

SUKKOT WITHOUT SUFFERING

The Gaon of Vilna was once asked, "What is the most difficult mitzvah to perform?" He thought for a while, and then answered, "The commandment of simhah be'hag, attaining joy on the festival of Sukkot. For eight days, or nine in the Diaspora, we must be in a high state of joy, without any diminution or distraction, without permitting the least worry or frustration or depression to pass our minds or touch our hearts. That is truly difficult!"

More direct, and somewhat less esoteric, is an halakhic application of this commandment to be joyous on the festival. That is the principle of מצטער פטור מן הסוכה that on the seven days of Sukkot (according to one opinion, and according to another all of them except for the first) we are exempt from the obligation to dwell in the Sukkah if we experience pain or distress in so doing. Hence, if we are sick or it is raining or it is too cold, we are not required to perform the mitzvah of Sukkah. The reason for this is, as the Talmud puts it, תשבנו כעין תדורו, that our stay in the Sukkah must be similar to our dwelling at home: if such inclement or unfavourable conditions were to prevail at home we would move out to another residence, then we need not dwell in the Sukkah.

On a deeper level, this halakhah may be explained in the following manner. I take the purpose of Sukkot to be a continuation of that of Yom Kippur. Just as on Yom Kippur, the various deprivations or afflictions teach us to rely upon God and be independent of material satisfactions -- that just as we can get along on this one day without food or drink or washing or sex or shoes, so must we learn for the rest of the year not to be enslaved to our passions or wants or needs -- so on Sukkot do we learn that it is, after all, possible to do without our well-built apartments, our beautiful homes, our well appointed chambers; that even in a mere hut or booth we can attain simhah (joy) if we rely upon God. So is it true of all our worldly possessions: they are good to have, but they are not necessary for survival or even for the attainment of happiness. If that indeed is the lesson of Sukkot, then if we do experience tzaar (distress), then that shows that we have missed the whole point of the Sukkot observance, and in that case we might as well leave the Sukkah and return home.

However, the question remains: after all, it is inconvenient to stay in an open Sukkah, subject to the rain dripping into the soup, to the wind blowing things around, to the dust covering the tablecloth, to the cold chilling our bones. And indeed, so is it true of all of life, as it is symbolized by the Sukkah. Shakespeare told us that we are disciplined and challenged "upon the rack of this tough world," and much earlier Job taught us כי אדם נשמש יוסי, that man is born to toil and weariness. And even without poetry or Scripture, any sophisticated and intelligent and mature person knows that there is no such thing as a painless life, that there is anguish and grief in every life. How then shall we explain the concept of מצטער פטור מן הסוכה, that one who experiences such distress is exempt from the obligation to dwell in the Sukkah?

In answer, we must make a distinction between pain and suffering. Pain (כאב) is clearly physical, whereas suffering (צער) is psychic. Although pain is usually the cause of suffering, it is not always so. It is possible to have pain without suffering, and suffering without pain. Animals, for instance, experience pain, but rarely suffering. Suffering seems to be mostly a human phenomenon. Only people suffer, for suffering is the anticipation of pain, the memory of it,

its interpretation, and sympathy with others who experience it. Suffering is not only a reaction to pain, but also to disappointment, to life situations, to frustrations. And just as pain fulfills the biological function of a warning signal, so suffering too has certain beneficial results. The Rabbis taught: *י"סורים מ"מרים צ"נות*, that suffering grinds up one's sins -- somehow, one who suffers intelligently grows wise enough to recognize the folly of striving so mightily to satisfy such petty desires. Or, the concept of *י"סורים ע"ל אהבה*, the "pangs of love," by which the Sages meant the ability to embrace suffering lovingly, but which might also be interpreted as: the suffering which mellows a person and allows him to love, urges him outward, evokes from within him the generosity that leads to concern for others. Even though the Rabbis maintained *נ"א בהם ונ"א בנשכרם*, forego the suffering and forego its reward, still suffering does add to growth and maturity. It all depends on what we suffer for, and what we do with our suffering.

The most important principle I wish to stress is this: Not all pains are worthy of suffering! The big question is: What kind of pain causes our most distressful suffering? Indeed, you can tell the quality of a man's life by what it is that causes him his deepest and most enduring suffering.

Of course, the problem of suffering is probably one of the most crucial and complex in all of religion and all of philosophy. To attempt an adequate discussion within the confines of this kind of talk would be foolish. Permit me, however, to touch upon the subject rather impressionistically, and distinguish between four kinds of suffering: noble, ignoble, trivial, and normal or acceptable.

Trivial suffering is the kind that we experience because of petty offenses against us, which are, objectively speaking, certainly not worthy of all the anguish which they cause us. Someone sneered at me, gossiped about me, gave me a left-handed instead of a right-handed compliment, or failed to praise me adequately -- as a result I am depressed, crestfallen and fail to enjoy life. This kind of suffering is petty, insignificant, and downright silly. That is why many of the early Hasidic masters taught the principle of *השתוות*, that of studied apathy or sacred indifference, the ability to grow beyond and above minor compliments or insults, to learn not to become ecstatic because of slight praise and not become depressed because of a petty insult.

The second kind is the ignoble brand of suffering. The woman who feels deprived and suffers because she has mink but not sable, or the man who is deeply distressed because he is driving a Dodge and prefers a Rolls Royce, the person who is moody and unhappy because he can't quite make his second million -- such people may genuinely suffer, but their experience is unproductive, uncreative, and unworthy. It tells us a great deal about them that they ought to be ashamed to reveal in public.

Noble suffering is directed outward, and is not involved with ego satisfactions. A man reaches the age where he realizes that his great idealistic youthful ambitions will probably not be attained. He suffers because he wanted to make a great contribution -- write a great book, build a great institution, make an enduring contribution to posterity -- and he has not done so; a person looks upon himself with cool objectivity and discovers that his character is wanting, that his reaction patterns are base and unworthy, and he suffers because he has not refined his character -- that is great suffering, and that suffering is in itself a sign of greatness. When a Jeremiah suffers, and expresses his feelings in his "Lamentations," over the destruction of Jerusalem -- that is noble suffering. On a reduced scale, the devout Jew who genuinely looks forward with love and yearning and longing for the opportunity to observe this lovely and warm mitzvah of Sukkah, and then discovers to his dismay that the rains have drenched his sweet dream and he cannot indulge his love of the mitzvah, and he suffers because of it -- as the Rabbis prescribed he should, when they said that if it rains on Sukkot one must feel

כעבד שמשך עליו רבו קיתיון של צים , like a loving and reverent servant whose master has in anger poured upon his head a pitcher of water -- that is noble suffering.

These three forms -- trivial, ignoble, and noble suffering -- are all important, but the one that offers the greatest problem and challenge is the fourth variety, what we might call the normal or acceptable suffering. This would include suffering which corresponds to clear pain, such as physical pain, or deep emotional distress rooted in reality. Such suffering is of course not trivial, certainly not ignoble, nor can it be called noble. And it is specifically of such suffering that the Halakhah spoke when it proclaimed the rule המצטער פטור מן הסוכה, that one who suffers (from the elements) is exempt from the obligation of dwelling in the Sukkah. This kind of suffering is real, and yet we must pause to ask what should be our attitude towards such suffering. (An example of noble suffering and normal suffering coming together in our liturgy, is the Shema Koleinu prayer which we recited throughout this entire season until Yom Kippur. There is hardly a person who is not moved by the words אל תשליבנו זצת זקנה, "Do not abandon us in time of old age, when our strength is spent do not forsake us." With all the guarantees we have to provide for us in our old age -- welfare, medicare, nursing homes -- we are all of us frightened at the prospects of weakening bodies and minds, inevitable infirmity and all that follows... This is the kind of worry and suffering that is normal and acceptable. But the worthier cry is one which issues from us when we turn to God and say אל תשליבנו זצפנך ורוח קדשך אל תקח ממנו, "Do not reject us, and do not take Your holy spirit from us." Here we are concerned about the absence of holiness from Israel, rather than about our own individual fates when old age begins to creep up on us.)

You cannot fault a person for suffering from real pain. Yet he must always ask himself: Is the suffering that I experience in proportion to the pain? And even if it is, may it not be worth the effort somehow to avoid the pain from causing the suffering?

The great R. Shmelke of Nikolsburg visited the immortal Maggid, the great teacher of Hasidism. He said to him, "Rabbi, I never understood one passage in the Talmud that I wish you would explain to me: מברכים על הרעה בשם, שמברכים על הטובה, that one must bless God for the evil and suffering that befall him, even as he must bless Him for the goodness to which he is heir. How are we to understand that?" The Maggid replied, "I will not answer you, but if you will go to the study hall you will find my student Zusya smoking his pipe. Ask him, and he will explain it."

Now, R. Shmelke knew that R. Zusya was a renowned "סוּרִים" בעל, one who had endured enormous pain of all kinds from the very day he was born. He was a man of incredible poverty, his body wracked with sickness and disease of all kinds, and he was always the butt of anti-Semitic cruelties. Everything that was wrong seemed to happen to him! And so R. Shmelke asked R. Zusya the question. Whereupon, in reply, R. Zusya laughed and said, "You came to the wrong person! You see, I never in my life experience suffering, so I don't know how to answer your question. You had better go to a person who had suffered at least occasionally in his life." So R. Shmelke -- and all of us -- learned something very important about accepting suffering with love, about an attitude which allows you to restrict pain and not allow it to evoke suffering.

It is true that not everyone is that powerful, that saintly, that heroic that he can so contain the onslaughts of the outside world and prevent them from eroding his inner serenity. Yet the Torah clearly and unequivocally demands of all of us that we attain such heroism at specific times, especially such a time as this holiday which is זמן שמחתנו, the time of our joy. Thus, just as the

Torah tells us that it is wrong not to mourn sufficiently for our dead, so we are told that 'אסא יתקווה לך גתו' ופך גידו', one must not over-mourn and over-grieve, for then he is foolish spiritually, for he reveals his lack of faith in God. Thus too, one must suspend his תיסבס, mourning, on a festival.

Of course, the natural reaction to such a statement is: But you can't turn emotions off like a faucet! My answer is, no, not like a faucet, but feelings can certainly be controlled, turned down and toned down, and allowed to rise again. We have no choice, if we are to be committed Jews. We are summoned by the Torah and by Halakhah to that Spartan -- no, not Spartan, but Jewish -- heroism of self-control whereby we rise above our depression and distress, transcend our worry and frustration and even bereavement, and attain pure joy. Even as the Torah demands that we discipline our acts, so must we discipline our emotions. For the principle of Judaism is that just as we are more than our bodies, so are we more than our moods -- or else, what's a soul for? The human will and human reason must stand above both the material and the emotional.

So, on this great and wonderful and beautiful festival, the theme of which is simhah, joy, let us banish all worry, apprehension, fear, and suffering -- despite pain and want and threat -- and give ourselves over uninhibitedly to joy.

Of course there is pain in life. Wind and rain and dust enter the Sukkah of our lives. And cold. And especially -- loneliness. But insofar as it is possible, we must make every effort not to be a גיטו, not to suffer from these pains, but to transcend them and attain a state of simhah.

And may our Father in Heaven give us a year in which there will be no occasion for pain or worry or distress, save that of noble suffering, so that we may on this festival of Sukkot, the time of our joy, meet head-on the great challenge -- as it was defined by the Gaon of Vilna -- that of enjoying, for an entire festival, undisturbed and undiminished simhah.