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THE MITZVAH OF DWELLING IN A SUKKAH: FAITH IN G-D AND IN HIS MITZVOT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

We know the famous question: Why did the Holy One, blessed be He, command us to fulfill the mitzvah of dwelling in a sukkah during the month of Tishri rather than Nissan, which is when we left Egypt, as we read: “That your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in sukkot when I took them from the land of Egypt” (Vayikra 23:43).

The Tur (Orach Chaim 625) answers this question in the following way: Although we left Egypt during Nissan, we did not receive the order to build a sukkah at that time. This is because it was the summer, a time when everyone builds outdoor shelters for shade. It would have therefore been impossible to know whether the construction of such a sukkah had resulted from an order of the Creator. He commanded us to do this in Tishri, the rainy season, when most people leave their outdoors shelters and go back to living in their houses. However we leave our houses for the sukkah, thereby showing everyone that we are obeying the order of the King.

The very fact that we fulfill the mitzvah of dwelling in a sukkah during the month of Tishri, not Nissan, teaches us a great principle in serving Hashem. Although people are constantly confronted by trials, we know that they always try to overcome them. In fact the time to improve ourselves lasts all year long. How so? In Nissan, the month of our deliverance, a person must remove chametz from his home (i.e., his heart), thereby drawing closer to Hashem. Then in Iyar, he continues to elevate himself because that is when the omer is counted, a time to work on ourselves.

If that were not enough, in Sivan a person elevates himself even more because that is when he receives the Torah, by which he cleaves to Hashem. When the months of Tammuz and Av arrive, he continues to work on himself because everyone wants to rectify the causes of the Temple’s destruction, such as Lashon Harah and baseless hatred. Above all, in Elul and Tishri, the time of judgment and mercy, a person returns to Hashem, becoming pure and cleansed of all sin.

As a result of all this, a person may grow proud and tell himself, “I’ve rectified everything and now I’m perfect.” Such thinking may lead him to lose all the spiritually that he has gained.

Since Hashem is compassionate, it is precisely during this time that He commanded us to build a sukkah, to once again leave our homes for the sukkah and find shelter in the shadow of His wings. This is because the sukkah is the shadow of faith (Zohar III:103a), and we are to dwell in it so that

faith may once again grow in our hearts and we never succumb to trials. Furthermore, during the festival of Sukkot the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to visit people in their sukkah with the seven holy and faithful shepherds, the ushpizin. Why does this happen? So that the ushpizin can pour out blessings and success upon people, and as a result they will be able to overcome every trial they face. Moreover, the ushpizin stand by people not only during Sukkot, but on every day of the year, helping them to strengthen their Torah learning, mitzvot observance, and personal development. In reflecting upon this, we see that the presence of the seven ushpizin is a sign from Hashem that all our sins have been forgiven during the month of Tishri. It is like a person who greatly offends his friend, but later asks for forgiveness. How can he know that his friend has wholeheartedly forgiven him? If his friend comes to his home with beautiful gifts, he will know for certain that he has been forgiven. The same applies to the Holy One, blessed be He. On Sukkot we invite the seven ushpizin into our tiny sukkah, and Hashem arrives as well. This proves that He has forgiven all our sins on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. What’s more is that Hashem brings us a beautiful gift, namely faith, so we can continue to believe in Him forever. We will therefore know that all our sins have been forgiven. By way of allusion, we may add that the word ichaper (“He will atone”) has the same numerical value (310) as the world shai (“gift”), since the very fact of being forgiven constitutes a gift from Hashem.

For our part, we must appreciate the gifts that Hashem bestows upon us. We must strengthen our faith, our fear of Heaven, and our Torah observance so as to become vessels worthy of receiving such gifts. Hence on our part we build a sukkah, and not only do we build it, but we begin as soon as Yom Kippur ends, as stated in the Halachah (Rema, Orach Chaim 624:5). In other words, after our sins have been forgiven we want to be vessels worthy of receiving Hashem’s blessings, which is why we immediately start building a sukkah. This proves that we are grateful to Hashem for all the good He does for us at every moment, grateful for having forgiven us, and grateful that we want to draw even closer to Him. Hence immediately after all evil has left us on Yom Kippur, we begin to build our sukkah so the Satan can no longer make its way into us and establish a foothold there. Instead we fill our bodies and souls exclusively with mitzvot, solely with faith in Hashem and with love. By acting in this way, we demonstrate our complete love for Hashem and His mitzvot.

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Nothing is More Urgent

In a few days, we will all be dancing around Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah, when our joy will be immense. The Zohar praises those who study Torah, clinging to the Tree of Life and meriting great benefits. It states, “Happy is the lot of one who constantly occupies himself with Torah, for if a man abandons the Torah for one moment, it is as if he abandoned eternal life, as it says: ‘For it is your life and the length of your days’ [Devarim 30:20]” (Zohar I:92a).

One day the gaon Rabbi Israel Gustman Zatzal (the author of Netzach Israel) telephoned the offices of the rabbinate in Heikhal Shlomo and asked to speak with the Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Avraham Shapira Zatzal. Since there was a board meeting underway at the time, the secretary apologized, saying that it was impossible to speak to the Chief Rabbi. However Rav Gustman replied, “Tell Rav Shapira that Rav Gustman urgently needs to speak to him!” The secretary became alarmed and transmitted this message to Rav Shapira in the conference room. When Rav Shapira heard it, he immediately left the meeting to speak with Rav Gustman and find out what was wrong. When Rav Shapira picked up the phone, Rav Gustman said to him: “Rabbi Avrom, in the conversation that we had, it is difficult to understand what Rashi is saying, but now a clear interpretation of his words has come to me.” He then began to explain his point of view. Rav Shapira listened until the very end, at which point he began to raise issues with his viewpoint in order to refute his argument. Rav Gustman explained his concept further, expressing one idea after another as these two great Torah figures immersed themselves in a different world – the world of study – which was their true world, forgetting everything around them.

After their conversation, Rav Shapira returned to the conference room and apologized for the delay. He then explained to everyone in the meeting what had just happened: Rav Gustman had called him with an urgent request. What was so urgent? He had difficulty understanding certain remarks by Rashi, which prevented him from studying, and for him that was the most urgent thing in the world. Hence he told the secretary that it was extremely urgent. What do you think of that? He was actually right! It was truly the most urgent thing to understand what Rashi means in order to continue learning Torah. This is a true gaon, for whom urgencies mean something completely different. Nothing exists other than his learning, which is the most urgent and important thing in the world.

His student, Rabbi Yitzchak Dadoun, discusses such behavior in his book Rosh Devarcha: “Our teacher would follow his own advice. One day a group of prominent rabbis and dayanim arrived at Heikhal Shlomo and waited to meet with him. Arriving at the same time was a youngster from a yeshiva holding a Gemara, which he was diligently studying. This youngster had encountered a difficulty in his studies, and he had come to ask for an explanation from our teacher. When the latter saw a yeshiva student in line waiting to see him, he summoned him and asked what he wanted. When the boy explained the reason for his visit – that he had difficulty understanding a certain sugia and wanted to ask him for an explanation – he said to him: ‘You’re first. The Torah goes before all else.’”

Along the same lines, Rav David Samson Shlita, the Rosh Yeshiva of Lech Lecha in Jerusalem, recounted the following story: “During a study session at the yeshiva, I and my chavruta, Rav Pessach Yaffe Zatzal, had difficulty understanding an issue being discussed by Tosaphot, and we couldn’t find an answer to it. After several attempts, I decided that it was a good opportunity to go see the Rosh Yeshiva Zatzal and ask him for help. In this way my chavruta, who wasn’t as close to him as I was, would get to know him. We arrived at the home of the Rosh Yeshiva and knocked lightly at his door. The Rebbetzin answered, and when she saw us she said that the Rav was in an important meeting, and we had to wait until it was over.

“The Rosh Yeshiva had invited several important community leaders to his home, and they were discussing matters of importance to the public. Then suddenly, in the middle of the discussion taking place in his office, he left for some reason and to his surprise he saw us studying there. He approached us and asked what we wanted. We explained that it wasn’t important, since he was in a meeting, and we would wait until he was free. However the Rosh Yeshiva insisted, wanting to understand why we had arrived. We then explained that we had a problem in Tosaphot that we couldn’t resolve. He looked at us carefully and then said, in a tone of criticism: ‘This isn’t important? This is the most important and urgent thing in the world! There’s nothing more urgent than this!’

“He immediately wanted to hear what the problem was, and as his prominent guests waited for him in his office, he sat with us discussing our problem and offering solutions. After a long discussion, he provided us with a solution, but before leaving he said: ‘This solution is only so you can sleep tonight. By tomorrow I hope to find a better one.’”

In fact it is a love for Torah that beats in the hearts of those who study it. Rav Yosef Binyamin ben Yaakov also recounts that the Rosh Yeshiva Zatzal told him that when people come to discuss Torah with him, it truly strengthens his health and reinvigorates him. One day, when some of his students arrived to discuss Torah with him, he said to them: “Thank you for having come. I had a bad headache, but because of you it’s now gone.”

Guard Your Tongue

Newspapers

Because of our numerous sins, the evil inclination, which is the Satan, has found a new trick to make our Jewish brothers sin through mockery, thereby causing divine influence to leave this world. I’ve identified it as the reading of newspapers, which has greatly expanded in our time. They are filled with mockery and Lashon Harah, slander, ungodly and sacrilegious discussions. If nobody read them, they would not be printed. No one realizes that everyone will have to answer for this when they give an accounting before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

This pertains to those who print them, those who sell them, and those who read them: For many of our Jewish brothers, it has become absolutely essential for them, so much so that they can’t live a single day without a newspaper, which people lose hours reading.

– From the Letters of the Chafetz Chaim

The Torah and Those Who Support it

The Gerer Rebbe (author of *Imrei Emet*) said, “The roof of the sukkah alludes to the Sages. Hence it must be comprised of material that cannot contract impurity, and must be made of vegetation, for a scholar must absolutely be free of all impurity. However the walls of the sukkah represent those who support the Torah. Hence even if they are not perfect, being comprised of material that can contract impurity, they are still suitable for being an integral part of the sukkah.”

Rejoicing in Looking Upon the Four Species

Rabbi Moshe Bolvine recounts that in Grodno one year, he was the only person who had the four species.

Obviously, he went early in the morning to bring them to the gaon Rabbi Shimon Shkop so he could be the first to hold them together for the mitzvah, at which point he gave them to the other residents in town.

Yet when everyone had performed the mitzvah, Rabbi Shimon asked if he could keep the four species at his home. In this way, he could place them on his table during the day and rejoice in looking upon them.

He Would Kiss the Etrog

The gaon Rabbi Shmuel Shinavir recounted the following about his teacher Rabbi Shlomo Yehuda Leib of Lentshna:

“When he performed the mitzvah of the four species, he became crazed with a love for the mitzvah, kissing the etrog each time he recited Hallel.”

The Walls of the Sukkah

Rabbi Yitzchak of Letzan said the following about the gaon Rabbi Chaim Leib of Stevisk:

“A trustworthy man who was invited into his sukkah told me that he saw him get up on several occasions while he thought that his guest was sleeping, and he would kiss the walls of his sukkah with an incredible degree of enthusiasm and love. Furthermore, he almost never left the sukkah throughout the entire festival.”

This is the Beauty of the Sukkah

Rabbi Elchonon Halpern recounts a story that his grandfather, Rabbi Shemuel Engel, would often tell: On the eve of Sukkot, the Rebbe of Sanz (the Divrei Chaim) would enter the sukkah. His grandchildren would then show him the beauty of their sukkah, as well as the decorations and ornaments that they had hung inside. For the sake of education, however, the Rebbe said: “Is this the beauty of the sukkah? The true beauty of the sukkah resides in the fact that we study tractate Sukkah while dwelling in the sukkah!”

By Cleaving to the Torah, We Yearn to Serve G-d

Shemini Atzeret is called Simchat Torah (“the joy of the Torah”), for on this day we conclude the yearly cycle of Torah readings. I would like to provide a nice explanation as to why our Sages instituted the conclusion of the Torah readings precisely on this day, after all the festivals and awe-inspiring days have ended.

We know that the number seven represents everything pertaining to the realm of nature, whereas the number eight represents things beyond the realm of nature. In fact Hashem created the world in seven days, and everything in this world corresponds to seven: The seven planets, the seven middot, the seven days of the week....

Yet since the number eight represents the realm beyond nature, the festival of Shemini Atzeret alludes to what preceded the creation of the world, when there was only G-d and the Torah. It is therefore the best time to rejoice with it.

Furthermore, let us examine the interpretation cited by Rashi and the Midrash in the Aggadah: During the festival of Sukkot, the Children of Israel make an offering of 70 bulls, which correspond to the 70 nations of the world. As they prepare to conclude the festival, G-d says to them: “Please, bring Me a small meal. Stay with Me a little longer.” He employs a language of affection, like a father telling his children who are about to leave him: “It is difficult for me to see you go. Stay with me for another day.”

All of us must therefore experience a sense of longing for the days of the festival that have concluded, feeling difficulty in parting from their sanctity as well as the divine service we performed. Through this sense of longing, we can extend the holiness of the festival and sense of closeness with Hashem throughout the year. Hence this is the main goal of Shemini Atzeret: To feel the difficulty of parting from G-d and the conclusion of the festival, so that the holiness of these days influences the rest of the year and our connection to Hashem endures as well.

Now the only way to remain influenced by these days, to feel connected to our Creator and prolong the sanctity of the festival throughout the year, is to study Torah. In fact by taking this approach, we will yearn to serve Hashem and draw closer to Him.

It was for this reason that our Sages instituted the conclusion of the yearly Torah readings on the final day of the festival, and to surround this event with great joy. This enables us to adhere to the Torah, and to cherish and prolong the sanctity of the festival (as well as the exhilaration we felt during these holy days) throughout the rest of the year.

This is also why we conclude the yearly Torah readings and restart them immediately afterward on Shemini Atzeret. During the festivals and holy days, all Jews have completely repented and committed themselves to rectifying their deeds and acting only in accordance with the way of the Torah and the will of Hashem.

Through their great wisdom and profound insight, our Sages wanted us to begin a new life immediately after the festivals, in accordance with our commitment. Hence they instituted that the yearly Torah readings should restart as soon as the festival ends. Furthermore, the first parshiot we read upon restarting the yearly Torah readings describe the creation of the world and its renewal, and as such we too must act like newly created beings.

The Etrogim that Saved the Jews of Warsaw thanks to the Chiddushei HaRim

There was a worrisome and sad atmosphere one year among the Jews of Warsaw. The lack of kosher etrogim for the festival of Sukkot, which was soon approaching, drained them of all their joy.

Etrogim, as we know, are not grown in Poland. Merchants would therefore normally import magnificent etrogim each year from tropical countries. This wasn't easy, and it was extremely expensive. However a love for this mitzvah outweighed all other considerations, financial or otherwise, and whoever had the means made every effort to purchase a beautiful etrog for the festival of Sukkot.

The weather was particularly bad that year, making everything more difficult about growing etrogim, which are extremely sensitive to variations in temperature. This naturally produced an extremely small harvest, with the result being that in the Jewish districts of Warsaw there wasn't a single kosher etrog upon which people could make a blessing.

In the prayers of Rosh Hashanah, the residents of Warsaw beseeched the Almighty to see their anguish and enable them to find beautiful etrogim with which they could properly fulfil the mitzvah of the four species. In their hearts, they believed that the Holy One, blessed be He, would certainly not leave their great city without etrogim for the mitzvah of the four species.

As it turned out, less than a week before the festival of Sukkot, hopeful news spread through the city like a flash of lightning. A Greek merchant had arrived on the Vistula River with a boat filled with beautiful etrogim. Not long afterward, a Jewish crowd made up of young and old began running toward the riverbank, their eyes wide open as they saw market stalls filled with highly coveted etrogim.

Yet once the crafty Greek merchant realized the great value of his merchandise, he ordered the crowd with a proud voice to move away from the stalls and to purchase etrogim in small groups. In doing so, he hoped to control the situation.

The eyes of people in the crowd glistened with joy at the sight of these superb etrogim, which they so ardently yearned for. In fact they were prepared to do everything the merchant told them, just as long as they could purchase an etrog for the festival, which was not a trivial matter.

However their joy didn't last very long. The first group of buyers returned to town greatly disappointed. "The merchant went mad," they murmured in disbelief. Apparently the crafty merchant had demanded a colossal price for each etrog, a price equal to a hundred etrogim sold the year before.

Every effort made by the leaders of the Jewish community to convince the merchant to lower his price was useless. Even when they threatened to purchase only one etrog from him, he didn't soften his stance or lower his price. From the desperate look that he saw in people's eyes, he thought he could actually sell all his etrogim for his asking price.

The leaders of the community were therefore faced with a serious dilemma: Despite the exorbitant price, should they use public funds to purchase a few etrogim for performing the mitzvah for the entire community, or should they pressure the merchant until he lowered his price? They expressed their concerns to the Gerer Rebbe Zatzal, the author of Chiddushei HaRim, who was in Warsaw at the time.

The Gerer Rebbe, who was known for his keen insight, carefully listened to every detail. He then thought about it for a few moments, and eventually asked his faithful assistant to summon Rabbi Nachum and Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya, two well-known merchants of etrogim in Warsaw, for he wanted to discuss the situation with them.

The Rebbe's assistant obeyed, and both etrog merchants were quickly summoned before the Rebbe. After speaking with him for a short time, both merchants were seen leaving his office with a mysterious smile on their faces. When asked what the Rebbe had told them, they didn't say a word.

On the morning before the festival of Sukkot, a new rumor began to spread along the streets of the city, namely that a new shipment of etrogim had arrived in the shops of the two etrog merchants, Rabbi Nachum and Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya. People heard that they would open their shops at a certain time and furnish the community with an abundance of etrogim.

The residents of Warsaw were stunned, unable to contain themselves. They gathered around the shops of the two merchants a few hours before opening time. In fact through the glass window, people could see large cases resting on layers of linen, where beautiful yellow etrogim were seen.

Among the crowd gathered at the entrance of these shops was the Greek merchant, who had also heard this rumor and hastened to see if there was any truth to it. When he saw the mountain of cases through the shop window, he turned as white as chalk because he realized that his merchandise would very soon be worthless. His heart was racing because he hadn't had enough sense to slightly lower his prices, which would have still earned him a fortune. How he regretted it!

The Greek merchant immediately announced that whoever would hurry and purchase an etrog from him in the following hour, before the shops of the Jewish merchants opened, could do so at a trivial price. In fact the price he set for his etrogim was ridiculously low.

Hundreds of people quickly gathered around the stalls of the Greek merchant, who made no fuss this time. In fact all he cared about was getting rid of his merchandise as quickly as possible.

It was only when the last Jew in Warsaw had purchased a beautiful etrog that the merchant went away in great sadness. The tremendous intelligence of the Chiddushei HaRim had proven itself: The beautiful etrogim that people had seen through the store window of the two Jewish merchants, these "etrogim" had been carefully carved out of wood and painted yellow!