

"ON DOING WITHOUT"(orig - as "Sukkalim
& Sukkot" Kurlimb
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It is a pity that we Jews of mid-town do not have the opportunity to build an individual Sukkah for each family. We are missing a great educational experience not only for ourselves and our children, but even for our non-observant Jewish friends and our non-Jewish neighbors - -the very ones who are most often amused by the sight of apparently civilized modern people leaving their comfortable, secure, and well-appointed apartments in order to repair to open-roofed huts exposed to the first chills of autumn and at the mercy of rain and other natural nuisances. Yet it is specifically for sophisticated, secure, twentieth century, middle class citizens that the message of Sukkot is most relevant.

Allow me to explain the relevance of Sukkot for modern men and women by referring to a debate between two eminent authorities in the Talmud. The Torah commands us to build and dwell in the sukkot for seven days because our ancestors dwelt in them in the wilderness of Sinai. Rabbi Akiva maintains sukkot mamash - - the words are to be taken literally: our ancestors lived in makeshift huts that had to be dismantled and reassembled very frequently, therefore we too must experience this transience. As the Talmud puts it elsewhere: tzei mi-dirat Keva ve' shev be' dirat aray, for the duration of this festival leave your permanent dwelling place and live in this temporary, make-shift hut called a sukkah - - just, as your ancestors once did. Rabbi Eliezer, however, maintains that the sukkot of our ancestors does not refer to the actual, physical houses in which they lived. Rather, elu ananei ha-kavod, when the Israelites wandered in the desert they were covered by the "cloud of glory". G-d stretched His Kavod over them like a cloud to guide and protect them from the elements and enemies. It is a symbol of these ananei Ha-kavod that we enter the sukkah, with its covering of sek-hakh.

, Generally this talmudic passage is assumed to be a controversy between the two Rabbis. I believe, however, that there is no debate here. Both, R. Akiva and R. Eliezer intend the same idea; one expresses the negative, the other the positive aspect. They treat two sides of the same coin.

Both R. Akiva and R. Eliezer want the idea of Sukkot to mold our character. And you can tell the character of a man, as the American Thoreau was to say centuries later, by the things he can do without - - and also the things he cannot do without. Can he do without additional luxury, another gadget, a newer automobile? If not, he is one kind of person. Can he do without a book, without a serious, selfless thought, without tallit and tefillin, without a word of prayer? If not, he is a completely different kind of individual. What R. Akiva means when he says sukkot mamash is that Sukkah shows a man how to live on a minimum subsistence level - even in a hut, without a roof over your head - and learn that it is possible to survive that way too. It teaches you that there are many things you take for granted and assume are absolutely indispensable that you can actually do without. It is possible to survive even without a house, a home.

R. Eliezer takes the positive side of the question. Indeed you can do without luxury, even without a permanent dwelling place, a dirat keva. But there are certain things you cannot do without. And one of them is: ananei ha-kavod - - divine protection, a sense of human dignity that derives from the glory of the Creator. This is one of those things without which no man can long survive and find sense and meaning in his existence.

The question each of us must ask himself on Sukkot, therefore, is: what are the things we can and the things we absolutely cannot do away with? It is Sukkot which recommends the proper answer to that crucial question. But first this ought to be made clear: it does not tell you to do without the comforts and luxuries of life. Certainly not. Our tradition even demands that the High Priest be a man of means, and if he is pious but poor, then upon his election to his sacred office his fellow kohanim must share their

substance with him. Wealth and honor are things we ask for in our prayers. A man can do a world of good with material riches wisely and charitably distributed. Sukkot does not tell you that you should do without that. But it does tell you that you can do without it. It reminds you of the proper scale of values, to discriminate between what is vital and what is peripheral, what is indispensable and what is expendable, what we can and what we cannot do without. The sukkah reminds us that if need be we can manage in sukkot mamash, we can actually get along without a solid roof over our heads, but we cannot get along without a piece of heaven, of ananei ha-kavod, over our heads. A sense of dignity and noble purpose, the aspiration for a life of holiness is an imperative, an absolute requirement.

But that term kavod or divine glory is much too general. What, more specifically, does Sukkah tell us ^{gh} out be the essentials in our lives?

Sukkah tells me I cannot get along without a sense of history. To our sukkah we invite the ushpizin - - the seven fathers of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David and Solomon - one each night. We cannot do without them, without an awareness of continuity, a sense of being rooted, a familiarity and even intimacy with the spiritual giants who influence our national character and gave character to our nation's influence in the world.

On Sukkot we appreciate that we can get along without an esthetic sense of some kind, without a feeling of gratitude to G-d for the beauty He implanted in this world. For on Sukkot we perform the mitzvah with the etrog which is called peri etz hadar, the fruit of a beautiful tree; and on this festival, more than on any ^{other}, we emphasize hiddur mitzvah and noy mitzvah, beauty and elegance.

On Sukkot we learn again that we cannot do without the Sabbath. For on Saturday we even put aside our lulav and etrog in honor of the day.

On Sukkot we are reminded that we cannot do without Torah, for we are commanded not only to eat but to study in the Sukkah. Ki hem chayenu v'orekh yamenu, Torah ^{2/6025}

is our life and the length of our days.

Sukkot tells us we cannot do without honesty and integrity in our social and business relationships. That is why a lulav ha-gazul, a lulav or etrog acquired dishonesty^ל, is invalid for our religious purposes.

On Sukkot we remember that we cannot do without the rest of the world. For on this festival, in the days of the Temple, seventy sacrifices were offered corresponding to the traditional number of the nations of the world. When we read the details of these offerings in our Sukkot prayerbook, we realize that we cannot ignore the rest of mankind, no matter what their color or their conviction. A Jew must never be indifferent to the fate and destiny of the other peoples of the world.

And last but not least; Sukkot informs us that man cannot live without G-d. Through the sekhakh we must be able to see the stars, we must be able to look up at the heavens. Maasei yadav magid ha-rakia, the heavens declare the majesty of G-d. No matter what his technical achievements, man must ever remember that he can never do without his Creator, distant as He may sometimes seem from him.

So that Sukkot teaches us both the negative and positive scale of values. With R. Akiva it teaches us what we can do without, with R. Eliezer -- that which we can never do without. Perhaps that explains the Halakhah which declares mitztaer patur mi-sukkah, that one who experiences an inordinate degree of inconvenience in the sukkah is free from the obligation to dwell therein. Certainly, for all of sukkah comes to teach a man that he can get along without his usual comforts, and if he finds that he cannot do so -- why he has failed to learn the great

lesson of Sukkot, and he might just as well move back into his own home.

Never before has a society, and especially our society, needed this lesson. We live in what Prof. Glasbraith has called "the affluent society." A few years ago someone calculated that America, with only 10% of the world's population, has 52% of its food, 75% of its clothes, 95% of its autos, and 99% of its television sets. Amidst all this opulence, and in this economy of abundance, are we happy? Do we feel rich? No, definitely not. Our society is one which constantly craves more and more. The more we have, the more we want. We even have a whole industry, advertising and market research, devoted to increasing our appetites and multiplying our wants. And the man who is always unhappy with what he has is miserably poor no matter what his financial worth really is. The Midrash defines the word evyon - a pauper - as deriving from the word ta'ev -- she'ta'ev le'khol davar, a man of desires, he who has an insatiable appetite for everything he sees. So that this Faustian conception of life that we have developed, of wanting too much and having too many expectations, has not brought ^{us} happiness or true wealth.

And are we fulfilled or serene? Look at the picture: a dreadfully high rate of mental disease, an increased suicide incidence, growing crime and delinquency in our cities, a "beat" generation that considers all of contemporary culture a silly joke, and intellectuals who wallow in the deepest despair. And all this not because we have a great deal, but because we have not a clear conception of what is enduring and what is ephemeral in all that we have. We have failed to discriminate between the essential and the expendable, between what we can do without and what we can not and ought not be able to do without. The proper appreciation of the meaning of Sukkot can, therefore, make the difference between a life of happiness, contentment, serenity, and meaningfulness on the one hand or disillusionment, hunger, misery, and a sense of futility on the other.

Indeed, in this sense Sukkot is a continuation of the spirit of Yom Kippur. The great leader of 19th century German Orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, points out that our abstention from food and drink and wearing shoes on Yom Kippur is not declared as siguf in the Torah, as self-denial or asceticism. It is called inuy, a word which Hirsch maintains comes from the word ani, a poor man. V'anitem et nafshotekhem, "ye shall afflict your souls" really means: visualize yourselves as poor people, try for one day to experience the life of a poor man who must go hungry and thirsty, who cannot afford shoes with which to cover and protect his feet from the hard, cold earth.

Learn from this one day's experience not only to sympathize with the hungry and thirsty, ^e barfoot, but also that if necessary you can even get along for a whole day without anything in your mouth, that food and clothing, important as they are, are not the major values of man's life: holiness and G-d are.

Sukkot continues this lesson. What Yom Kippur teaches about food and clothing, Sukkot teaches about shelter: tzei mi-dirat keva le' dirat arai, for seven days live in a hut and appreciate that this too is something which, in the final analysis, man can do without. V'anitem et nafshotekhem every man must learn by this symbolic experience that you can be an ani in the material things of life, as long as you retain and enhance nafshotekhem, your soul, your spirit, your dignity, your awareness of ananei ha-kavod, the ^adivine cloud of glory which hovers over every human being.

When we will have learned this powerful lesson, when we will have studied our own lives and decided upon the things we really cannot do without and those which we can do without, then our lot will be one of tranquility, fulfillment, and peace. Sukkot will have made for us not only these several days, but the whole year, a zeman simchatenu, a time of happiness and serenity.