

"THE ARK AND THE TABLETS"

The Haftorah that our tradition has ordained for this second day of Sukkot offers us a revealing glimpse into a significant epoch in the life of our forefathers. It tells us of the festivities that occurred when King Solomon dedicated the Bet ha-Mikdash, the holy Temple that he had built, and the moving prayer that he offered at this occasion.

While the choice of this Haftorah was, in a formal and outward sense, based upon the fact that this week of festivities and dedication coincided with the holiday of Sukkot, I believe that the teaching of the Haftorah has an inner relation and is peculiarly relevant both to the nature of Sukkot and to the spirit of our own times.

When we read the Haftorah carefully, we find recorded a great deal of the pomp and circumstance in ancient Jerusalem. It is enough to warm the hearts of any proud Jew who aspires to the restoration of the ancient national glory of our people and the re-awakening of the great religious spirit of our history. Great crowds gathered in Jerusalem that day. King Solomon was surrounded by the Kohanim and Levites, ve'khol adat Yisrael ha-noadim alav ito - and all the congregation of Israel were assembled unto him. One can only imagine the colorfulness and pageantry, the tumultuous song and the dancing of this happy, dedicated assembly. As the King and the elders and the people surrounded the Aron or Ark, sacrifices were offered by the priests -- so many, that lo yisafu ve'lo yimanu me'rov, "they could not be told or numbered, so many were they." The <sup>e</sup>prists then took the Aron to its place in the innermost part of the Temple, to the kodesh ha-Kadashim, the holy of holies. How dramatic that occasion must have been! How impressive to notice how, in the words of the Haftorah, va-yasoku ha-keruvim al ha-aron, the wings of the cherubim spread forth over the place of the Ark. And when the Kohanim left the Temple, where they ministered, an even more dramatic event occurred: a dense cloud, representing the mysterious and sublime Presence of G-d, filled

the entire Bet ha-Mikdash. Indeed it had an awe-inspiring, ceremonial, dramatically impressive effect.

And yet somehow there is one sentence that the author of the Book of Kings put in as a gentle reminder to the reader. It is this one verse which, to my mind, is of the most crucial importance to us. Ein ba-aron rak shnei luchot ha-avanim asher hiniach sham Mosheh be'chorev "there was nothing in the Ark except the two stone tablets which Moses put there at Horeb, or Sinai." That is all! Only two modest tablets of stone. Do you hear the crowds milling, the Levites singing, the masses shouting? Do you see the multitude of sacrifices, the beautifully attired King, the majestic cherubim, the dense and awesome cloud? Do you notice the gorgeous grounds, the august sanctuary? Well, dear reader of the Bible, all this is nothing, utterly nothing, if not for the fact that ein ba-aron rak shnei luchot ha-avanim - that the Ark contained two little slabs of stone on which were engraved the commandments that G-d gave to Moses at Sinai! All this ceremony is wonderful - as long as you keep the main thing in mind: the Torah. But ~~once~~ that Torah is ignored, once it is displaced from the Ark of the heart, once it is allowed to atrophy from neglect, once that Torah is missing - then all the noise and song, all the beauty and majesty, all the dignity and ceremony is of no value. If you remember the main thing, then everything falls in place. Ignore the essentials, and everything else loses meaning. In other words: develop a perspective, a sense of proportion, in which you will always keep the truly worthy ends in focus.

Is not that something which we American Jews must learn and learn again? Like most moderns, we have throughout life a tendency to be diverted from the vital by the trivial. Like <sup>an</sup> am ha-aretz who is proud of his beautiful tallit but has forgotten to put on the <sup>^</sup> tzitzit; like the naive fellow who admires Prof. Einstein's penmanship but ignores his theories; we have managed to become entangled in the secondary and superfluous, and lose sight of ultimate aims and higher ends. As life gets more complicated and society more complex, as techniques and trinkets proliferate, we progressively lose the ability to

distinguish between the genuinely purposeful and the generally superfluous, between the fundamental and the frivolous.

Until Admiral Rickover began his incessant critique of American education, we had a tendency to emphasize the extra-curricular activities over and above the main business of the school: teaching hard subject matter. We lost sight of the center and heart and core of the enterprise of education. <sup>↑</sup> Bright and intelligent young people consider every secondary aspect in preparing for marriage - except that which is truly essential. Finances, career, a place to live, furniture, vacations, everything is thought through in the most careful detail - except for the one sacred bond that can keep husband and wife together through the hunderum of every day, prosaic life. Everything is planned and considered - except taharat ha-mishpachah, which alone can insure the sublimity of their feelings towards each other, the endurance of true love, the permanence of mutual respect and affection.

Our politicians, engineers, and journalists are effusive in admiring our sleek missiles and powerful rockets. Yet few indeed bother to inquire as to the purpose of this national preoccupation and unprecedented expenditure.

Our society is very sophisticated. It does not neglect to speak of the main things, of the shnei luchot ha-avanim. Our newspapers and magazines always <sup>write</sup> ~~speaks~~ of the importance of the "democratic heritage," and of the enduring qualities which make America great. But in actual practice, our society completely ignores what is really important in its life, and emphasizes only the trivial and the foolish. A society which pays entertainers millions while professors are reduced to the life of paupers; which interrupts news broadcasts of an astronaut landing in order to present the world series; which headlines the stupid doings of morally weak and intellectually feeble actors and actresses but relegates to a back page such crucial issues as disarmament - a society of this sort has forgotten that all the pomp and all the ceremony are senseless unless ein ba-aron rak shnei luchot ha-avanim.

Thank Heavens we at The Jewish Center have been spared from a popular plague of our people - that of synagogues, the successors to the Temple, which have everything, ~~but everything~~ - except: the shnei luchot ha-avanim, the two stone tablets - the Torah. Too many Temples throughout the country can boast of the finest music, the best choirs, packed calendars of activities, the biggest Boy Scout groups, Men's Clubs and Sisterhoods, the most successful banquets, dinners, outings, and bazaars. All this would be good and well, provided the essentials were not forgotten. The whole problem is that in the Aron of the synagogue the two stone tablets are missing. Oh, they may have any number of Torah scrolls in the physical Ark, but I speak of the Ark that a synagogue must plant in the heart of its people. If, as in the Bet ha-Mikdash of Solomon, all the aesthetics and activities bolster the main idea, the shnei luchot ha-avim - then everything else is proper and deserving of praise and commendation. But if, Heaven forbid, the Temple has at the center of its life a spirit of secularism, a disdain for true spiritual values, an indifference to true Yiddishkeit; if at the center of the synagogue there are not the stone tablets that Moses brought down from Sinai, but if in the Aron there is the bazaar or the bagels-and-~~lox~~ or the fund-raising of the new swimming pool - then all else is a sham and a failure, a disgraceful game of religious charades. Solomon's greatness lay not in the majesty of his architectural design or in his public relations or in his ability to "get the crowd out." It was that primarily he put Moses's Torah into the Ark, and only secondarily that he had the other talents as well.

And indeed the Sukkah is itself a symbol of that very teaching. For seven days we are commanded to leave our comfortable dwellings, our penthouses, and suburban homes and slick city apartments, and retire to ~~it~~ - a hut, a Sukkah. The temperature is wrong, the dust excessive, bits of the foliage of the sekhakh fall into our food, the walls are not altogether wind-resistant - and for all our discomfort and inconvenience, we suddenly discover a great truth! It is actually possible to survive without a dirat keva, without a permanent house!

If you have your family and friends about you, if you still know how to make Kiddush and praise Almighty G-d, if you have life and limb and health so that you can utter a word of thanks to G-d who looks down upon you from Heaven and right through the sekhakh - then you have the main thing, and all the rest is superfluous luxury. The Sukkah was the residence of our ancestors, in the great wasteland of Sinai, who had nothing but G-d. And it is a symbol to us, in our Sukkot, that if we have G-d and Torah, we need little else; and if we do not have G-d and Torah, nothing else will help.

Ein ba-aron rak shnei luchot ha-avanim. The lesson of the Sukkah then, and that of this morning's Haftorah, is that it is more important to know how to live than how to make a living; that a home ~~is~~ means more than a house; that the modest kodesh ha-kadashim is more significant than the lavish courtyard; that what is within the Aron counts far more than the color combinations of the cloth outside it.

(Our Tradition refers to this holiday of Sukkot as zeman simchatenu - the time of our happiness. Indeed, an awareness of the meaning of Sukkah allows us to feel happy. How often does it happen that our unhappiness, our malaise, our inner bitterness arises not because of major tragedies, not because we are deprived of fundamentals -- but because of an accumulation of petty irritations, minor frustrations, little annoyances. It is the little things, rather than the big things, that most often destroy our peace of mind. If, therefore, we allow the sukkah to remind us of the truly essential in life, if we will retain the proper perspective and not exaggerate the importance of trivia -- we shall retain our simchah as well. If we recognize our dissatisfactions as being in the area of the superficial and insignificant, they will not nullify our joy in living. That <sup>how</sup> is the festival of Sukkot can become for each of us zeman simchatenu.)

Perhaps this insight lies at the heart of a rather strange halakhah. We are taught in Jewish law that mitzta'er patur min ha-sukkah, that one who is suffering, one who is in pain, or tzaar is released from the obligation of

dwelling in the Sukkah. This is a remarkable law because we nowhere else find an exception for the mitz'ta'er, the person in pain. One may have a toothache, yet he is not exempt from the requirement to <sup>eat matzah.</sup> ~~lay the tefillin.~~ One may have a headache, yet he must fast on Yom Kippur. Why, then, is the mitz'ta'er exempt from Sukkah?

Perhaps those who have truly experienced what it is to be a mitz'ta'er can answer that question. One who is felled by serious illness and confined to a sick room at home or in the hospital knows the answer. His appetite is curbed, and no delicacy or drink appeals to him. His pain intrudes into his heart and mind, and what normally passes for entertainment rings hollow and false and utterly unconvincing. The bare walls are before his eyes all day and all night, and he begins to realize that the usual diversions of civilized society are trivial and petty. The values he cherished when he was active and in the center of things, now recede and shade off into darkness. Life seems to be passing him by. All the great luxuries and honors to which he aspired when in full health now seems so utterly insignificant compared to that one thought that dominates all else: life and recovery and the security of his family. The elements of compassion and friendship and love which he took granted before and never considered as really essential, now appear to him as the most important things in life. The friendly but perfunctory greeting, "how are you?" once taken by him as a mere gesture, an empty formality, he now appreciates as a sincere query; he can detect the anxiousness and friendship in the words, the warmth and the concern in the very intonation. ~~The~~ mitz'ta'er who must lie on his back for an extended period, no matter what assurances are given him, no matter how good his medical condition is, nevertheless <sup>cannot</sup> ~~cannot~~ help but flirt with morbid thoughts; now and then his mind is darkened by the ~~f~~ fear of death. And confronted with such momentous thoughts, only that which is truly essential stands out, and the rest shrinks into insignificance. To one who totters on the brink of life and death, gripped by pain and shaken by agony and doubts and fear, of what value are another killing on the market, <sup>a</sup> bigger sale, a better dress, a more beautiful home, a more expensive cruise?

The mitz'ta'ar, therefore, he **who** has suffered illness and pain and isolation, knows the secret that is taught to others by the Sukkah: to keep the main things in sight, not to forget amidst all the pomp and pageantry, the ceremony and celebration, that ein ba-ar on rak shnei luchot ha-avanim - that everything is meaningless unless in the Ark there lie the two stone tablets that Moses took down from Sinai. The mitz'ta'er already knows from his own bitter experience what the Sukkah has to teach all of us. And therefore: mitz'ta'er patur min ha-sukkah, the mitz'ta'er is exempt from the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah, because the purpose of the sukkah is to teach something the mitz'ta'er already knows.

As we recall the ancient splendor of the dedication of the Bet ha-Mikdash that took place during this season in the days of Solomon; as we re-live symbolically the journeys of our ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai; as we leave our homes to dwell in the sukkah, may we learn to adopt a sacred scale of values, cherishing what is truly essential over the glitter of the trivial. May G-d spare us from having to learn this lesson through the experience of the mitz'ta'er.

May we, rather, in good health, in tranquility and in peace, learn to stop every once in a while in the course of our busy lives, and inquire of ourselves of that ancient yet ever-significant verse: ein ba-aron rak shnei luchot ha-avanim. For only by striving to live by the ideals of the commandments inscribed on those two tablets of stone, stored in the Ark of every Jewish heart, will all the rest of life prove meaningful, satisfying, and beautiful.