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Joy Is Vital

Sukkot

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After two days of Rosh Hashanah and a very long day on Yom Kippur, you'd think that Jews would be exhausted. Isn't it enough already?

But no, we still have Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Sukkot has the most mitzvot: to dwell in the sukkah (booth), to take the four species and to be joyful — oh so joyful.

Surprisingly, the commandment to be joyful is repeated three separate times. Why so often? Maybe because this is the hardest of all the mitzvot. Shaking the lulav is not hard. Building a sukkah is challenging, but not really hard. But being oh so joyful?

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the late 18th century Chasidic master, taught about joy in a way that resonates with a contemporary audience: "Finding true joy is the hardest of all spiritual tasks. If the only way to make yourself happy is by doing something silly, do it. If despite your desire to be happy you feel down, draw strength from happier times gone by. Eventually joy will return. If you don't feel happy, pretend to be. Even if you are depressed, put on a smile. Act happy. Genuine joy will follow. Get in the habit of singing a tune. It will give you new life and fill you with joy. Get in the habit of dancing. It will displace depression and dispel hardship. Always remember: joy is not ... incidental to your spiritual task; it is vital."

Many of us struggle with being joyful; we're good at worrying, good at existential angst. But are we good at joy?

What does Sukkot teach us about what joy really is? Think about the season. What are we celebrating? One thing is that we made it through Yom Kippur. We have atoned for our sins. We learned again — through the fast, through our hard work of introspection, through our communal prayer — that even though we're not perfect, even though we made mistakes, change is possible and that it is possible to begin again.

That is a cause for joy.

And, of course, we are celebrating the harvest. Sukkot is the fall harvest festival — the lulav, etrog, myrtle and willow are all produce of the land of Israel. So Sukkot connects us to that land and reminds us how important Israel is to us.

And those four species, so different from each other, represent the different parts of our bodies: lulav, our spine; myrtle, our eyes; willow, our mouth; and etrog, our heart.

We shake the lulav in all six directions, unifying the disparate parts of ourselves and the different parts of the world. So that's a cause for joy, too. It is the promise that in our fragmented lives and in this broken world, we can still hope for wholeness — and work for it. That too is a source of joy.

There are other harvests as well, not just for a community but also for each of us as individuals. Sukkot reminds us to think of the abundance of our lives and all we have to make us grateful. If we stop and notice those blessings, that too is a source of joy.

Sukkot is a moment when we notice what we usually take for granted. We build a sukkah, a temporary booth covered with greens or bamboo, material that was once alive, and yet we can still see the sky. We bring into the sukkah what is most important: family, friends, good food. We're not in a rush in the sukkah; the mitzvah is to sit there, to relax, to enjoy. We invite not only family and friends, but our spiritual ancestors — ushpizin (Sukkot guests), Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, a different pair for each night. And we remember other ancestors as well.

In our sukkah, we go around the table and ask people whom they would like to invite into the sukkah with them, people who are no longer alive, perhaps, or family and friends who live far away. So what is most important? Family, friends, memory ... and the time to breathe a little. All that is a cause for joy.

The Torah gives us a reason for this holiday: that our generations may remember that God caused us to dwell in sukkot when God brought us out of Egypt. The great commentator Ramban asked: "Sukkot, really? Agricultural booths in the desert? Probably not. What were the sukkot in the desert?" His answer: "the clouds of divine glory that accompanied us

in the desert; that's where we lived." For 40 years we didn't have homes, we didn't have cities ... we didn't have things. Yet because we felt God's presence, we had everything we needed.

Maybe that is the ultimate cause for joy — knowing that we have everything we need. And that what we need is what we can bring with us into the sukkah that we build, to help us remember what is important — not our houses, not our cars, not our computers or iPhones. Those things are not really the source of joy.

Joy comes from being grateful for what really matters, and through that gratitude we feel the presence of God.

No wonder Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav teaches that joy is not merely incidental to our spiritual quest. It is vital.

Chag Sameach.

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