

"THE BOOTH OF ALIENATION"

What a strange festival this is! The weather is just turning chilly, people are coming home from the country and the beach, leaving the great outdoors for the indoors -- and we go outdoors and build ourselves a summer hut known as a sukkah! In our prayers we refer to this holiday as the zeman simhatenu, the season of our joy, because this is, according to the Bible, our hag-he'asif, harvest festival -- yet we are, at most, a coupon-clipping and dividend-accumulating society and hardly an agricultural community. We are bidden to take, on this festival, the cluster of plants known as arba minim, which represents all kinds of natural growth -- but we are city folks for whom such things are imported delicacies. No other holiday is, apparently, so inappropriate, so untimely, so irrelevant.

And yet it is precisely because of its apparent irrelevance that it is so very relevant! For the sukkah is a symbol of galut. Historically, our ancestors constructed their sukkot when they were in the great Sinai desert, neither in their Egyptian birthplace nor in their Promised Land. The Talmud describes the nature of this commandment as tzei mi-dirat keva ve'hikaneis le'dirat arai: leave your established home and enter a temporary abode. Hence, everything about this holiday ought really to symbolize disjunction and impertenance, peculiarity and abnorm-

ality, for these are the features of galut or exile. Galut means to be torn away from your natural habitat; it means anomolousness and irregularity. Sukkah therefore implies galut and all its negative consequences. And what Judaism teaches us is that we must recreate the atmosphere of a holiday within the sukkah, that we bear with us the holiness and purity of Judaism even in this modest symbol of exile and diaspora. For the sukkah is indeed the symbol of the wandering Jew: Jewish law accepts as valid a sukkah that is built even upon a sefinah or agalah, a boat or train or wagon. The wandering Jew can live in a movable sukkah. Sukkot, then, teaches the Jew how to live in exile -- and to survive!

The unusual political and social significance of this idea can best be appreciated by referring to a remark made some time ago by a historian who has not distinguished himself by friendship for Jews or admiration for Judaism. The English historian, Arnold Toynbee, who otherwise considers us nothing more than a fossil of Syriac civilization, maintains that Jews have one valuable lesson to teach the world: how to live in a diaspora. Peering into the future with a historian's eye, he forsees the time when national boundaries will disappear, and when entire populations will shift, even as Jews today live throughout the world, and as Negroes constitute a diaspora in America and Chinese throughout much of Asia and elsewhere. National cultures will have to learn to survive as cultural and religious entities in places which are

geographically not their own. Ultimately, this condition will characterize the entire world. What the world must learn, therefore, in order to survive, is how to continue a permanent culture in a temporary abode -- in other words, how to succeed as a Diaspora.

No wonder that the Haftorah for Sukkot, from the prophet Zechariah, speaks of the punishment that will come to Egypt and other nations if they will not observe the festival of Sukkot. This is rather strange: we know that Gentiles are obligated to observe the seven Noahide Commandments, but the observance of this holiday or any other is not among them. The explanation, however, according to our theme is this: if these people will not learn the secret of the sukkah, that is, how to survive culturally and ethically in diaspora, then the punishment of extinction will come to them naturally rather than be imposed upon them from without. Survival is granted only to those who will have learned from us the secret of the sukkah.

But not only does this idea have political and social consequences, it also has psychological and spiritual ramifications of the greatest importance. The most characteristic feeling of modern man is alienation, the feeling of being a stranger on earth, the experience of rootlessness and homelessness. This is a recurrent theme in all of modern literature and drama, under the influence of the great existentialists. Now, this alienation

can result in a loss of identity, a deterioration of selfhood, a lack of desire to achieve and build and contribute. This has often been the case with great intellectuals of our age, as well as with pseudo-intellectuals for whom alienation is expressed in nothing more than self-pity.

But it need not be so. It is also possible for alienation to result in a strengthening of creativity and identity.

It is this second result that Judaism seeks of the phenomenon of alienation, which it considers to be a universal quality of life, rather than a characteristic of modern life only. Over two thousand years ago, before the destruction of the Second Temple, the Alexandrian Jew Philo, who had such a profound effect upon all of Western Civilization, put it this way: The righteous man is always an alien, for he is in effect a citizen of Heaven who finds himself temporarily on Earth, where the values of his "home" are largely unknown and unappreciated. The decent, right-thinking individual will often find himself ridiculed and alienated.

How do we survive alienation, the feeling of exilehood? The answer is: by learning to transplant the spirit of home wherever you are. Judaism recommends that exile can be overcome by recreating the atmosphere of home even in the Diaspora, by bringing a patch of Heaven even to Earth. This can be done -- indeed, it must be done, even as the space-men who venture into the outer

reaches of the universe in their spacecraft must take along the equipment which will help recreate an earth atmosphere even in the near-vacuum of outer space, lest they perish in the unfamiliar environment.

This is precisely the teaching of Sukkot. We enter an abode which is strange and unnatural: the season is wrong, the weather often inclement, the locale abnormal, the items we use are inappropriate. Yet we recreate in this "booth of alienation" a spirit of at-homeness, of warmth, of sanctity -- a pure Jewish atmosphere. That is why we traditionally invite, at every meal in the sukkah, the ushpizin, the honored guests, namely, the spirits of the seven fathers of our people. Their presence in the sukkah, spiritually, gives us that feeling of being at home even while we are situated in the temporariness and impermanence of Diaspora.

Indeed, each of these ushpizin recollects, in some major facet of his life, the very same idea we have been proposing: surviving spiritually intact in exile. Abraham was told lekh lekha, to leave his home and go wandering. Isaac, having been blinded at the Akedah, became a stranger in his own household: he never understood his wife and children, and they understood him even less. Jacob had to flee for fourteen years. Joseph was sold as a captive into Egypt, and kept his sanity and sanctity only by remembering demut diyukno shel abba, the image of his father's

face. Moses, before he rose to greatness, was a refugee in the desert of Midyan. Aaron, at the most crucial point of his life, was left stranded by Moses who ascended Mt. Sinai, and found himself an alien amongst his people who ignored him and his principles as they danced about a golden calf. David spent many years in flight from King Saul and from his own son Absalom. All of them were people who learned how to live as a citizen of Heaven while a stranger on Earth. Their company in the sukkah, therefore, reinforces the insight that Israel can teach to the entire world.

Of the immigrants who came to this country during the great periods of migration, some remained loyal to Torah while so many more abandoned Judaism and cast their tefillin overboard at the first sight of the skyline of the New World. What was the difference between these and these? -- Some knew how to survive in the sukkah of life, and some never learned the lesson.

So it is with us in our days. We send a young man off to the army, or a young man or woman to a college campus. If they have learned the lesson of the sukkah well, if they have been taught how to make Judaism portable, if it is true that not only did they go through the Day School or Yeshivah, but the Yeshivah went through them, then they will remain Jewish even on campus or army camp. If they do not, it is a sign that we have failed them, that they have failed us, and that all of us have failed the teaching of Judaism.

Do you remember the famous question that the Palestinian exiles asked as they sat, mournfully by the waters of Babylon (Psalm 137)? Eikh nashir et shir ha-Shem al admat nekhar -- how shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land? This indeed is our question: how can you live Judaism in a strange land, in exile? They answer their own question: im eshkahekh Yerushalayim tishkah yemini, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand fail". They took along the atmosphere and the memory of Jerusalem, its sanctity and its teachings and its way of life, and they transplanted it on to the admat nekhar, foreign soil, the Diaspora. Alienation from the world can be overcome, provided one does not allow himself to become alienated from God, from Torah, from Yiddishkeit; provided he remains true to Jerusalem, to Heaven.

How do we know if we have achieved this remarkable spiritual feat? Indeed, what is the purpose of learning this secret of survival in the Diaspora? The test is this: whether we have learned to sympathize and help the real alien in life -- the poor. Judaism has always commanded us to consider the poor, especially during festivals. But most especially, according to our sacred writings, is this commandment "to concern ourselves with the poor" relevant to Sukkot. Thus we are told that there should be no sukkah without an ani, a poor man, present as a guest. Indeed, Jewish aristocrats of yore would invite seven poor people to each meal at the seudah, symbolizing the ushpizin. Furthermore,

each poor man invited must not be seated someplace in the corner, by himself, but must be treated royally, as if he were the reincarnation of one of the ushpizin, as if he himself were one of the fathers of our people. Why is that so? Why the special emphasis on the poor? Because the poor man knows better than anyone else the bitter depths of loneliness. The word "poor" should not be taken only in its financial sense, but even more, in its psychological and spiritual sense. When we have ourselves learned to achieve a feeling of at-homeness even in the midst of the despair of exile, then we shall have learned how to lend a sympathetic ear, and a helping hand, and a heart that beats in the rythm of sympathy with the poor man, the embittered, the lonely, who aspire and yearn for a word of friendship, a gesture of comfort, a sigh of compassion and commiseration.

Hence, the great Maimonides records the law for the holidays: mi she'noel daltot hatzero, he who closes the door of his courtyard during the festival and eats and drinks together with his wife and children, but v'eino maakhil u'mashkeh, he fails to share his food and his drink le'anim u'marei nefesh, with the poor and the embittered at heart, then, declares Maimonides in a statement of unusual sharpness, ein zu simbat mitzvah ela simbat kereso, this cannot be considered an occasion of religious joy, for it is only "the joy of the belly!" It is only when occasions of happiness are shared with the lonely, that we have risen to

the heights of a religious experience; it is then that we have learned to embody within ourselves the distinctive historic Jewish lesson of how to recreate the atmosphere of Jewishness in a strange environment.

Let us then conclude with an introductory prayer, with the beautiful yehi ratzon prayer that is recited upon entering the sukkah, and in which, amongst other things, we ask God: U-vi'zekhut tzeti mi-beti ha-hutzah, by virtue of leaving the security of my regular home and going outdoors into the sukkah, ve'derekh mitzvotekha arutzah, by virtue of my following in the path of Thy commandments, yehashev li zot k'ilu hirhakti nedod, may it be considered as if I had wandered far on Thy behalf, as if indeed I had experienced the bitterness of exile. Teach us to master the art of survival in the many and varied exiles of life, for this is the essence of Sukkot.

But above all, while teaching us to learn this art, we pray, in conclusion: do not let the galut last forever. Let us, finally, return home: u-tezakenu leshev yamim rabbim al ha-adamah, admat kodesh. Make us worthy to dwell many years on the land, the Holy Land, ba'avodatekha u-ve'yiratekha there to serve Thee and revere Thee.

Barukh ha-Shem l'olam, amen ve'amen; blessed be the Lord forever, Amen and Amen.