own hands and, in that instant, Rav Finkel said, an entire moral universe opens inside a single decision: Does he keep the blanket for himself or does he push it toward the five men beside him who have none? Even there, the choice to share remained a choice a human being could make. "Take your blanket back to America," he told them, "and push it toward five other people."

Even a single blanket, in the worst circumstances a human being can be placed in, is still enough to require a decision. Even in a place of almost unimaginable scarcity, there remained another moral question: Which direction do I move whatever shelter I have been given? That is, in the end, Avraham's own choice, replayed. He could have looked at the three exhausted travelers on the horizon and thought: I had it hard. I worked for this shade; let them find their own. Instead, he ran toward them and said, in effect, rest here. A blessing, it turns out, is never never meant to stop with the person who first receives it. If I have been given a home, I am meant to make others feel at home. If I have been given a second chance, I am meant to extend one to someone else.

Ben Zoma's answer in **Pirkei Avos** בחלקו עשיר, “Who is wealthy? One who is satisfied with his portion” is usually read as an answer about contentment. Sukkos suggests it is also an answer about generosity. A person convinced he does not have enough spends his life gripping tightly what little he has. A person who has just been reminded how much he has is finally free to loosen his grip and ask: Who else could use some of this?

Chazal teach that Avraham kept the entire Torah before it was given (*Yoma* 28b). The **Gra**, quoted in **Divrei Eliyahu** on this *parshah*, finds a hint to his keeping the *mitzva* of *sukkos*. נה' גרד אַתְּ אֶבְרָהָם בְּכָל "And Hashem blessed Avraham with everything." (*Bereishis* 24:1). Three consecutive *pesukim* in the laws of Sukkos open with the letters ב, כ, ל – בסכת תשבו ב, כל – “Every citizen of Israel shall dwell in *sukkos*”; and למען ידעו – “So that your generations will know” (*Vayikra* 23:42,43) Beis. Kaf. Lamed. The very *mitzvah* Avraham would earn by running to meet three strangers and offering them a little water and a little shade, was spelled, letter by letter, into the blessing he received.

That same word — כל, everything — is the attitude Yaakov expresses generations later, standing face-to-face with Esav and insisting he take a gift: קח נא... כִּי הִנְנִי אֵלֶיךָ וְכִי יֵשׁ לִי כָל, “for God has been gracious to me, and I have everything” (*Bereishis* 33:11). Esav, a *pasuk* earlier, describes his own fortune differently: יֵשׁ לִי רַב, I have much (33:9). ***Yesh li rav*” is a measurement, and every measurement invites comparison: More than some, less than others. “Yesh li kol” is not a measurement at all. It is a recognition: What I have is the portion Hashem has given me. That is Ben Zoma's answer to איזהו עשיר restated in one word: not the person constantly measuring how much he has, but the person who experiences his portion as a kol, rather than a rav. And perhaps that is precisely why Yaakov can say יש לי כל while trying to give something away. Gratitude loosens the grip.**

And there is a striking echo in what happens next. After Yaakov has said יש לי כל, the Torah tells us that he travels to a place called Sukkos, where וְלִמְקָנָהוּ עֲשָׂה סִכָּת, “for his livestock he made shelters.” I would not claim that one is presented as the reason for the other. But the sequence is evocative: יש לי כל, I recognize what I have been given, and then סוכות, I provide shelter for what has been placed in my care.

Once we appreciate that everything we have is a gift of God, hospitality stops being only about filling the empty chair at our own table. Sometimes, the person who most needs an invitation on Sukkos is not standing at the door; he or she is already sitting quietly inside the community, in plain view, and is simply overlooked--the widow or widower for whom the table suddenly went quiet, the family that just moved in and knows no one yet, the person who looks entirely successful, but is, on the inside, entirely alone. None of them will ask for shade--or an invitation. That is exactly why we have to notice on our own.

Avraham did not wait at his tent for the three strangers to knock. The Torah tells us: וירא וירץ לקראתם — “He saw them, and he ran toward them.” **The deeper challenge of Sukkos may not be, “Whom will I invite into my sukkah?” It may be, “Whom have I simply failed to notice?”**

Rosh Hashanah teaches us that we are not the authors of our own destiny. Yom Kippur teaches us that we are not permanently defined by our failures. And Sukkos takes us out of our homes and under the *schach*, so that the lesson stops being just an idea we hold and becomes a week we live in. Then it asks the only question that could follow: Now that you have understood how much you have been given, what will you do with it?

You received; now give. You were sheltered; now shelter. You were welcomed; now welcome. You were forgiven; now forgive. You were handed a place; now make one for somebody else: a seat at your table, an invitation, a phone call, something that costs you almost nothing to offer and might mean everything to. The blessing was never meant to stop with us. It becomes complete when it passes through us to somebody else. When the guest becomes a host, when the sheltered becomes the one who gives shelter. May we all use our blessings and gifts to help others. And may Hashem continue to shelter and protect us.