

Adam's imagination led him to violate God's command, as simple as it was. In what ways do our fantasies cause us harm?

ESTD 1997

# JewishTimes

Dedicated to Scriptural and Rabbinic Verification of Authentic Jewish Beliefs and Practices

Volume VI, No. 1...Oct. 20, 2006

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## Weekly Parsha

# Bereshis

**RABBI BERNARD FOX**

**"In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth." (Bereshit 1:1)**

The Torah begins with an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Rashi asks an important question. The Torah is a work of law.

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# the Meaning of Life

## A Life of Meaning

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

My friend Howard puzzled me with an intriguing question: why did Adam, or for that matter does man, require commands, "mitzvahs"? Yes, we may offer a simple answer that we require mitzvahs to perfect ourselves. But I feel this question goes deeper. Howard mentioned that Adam was a perfect creation, and Ibn Ezra backs him up, he was a "chacham Gadol", a "great intellect"[1]. Nonetheless, God decreed that Adam possess a command. And this applies to all subsequent giants, such as Abraham, who received the command of circumcision.

Interestingly, the prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge was commanded immediately upon Adam's creation:

*"And God, Elohim, took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it. And God, Elohim commanded upon the man saying, 'From all the tress you may eat. And from the Tree of Knowledge [of] good and evil you may not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die'."*[2]

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## Weekly Parsha

# JewishTimes

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It presents a system of six hundred thirteen mitzvot. It would seem appropriate for the Torah to concentrate on the objective of teaching us the commandments. Why does the Torah begin with an account of creation?

Rashi provides a response. He explains that Hashem promised the land of Israel to Bnai Yisrael. However, the Jewish people would not occupy an empty region. They would dispossess other nations. The Torah teaches justice. How can we justify the seizure of the land of Israel from these nations?

The account of creation provides the response. The Almighty created the universe. Therefore, He has the right to apportion the earth to various nations. He also has the authority to command the dispossession of these nations.[1]

Rashi's answer is difficult to understand. The nations, which Bnai Yisrael would expel, were idol worshippers. They did not accept the authenticity of the Torah. Certainly, they would question the assertion that the Creator had promised the land of Israel to Jewish people. They would not agree that the Almighty – the true owner – had confiscated the land from them.

We encounter this very situation today. The nations of the world are familiar with the Torah, its account of creation, and its record of the Almighty's promises to the Jewish people. Yet, these nations do not recognize the Jewish people's Divine right to the land! Are we to assume that the Almighty did not fully understand the nature of his creatures? Did He think the entire world would accept the message of the Torah?

Rav Yisrael Meir Lau explains that we must carefully consider Rashi's comments. Rashi does not say that the nations of the world will be convinced of the Torah's argument. It seems that Rashi did not maintain that the message is addressed to these nations. Instead, the Torah is speaking to Bnai Yisrael!

According to Rashi, Hashem recognized that

the morality of the Jewish people would be challenged by the nations. He also realized that Bnai Yisrael would be sensitive to this reproach. We need to know that, despite all accusations, we have a Divine right to the land of Israel. Therefore, the Torah teaches us the basis of our claim.

This lesson is important today. The world does not recognize our right to the land of Israel. We must work to overcome this obstacle. We must also strive to live in peace in the land. This may require accommodation and compromise. But we should not abandon our assertion of the justice of

our claim. We need to know that the Creator promised us the land of Israel. No other nation's occupation of the land supercedes this Divine right.[2]

**“And the earth was without form and in confusion with darkness on the face of the depths. And the spirit of the Lord hovered on the waters' surface.” (Bereshit 1:2)**

The meaning of this pasuk can best be understood in conjunction with the previous pasuk. The Torah begins with the statement that Hashem created the heavens and earth. The terms heaven and earth are proceeded with the article et. This article generally implies some inclusion. Our Sages

explain that, in this case, the term et is intended to include all derivatives. In other words, the pasuk should be understood as stating that creation began with the forming of the heavens and the earth and all of their derivatives. The derivatives are the stars, plants and other elements that came forth on the subsequent days.[3]

Now this seems very confusing. The first pasuk asserts that the heavens and earth with all of their elements were formed on the first day. The subsequent pesukim assert that these various elements emerged during the full course of the six days of creation. Our pasuk resolves this difficulty.

The initial creation contained all that emerged on the subsequent days. However, these elements existed only in potential. This is the meaning of

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## Weekly Parsha

the earth's formless and confused form. The darkness also represents this concept. In darkness individual forms cannot be discerned. These terms describe the initial creation. The various elements had not yet emerged into their actual form. The Divine influence was required in order to transform the potential to actual.

Based on this interpretation of creation, Rabaynu Avraham ben HaRambam explains the "hovering" mentioned in the pasuk. The term used for hovering is associated with the bird hovering over its nest. Why is this term used to describe the Divine influence? A bird hovers over its nest in order to protect and cultivate its eggs. The eggs contain a living entity - in potential. Through the efforts of the mother, hovering over the eggs, the potential of the eggs emerges in the form of offspring. In a similar manner, the earth included its eventual elements in potential. G-d's "hovering" represents His influence in converting potential to actual.

It is interesting to note the correspondence between this understanding of creation and the modern scientific view. Science maintains that the building blocks for all that now exists were formed during the initial creation. Over time, the universe we now see eventually emerged. This occurred through the organization of these primitive elements. However, science is faced with the challenge of explaining the emergence of design and organization from chaos. The Chumash provides the resolution of this riddle. G-d's influence caused the normal pattern of the physical universe to be reversed and organization emerged from chaos.

**“And He chased out the man. And He stationed at the east of Gan Eydan the cherubs and the revolving sword blade to guard the path to the Tree of Life.” (Bereshit 3:24)**

Hashem places Adam and his wife Chava in Gan Eydan. Adam and Chava sin and are driven from the Gan – the garden. Hashem places cherubs – angels – at the entrance of the Gan. These angels are accompanied by a revolving sword blade. Together they guard the approach to the Gan and the Tree of Life.

Early explorers understood the account of humanity's experience in Gan Eydan and the eventual banishment in the literal sense. Ancient maps suggest probable locations for the Gan. These explorers believed that a complete exploration of the globe would result in locating the Gan.

However, this literal interpretation does not provide a full understanding of these incidents. These events communicate a deeper message. This message can be appreciated through looking beyond the literal meaning of the passages. An exploration of the full meaning of the experience

of Gan Eydan requires a lengthy analysis. We will limit our discussion to the meaning of the cherubs and the sword that guard the Gan.

We must begin our analysis by understanding the significance of the Gan and the Tree of Life. Adam and Chava lived a life of leisure in Gan Eydan. This life is very different from our existence in today's world. Most must toil to secure daily sustenance. Even those that are more economically established must deal with the aggravations of everyday existence. Life is uncertain and economic success cannot insulate us from the frustrations and tragedies that occur in everyday life. Gan Eydan represented an idyllic existence immune from the problems we experience in today's world. Humanity's banishment from the Gan introduced into our lives these difficulties. The Tree of Life epitomized the perfect existence. The exact nature of this tree is debated by the commentaries. Nonetheless, it seems to represent the potential to achieve longevity and happiness. According to this interpretation, banishment from the Gan is much more than exile from a geographic location. Banishment represents a change in humanity's environment. With banishment, humanity is confronted with a new more difficult reality.

We constantly attempt to return to Gan Eydan. We have abandoned our search for its geographical location. Instead, we attempt to transform our world into the Gan. We strive through the application of science and technology to improve our lives. We endeavor to make our world more perfect. We seem to believe that we can eliminate suffering and our personal frustrations. However, we never really succeed. We created automobiles to transport us. We are plagued with the pollution they generate. We released the power of the atom and now we are confronted with the dilemma of disposing of nuclear waste. We invented vaccines and antibiotics only to be plagued by new diseases and antibiotic resistant infections. It seems that every advance is associated with a new problem or challenge.

How do we react to this phenomenon? We assume that these new problems can be solved. More science and better technology will solve the problems created by our latest technological breakthrough. We have absolute faith in the ultimate triumph of human knowledge. Yet, a question must be asked. Can we ever succeed in our quest? Can we recreate Gan Eydan?

Perhaps, this is the message of the cherubs and the sword that guard entrance to the Gan. Perhaps, the Torah is telling us that the Almighty has blocked the road to success. Hashem banished humanity from the Gan. He decided that humanity is better nurtured in a less perfect world. He does not want us to return to the Gan. The failures and frustrations we encounter in our

endeavors to recreate the Gan are not a result of inadequate knowledge. Our objective is unrealistic. We can work towards improving life. However, a certain level of toil and frustration is built into nature. We can never overcome the inherent limitations of our material existence. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Bereshit 1:1.

[2] Rav Yisrael Meir Lau, Why Does the World Contest Our Right to Eretz Yisrael?

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Bereshit 1:14.

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Death is quite a deterrent, yet Adam succumbed. What was so difficult about this command, and why did God select this specific command?

Why does man require commands? This is an important question.

Reviewing the verses above, we wonder the purpose behind the Torah using precious 'real estate', recounting that God "took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it". Of what significance is this fact? Why did God require man to work and watch the Garden? Additionally, we find no "command" to work and watch the Garden...simply that God did so without a command, and man did not reject this obligation. Evidently, a command is unnecessary in connection with procuring food, but man does require a command concerning human "restraint". We must understand the distinction. And we must seek an answer for the severity, the punishment of death. Furthermore, we note that God commanded man prior to creating woman. Evidently, man cannot exist, even briefly, without God's commands. Why? Strong questions, but as always, God places the answer "at the side" of the questions.

Let's take one question: why did God "take the man and place him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it"? Doesn't something about this verse sound familiar? It does to me. This verse immediately precedes the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. We are drawn to God's 'purposeful' contrast: in both cases, God made something obligatory on man: in the first verse, working the Garden; and in the next, restraint.

What occurs to me is that God wishes us to observe a parallel between man's toil in the physical, and between his ability to observe God's command – the metaphysical or spiritual. In both spheres of our lives – the physical and metaphysical – God planned our existences to be "dependent". We depend on food, but we also depend on something greater: God's commands. But why?

I feel this is the core idea: man must know his existence is "conditional". Man must further appreciate that the physical world, and his life on Earth, are not as important as the metaphysical world, meaning wisdom, and man's soul. I feel this is a central lesson in our receipt of commands, and why God created us as "dependent" beings. For with no commands, and no obligation to secure our food, man might erroneously assume his existence is necessary. But as just we know

that God needs nothing, the universe too can go on without us.

Gratifying emotions of ambition, success, ego and a host of others are required, human assets. However, man is very susceptible to abusing these psychological gifts. He may become so self-absorbed, that he lives without regard for his Tzelem Elohim, his intellect. So important is a life of wisdom, for it enables us to appreciate the Creator, that a Rabbi taught that God labeled our intellects with His name, Tzelem "Elohim". The Rabbi taught that this naming was to direct our attention to the great import of engaging our intelligence.

Adam denied the damage caused by deviating from God's word, but not the damage caused by denying bodily needs. And Adam was a "great intellect" as we mentioned. Even with the deterrent of death, this great person sinned. And the command was not so difficult: simply restrain from one, single fruit...all others were permissible. This teaches that man's imagination can get the best of him. Even at the risk of his very life, man will seek that which is unnecessary. Why? It is because the fruit of the Tree of Life contained a lure, of which man did not even apprehend. Yet, the unknown was so enticing; man's imagination caused his downfall.

God gave man one command, as an indication that the physical world, in all its splendor, is merely a "means", but our true objective is to approach God. This is "mitzvah". If we violate God's word to procure more physical pleasures, ironically, we will in fact be counterproductive, and we will lose them, as Adam proved. Following God's commands secures life and happiness, not like Adam imagined.

"For on the day you eat from it, you shall surely die" underscores this very idea, that man's existence is conditional. Man must appreciate this.

One purpose of commands is clearly to teach that our existence is dependent: "...not on bread alone does man live, but by all that comes from God's mouth does man live." [3]

Howard also mentioned the Rabbi's lesson on Tzitzis: in our physical needs such as clothing, we are reminded of the commands: "And you shall see them [Tzitzis], and you shall remember all God's commands, and you shall perform them. And you shall not go astray after your hearts and after your eyes, that you are estranged after them". [4]

Tzedaka too teaches the lesson that we must not be convinced that wealth is acquired by monetary retention, but the opposite is true: God promises, "And I will open up the storehouses of heaven and empty out a blessing for you until there is more than enough." [5]

And one of our greatest mitzvahs – the Sabbath – is also to direct us away from the physical, towards a day engaged in Torah, where physical activity is greatly curbed. Our Licha Dodi prayer states, "Last in creation, but first in His thoughts" regarding the Sabbath. Although the last day, Sabbath was the goal of creation: the epitome of counterintuitive thinking, but true. God created the universe – or at least Earth – as a laboratory for man to recognize God's wisdom, for our own good and happiness. The life of wisdom far exceeds any other lifestyle, as we just learned from one of the wisest men, King Solomon, in his book of Ecclesiastes, Koheles.

Adam required a deterrent of such gravity, since man's imagination and ability to deny God is equally strong. Man overemphasized the physical, and required a threat to awake him to the tenuous nature of Earthly life. God wished to impress upon Adam that just as food is obviously required, he should adhere to God's word as well. But God knows man's nature, and therefore formed a mitzvah, a decree, to redirect him from overindulgence. From the very first human, God wished to educate us on what is primary in life. We appreciate the wisdom in God's formulation and arrangement of Torah verses. The very verses and their order, create questions, and provide answers.

If we appreciate and become convinced of our temporal, Earthly stay...if we consider the sublime lessons derived from analyzing the Torah's words, we will live without the damaging fantasies embodied in our society that promotes man, over God. We will enjoy what is true, and abandon our plans of grandeur, since we realize this world is a means for us to study, to approach the Creator, and not abuse for selfish goals. If we truly wish to live a peaceful and satisfying life as the Creator decreed, then we will enjoy not only individual mitzvahs and their respective benefits, but we will appreciate that the very institution of mitzvah has a powerful lesson: our existence is conditional. This further embellishes the primary ideal of focusing on God. This is the meaning of life. ■

[1] Gen. 2:17

[2] Gen. 2:15-17

[3] Deut. 8:3

[4] The Shima Prayer, Deut. 15:39

[5] Malachi 3:10, Deut. 16:10



# Sukkot: Bringing Heaven *down to* Earth

**RABBI JOSHUA MAROOF**

*This article on Sukkot is dedicated to the memory of my paternal grandfather, Aziz ben Michael Maroof, who passed away this year on the fourth day of Sukkot. May his soul find its rest in the bond of eternal life. Amen.*

## A Busy Month

The month of Tishre is filled to the brim with holidays. Rosh Hashana initiates a spiritual momentum that reaches its zenith ten days later on Yom Kippur. Only four days are then given to us to recuperate from the intensity of the Day of Atonement before the joyous holiday of Sukkot begins. Although Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur share a common theme - repentance - it is more difficult to account for the observance of Sukkot at a time of year that is already overscheduled. Indeed, in view of the fact that Sukkot is a commemoration of our dwelling in the wilderness of Sinai after our departure from Egypt, it could

just as easily (and, we might argue, even more logically) have been established in the spring-time after Passover. Apparently, for a deeper reason, the Torah intended for Sukkot to be closely linked to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. What is the conceptual relationship between the High Holidays and Sukkot that the Torah wishes to teach us?

## The Enigma of the Four Species

Before attempting to answer this fundamental question, let us examine another aspect of the Sukkot festival. On Sukkot, The Torah commands us to "take for ourselves" four species - a palm branch (lulav), myrtle branches (hadasim), willow branches (aravot) and a citron (etrog) and to rejoice with them during the holiday. In the Holy Temple, this mitzvah was performed all seven days of Sukkot. Outside of Jerusalem, it was observed only on the first day. After the destruction of the Temple, however, the Rabbis decreed that the waving of the Four Species be enacted across the globe on all seven days so as to commemorate the Temple service.

The commandment of waving the species stands out from among all other holiday-related mitzvot in one respect: The Torah offers no reason for it! The Torah provides a rationale for eating matsah on Passover, fasting on Yom Kippur and even for dwelling in booths on Sukkot. However, it presents us with no explanation at all for the mitzvah of taking the Four Species.

In fact, the way in which the Torah presents the obligation to celebrate with the Lulav and Eetrog in Parashat Emor is itself quite unusual:

And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Speak to the Children of Israel, saying, 'On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is a festival of booths - seven days dedicated to Hashem. On the first day will be a holy convocation, you shall do no laborious work. For seven days, you shall offer fire-offerings to Hashem; on the eighth day, it shall be for you a holy convocation, you shall do no laborious work. These are the holidays of Hashem, holy convocations, that you shall declare in their proper times - to offer fire-offerings to Hashem, burnt offerings, meal offerings, peace offerings and libations, each day according to its requirements...'"

At this point, it would be reasonable for the reader to conclude that the discussion of the festivals has been concluded. But not so fast! The Torah suddenly reverses course and reopens the subject of the holidays:

'...However, on the fifteen day of the seventh month, when you are gathering the produce of the land, celebrate the holiday of Hashem for seven days - the first day shall be a rest day, and the eighth day shall be a rest day. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a beautiful tree [etrog], palm branches, the branch of a myrtle tree and willow branches, and you shall rejoice before Hashem your God seven days... In booth shall you dwell for seven days....' And Moshe told the holidays of Hashem to the Children of Israel.

On the surface, it seems as if the mitzvot of Sukkot are appended to the discussion of the holidays as an "afterthought". Why did the Torah first summarize its entire treatment of the festivals and only then revisit Sukkot in more detail? Couldn't the Torah have provided us with a complete account of the holiday the first time around? Furthermore, we must wonder why the final section of the Parasha begins with the word "however". "However" usually introduces a new statement that will contradict expectations generated by a previous statement (ex. "it was hot outside; however, Jim did not turn on the air conditioning"). Here though, not only does the presentation of Sukkot not contradict the preceding material, it actually elaborates on and clarifies it! There is no doubt that the striking manner in which the Torah teaches us about the laws of Sukkot is meant to give us insight into their underlying significance.

## Adam, Eve and Mother Earth

In order to solve the mystery of the Four Species and develop a better appreciation of Sukkot in general, let us consider the teachings of our Rabbis on the subject. Nachmanides in particular offers us several hints that we may be able to utilize in our quest for an explanation of the Species. In his commentary to Parashat Emor, he mentions that the purpose of the commandment is to rectify the sin of Adam, the first man, who consumed the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. According to one Midrashic opinion, the fruit that Adam erred with was the Eetrog. Apparently, through utilizing the Eetrog for a mitzvah, we obtain atonement for the mistake of our ancestor. Nachmanides also cites a Midrash that, at first blush, sounds quite surprising:

"Fruit of a beautiful (hadar) tree" - this is the Holy One, Blessed is He, as it states, "Glory and splendor (hadar) are before Him".

"Palm branches (temarim)" - this is the Holy

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## Holidays

One, Blessed is He, as it states, "The Righteous One sprouts like a palm."

"Myrtle branches" - this is the Holy One, Blessed is He, as it states, "And He stands among the myrtles".

"Willow branches (aravot)" - this is the Holy One, Blessed is He, as it states, "Praise He Who rides above the heavens (aravot)."

How can the Midrash suggest that the Four Species represent Hashem Himself? Taken literally, this notion is not only blasphemous, it would be idolatrous. What did the Rabbis intend to teach us with this homiletic interpretation?

Let us consider one further Midrash of our Sages concerning the Lulav and Etrog. We know that in addition to holding the Four Species in our hands, we wave them in every direction during the Hallel prayer. This is said to be done in imitation of the trees of the field that tremble with joy when they witness the judgment of God. The Rabbis base this concept upon a verse in the Book of Psalms:

"The field will exult and all that is in it."

"The field will exult" - this refers to the world.

"And all that is in it" - this refers to the creatures.

"Then all the trees of the forest will rejoice - before Hashem, for He has come to judge the Earth."

Why do the trees rejoice? Because Hashem has come on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. And what has He come to do? "He will judge the Earth in righteousness and the peoples in fairness."

Here the Rabbis emphasize a thematic connection between Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot that manifests itself specifically in the waving of the Four Species. Through performing the mitsvah of Lulav and Etrog, we participate with nature, as it were, in its celebration of the Divine judgment that was finalized on Yom Kippur. To some extent, we understand that the description of trees rejoicing is meant in a metaphoric or poetic vein. But what do the Psalmist, and the Rabbis who elucidated his words, intend to teach us by utilizing this imagery? After all, what significance could Hashem's evaluation of human beings possibly have for the vegetation of the Earth?

## Yom Kippur and Sukkot

I believe we are now in a position to develop a more comprehensive and meaningful approach to understanding the Tishre holidays in general and Sukkot in particular. Let us begin by considering the thematic objectives of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in greater depth.

The overarching purpose of the High Holidays is for the Jewish people to repent before God. However, repentance is not a simple mitsvah. It is interesting to note that, no matter how much we repent, there always seems to be more to do. The process never reaches any definite conclusion. What accounts for this unusual state of affairs?

An analogy will lead us to the answer. Consider the removal of weeds from a garden. No matter how many times one hacks away weeds, they regrow quickly if the roots are not dug out. Cutting the vegetation above the surface of the ground is not sufficient because it is really just a manifestation of the root beneath. In the same sense, it is clear that the problems addressed in repentance - i.e., the particular sins we commit and promise to discontinue - are merely symptoms of an underlying spiritual "disorder" that cannot be resolved in a superficial way. If we are to develop as Jews, we must proceed to the "root" and attempt to dislodge it. Fortunately, the Torah helps us by identifying the character of the ailment we've diagnosed as well as providing us with a remedy for it.

The Torah teaches that from time immemorial, we human beings have found ourselves grappling with a fundamental moral dilemma that makes itself felt in every area of our individual and collective activity. On one hand, we recognize that we are small, frail beings with limited lifespans who stand in the presence of an Eternal and Inscrutable Creator. Every element of the material Universe, whether grand or minute, is governed by the principles of God's infinite knowledge. Intuitively, we realize that, as part of the created order, we too should admire and adhere to the dictates of His wisdom. Human life, if it is to have any lasting significance, must be organized around and shaped by a study of God's truth. Human beings must seek a connection with the ultimate reality if they have any hope of "being real" themselves.

At the same time, though, we naturally seek to dominate our environments and yearn to establish our own independent criteria of truth and morality. We strive to create personal, financial or political empires that will testify to the fact that we are "gods, knowing good and evil." In order to fully devote ourselves to

these goals, we must ignore or deny the fact that we are nothing more than tiny parts of a Divinely governed Universe. We must orient ourselves to our environments in a utilitarian, pleasure-seeking manner that focuses us on the sensual aspects of world and blinds us from perceiving the intrinsic beauty and wisdom that they manifest. Only then can we manage to nurture our fantasies of grandeur and style ourselves creators rather than creations.

Before they sinned, Adam and Eve oriented themselves to the world as seekers of truth whose primary desire was to understand the Universe and their place in it. However, once they began manipulating their environment for purposes of pleasure, they became conscious of their own moral freedom and their ability to generate a manmade value system that would revolve around their own personal agendas rather than God's plan. This immediately hurled them into the throes of a painful internal conflict, i.e., they were attracted to the pursuit of wisdom but could not release themselves from the grip of their newfound egotistical and hedonistic fantasies. We, as the descendants of Adam and Eve, continue to contend with the intellectual and moral dilemma they bequeathed to us. The vast majority of our sins result from setbacks in our constant struggle with this problem.

The power of the High Holidays lies in the fact that they throw this fundamental conflict into clear relief. The sound of the Shofar on Rosh Hashana awakens us from our self-imposed dogmatic slumbers and refocuses our minds on the reality of God's Kingship and its implications. On Yom Kippur, we go even further, demonstrating our recognition of Hashem's holiness through a complete renunciation of the materialistic worldview that enticed Adam and Eve. Separating from all bodily pleasures and selfish pursuits, devoting every moment of our time to reflection on Hashem's greatness, we immerse ourselves in the ultimate truth. On this day we reach the pinnacle of awareness of God, such that the Torah says "before Hashem, shall you be purified." The very process of tearing away our illusions and focusing on God's transcendence can purify and transform us. Yom Kippur, then, is the intellectual antidote to the tradition of sin that has its roots in the Garden of Eden.

It should be immediately obvious that Yom Kippur, though necessary for our growth, is by no means sufficient. Prayers and fasting certainly offer us a powerful experience of clarification and intensive focus. However, we

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## Holidays

know full well that, as soon as we return to our conventional daily routines, whatever effects Yom Kippur has had will wear off quickly. Involvement in the day-to-day pursuit of a livelihood as well as exposure to temptations of pleasure and prestige will overtake us and cause us to lose a handle on the ideas that seemed so clear at Neilah time. Simply stated, real change cannot be effected in the abstract. It requires a shift in how we actually perceive, understand and respond to the concrete reality of everyday life. How can a more effective bridge be made from the spiritual heights of Yom Kippur to the mundane world of the physical and temporal?

Sukkot is the Torah's answer to this problem. On Sukkot, it is precisely the physical dimension of our existence that is addressed. We eat, drink, and sleep in the Sukkah. Every act of dwelling, no matter how apparently insignificant, is transformed into a mitzvah. Through fulfilling the commandment of Sukkah, we remain "before Hashem" - cognizant of His transcendence - while engaging in the very activities that usually distract us from Him. This is why, in describing Sukkot, the Torah states "And you shall celebrate before Hashem for seven days." The institution of Sukkot does not allow us to leave our experience of God's presence behind after Yom Kippur. On the contrary, we must extend it and carry it along with us into the Sukkah. Only then can our new level of abstract understanding begin to exert a substantial influence on the way we live our lives.

### Giving a New Meaning to the Term "Fieldwork"

What is it about the Sukkah that makes it the ideal vehicle for 'extending' the Yom Kippur experience? Further reflection on the primary cause of human sin will help us appreciate the Torah's wisdom in its selection of Sukkot for this purpose.

As mentioned above, human beings fall into error when they disconnect themselves from nature and its lawfulness. Rather than seeing themselves as part of the Creation that should be living in harmony with it, they separate from it and attempt to lord over it. The Sukkah reverses this trend by placing us back "into the field", as it were, like Adam and Eve before their sin. Unlike a house whose artificial character reinforces our illusion of isolation from the Universe, the Sukkah reintegrates us with the natural world and its Source.

Thus, the Sukkah allows us to keep God at



the forefront of our minds, even as we eat, drink and rejoice. In this sense, it gives us a taste of the ideal state of human perfection, as formulated by Maimonides in his laws of Character Traits:

A person must direct all of his actions toward achieving knowledge of God alone. So that his sitting, standing, and speech are all instrumental to this goal...Thus, a person who walks in this way all of his days is serving Hashem constantly - even at the times that he is engaged in business dealings and even when he is involved in marital relations - because his purpose in doing these activities is to satisfy his bodily needs so he can serve Hashem. And even at the time he is sleeping, if he sleeps so that his mind can rest and his body doesn't become sick - for it is impossible to serve Hashem when one is sick - then it turns out that his sleeping is service of God, blessed be He. And it is regarding this topic that our Rabbis commanded and said, "All of your actions should be for the sake of Heaven." And so did King Solomon say in his wisdom, "In all your ways you should know Him."

### Demystifying the Midrashim

With this foundation in place, we can begin to understand the Midrashim introduced earlier. We wondered about the meaning of the "personification" of the trees of the field that we find in the poetry of the Psalms and in the discourses of our Rabbis. Now, the thrust of these texts becomes much clearer. The natural world, the "field" mentioned in Psalms, is already praising its Creator through conforming to His laws and statutes. On Sukkot, we literally enter the "field", and we grasp the produce of the "field" in our hands as we give thanks to God in Hallel. Through this, we demonstrate our sense of unity and solidarity with Creation. No longer are we struggling to distinguish ourselves from the rest of the Universe. On the contrary, we now seek to study, extol, and live in accordance with the magnificent design of the Almighty.

The Rabbis imply that, metaphorically speaking, the trees of the field "await" our arrival after the High Holidays. The entire physical Universe reflects the infinite wisdom of its Creator without resistance or reservation. Only mankind diverges from this pattern and attempts to establish an artificial, alternative world order that suits human ambitions and aspirations. As long as human beings remain out of step with the rest of the Universe, the natural world is somewhat deficient in its praise of God.

When the Jewish people returns to Hashem on Yom Kippur, we lay the groundwork for a spiritual renaissance - for reassuming our position as servants of Hashem rather than slaves of human agenda. This itself is reason enough for the rest of creation to rejoice. However, these feelings of optimism will be short-lived unless the sense of God's presence that we achieved on Yom Kippur is allowed to permeate our worldview in its totality and effect permanent change in our outlook. Our observance of Sukkot is meant to encourage us to translate the momentary epiphany of Neilah into a completely new orientation toward the material world. When we enter the Sukkah and grasp the Four Species, identifying with the vegetation of the Earth, we begin to view our own role in the world from a much more realistic standpoint - a standpoint that will we will hopefully internalize for good.

This also sheds light on the surprising Midrash that seemed to equate each of the Four Species with Hashem. Understood properly, the Rabbis did not, God forbid, intend to imply that physical objects could serve as representations of the Almighty. Instead, they meant to point out that the transformation we undergo

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on the High Holidays revolutionizes the way in which we view our environment. The instinctually or egotistically driven person who sees an Etrog will immediately consider it in terms of his own agenda - what does it taste like? Would it make a nice stew? Could I go into the Etrog farming business and be successful? Approaching the world through this framework is a tremendous liability, because it feeds into a human-centered view of the Universe. The more a person with this attitude is exposed to the resources of the material world, the further he will become steeped in the pursuit of instinctual gratification.

The person of Torah, by contrast, sees in the diverse qualities of the Species the providential design of the Creator that is revealed through them. Holding the Species together underscores the fact that, despite the differences they exhibit on a superficial, sensory level, all four of them derive from the same harmonious system of natural law. When he gazes upon the Lulav, Etrog, Hadassim and Aravot, he sees Hashem - in other words, he moves beyond their physical characteristics and perceives the Divine wisdom they embody. The framework through which he processes his experiences is fundamentally different than that of the materialist, and this impacts the way he understands his environment and behaves within it. Because his whole perspective on the material world is rooted in his knowledge of God, exposure to its beauty can only propel him toward further dedication to Divine service.

### Uniqueness of Sukkot

At this juncture we can make sense out of the unusual structure of Parashat Emor. Why does the Torah introduce Sukkot, seem to conclude the treatment of the holidays, and then introduce and explain Sukkot in greater detail? And why is the revisiting of Sukkot begun with the term "however"?

A closer examination of the Parasha's words will reveal the answer. In the first "conclusion" of Emor, we read:

"These are the holidays of Hashem, holy convocations, that you shall declare in their proper times - to offer fire-offerings to Hashem, burnt offerings, meal offerings, peace offerings and libations, each day according to its requirements. This is in addition to the Sabbaths of Hashem, and in addition to all of the gifts, pledges and dona-

tions that you give to Hashem. However, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month..."

The Torah did not intend to close its discussion of the holidays at this point. Rather, the Torah meant to emphasize a crucial distinction between Sukkot and the remainder of Biblical holidays. On all other holidays, the ultimate experience of being "before Hashem" is restricted to the Holy Temple where offerings are brought. Average Israelites would visit the Temple on the Festivals and would draw profound inspiration from it, but their role would never be crossed with that of the Kohanim.

On Sukkot, though, the concept of being "before Hashem" becomes common property. It is firmly implanted in our minds on Yom Kippur and integrated into our experience of daily living through the Sukkah and Four Species. On Sukkot, we achieve the ideal of becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, of incorporating awareness of God into the most mundane aspects of our existence. The clearest indication of this new status is the mitzvah of waving the Four Species, which - although it is considered part of the seven-day Temple service for Sukkot, and should logically be restricted to Kohanim in Jerusalem - is performed by all Jews world over on the first day of Sukkot (and, since the destruction of the Temple, for all seven days of the holiday.) Because Sukkot transforms the very manner in which we relate to our environment, and ourselves it has the capacity of extending the holiness of the Mikdash beyond its physical borders. On this Festival, the Jewish people create their own personal sanctuaries in the form of Sukkot and are slightly less dependent upon the Holy Temple to represent God's presence for them.

### Commemoration of the Exodus

We can now understand how Sukkot can function both as a commemoration of our dwelling in the Wilderness of Sinai as well as an addendum to the High Holidays. Yom Kippur leaves us in the lurch, bringing us to a spiritual high that is difficult to sustain once we've gone back to our usual routines. Sukkot enables us to extend the heightened awareness of God that we've attained - our state of being "before Hashem" - and to bring it back "down to earth" in the form of Sukkah and Lulav. This is precisely the purpose that the sojourn in the wilderness had for the Jewish people. Experiences of Divine revelation in Egypt and

at Sinai were powerful and transformational, but their impact could have easily become diminished if the Jews had not been given the opportunity to fully absorb their implications. During their time in the desert, the Jewish people proceeded under the direct, intimate and watchful eye of Divine Providence. This offered them the chance to internalize God's message by living it before they would have to meet the challenge of conventional existence in the Land of Israel.

### The Time of Our Joy

Our study of Sukkot has revealed to us the reason why the Torah established it as the culmination of the annual cycle of holidays. Whereas Passover, Shavuot and the Days of Awe teach us the fundamental ideas and principles of Judaism, Sukkot focuses on integrating the ideals of Torah with realities of mundane existence in this world. Through Sukkot, we become connected with nature on a different level, and this enables us to relate our daily activities to our intellectual and spiritual mission.

This understanding of Sukkot can explain another aspect of its identity. The Torah describes Sukkot as an especially festive holiday:

"Seven days shall you celebrate this holiday of Hashem, in the place which Hashem will choose - for Hashem, your God, has blessed you with your produce and all the work of your hands, and you shall be purely joyous."

The Rabbis of the Talmud elaborate on this further:

"The Rabbis stated that one who never had the opportunity to see the celebration of Sukkot (Simhat Bet Hashoeva) never saw real joy in his entire life."

Indeed, even in our prayers on Sukkot, we refer to it as "the time of our Joy", a phrase we don't apply to any other holiday, no matter how joyous. What is it about Sukkot that introduces an additional element of happiness into its observance?

I believe that the answer to this question is provided by Maimonides at the end of his Laws of Shofar, Sukkah and Lulav. He writes:

"Even though it is a mitzvah to celebrate on all of the holidays, on the holiday of Sukkot there was a higher level of celebration in the

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Temple, as it is written, "you shall rejoice before Hashem for seven days"....The happiness a person experiences in the performance of the commandments and in the love of God who commanded them is a great form of service. And anyone who holds himself back from this joy deserves to be punished, as the Torah states, "because you did not serve Hashem your God with joy and a good heart." And anyone who behaves arrogantly and assigns honor to himself and overestimates his importance in these areas is a sinner and a fool...

Maimonides echoes the statement of our Rabbis that Sukkot is the epitome of joyous holidays. He then proceeds to expound upon the importance of joy in the context of Divine service in general. On the surface, the Rambam's description here seems strange. How can being happy be a form of service? Isn't it simply a state of mind that either does or does not affect us?

In reality, the Rambam is offering us a profound insight. An illustration drawn from common experience will clarify his point. We have all found ourselves in circumstances where, because of preoccupation or distraction, we are unable to enjoy a happy occasion. We may be in attendance at a wedding but our concerns weigh upon us so heavily that we are not able to "throw ourselves" into the unrestrained joy that surrounds us. The presence of inhibition or inner conflict stops us from immersing ourselves in the pleasure of dancing, singing, etc. We may go through the motions, but our heart is not fully invested in the process. For this reason, our experience of the celebration remains incomplete.

The same circumstance applies on all holidays of the Jewish year, except for Sukkot. On Passover, Shavuot, etc., although we are happy, we still experience an element of inner strain, an inability to fully engage in celebration. A dissonance exists between the abstract ideas we are studying and our own spiritual state. We are not yet "at one" with the theme of the holiday, its message still needs to be internalized. Even from a practical perspective, the harvest - which is another element of our holiday observances - has not yet been concluded, so we have concrete reasons to be preoccupied as well.

By contrast, on Sukkot, we have become fully integrated personalities. We find ourselves in harmony with our environment, with our value system and with Hashem. Inner turmoil is absent. Furthermore, Sukkot comes at a time when the produce has been collected from the fields, so that our agricultural

concerns can safely be put to rest. Because we feel free of inhibition, preoccupation or reservation, we are capable of being fully engaged in the holiday experience. We can invest the entirety of our being - intellectual, emotional and physical - into the mitsvot of Sukkot, thus taking unmitigated pleasure in serving God.

It is now clear why the internal sense of joy we feel on the holidays is vitally important for our growth. The more completely we immerse ourselves in Torah and mitsvot, the more we develop our appreciation of Hashem's wisdom and cleave to His commandments. At the same time, we can now see why it is a state we are commanded to enter - it is a form of service -

and not a simple emotional response. As the Rambam teaches us, true happiness can only occur within the soul of an individual who is willing to set aside other concerns and allow himself to feel it. We can always find things to worry about that can sap our energy and dilute the intensity of our intellectual and spiritual focus. It is our obligation to rise above these distracting elements and fully partake in the holiday spirit.

Sukkot, the time of our joy, provides us with optimal conditions for true happiness. The Torah directs us to take advantage of this special opportunity and to use it as a vehicle for drawing closer to our Creator. ■

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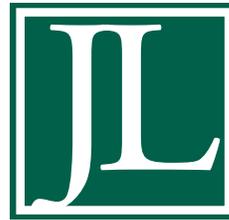


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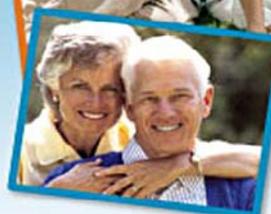
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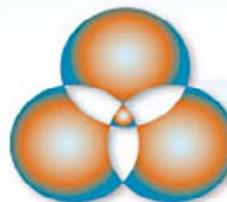
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