

Chol HaMoed Sukkot – 5783

On the first day of Sukkot, the Torah reading is taken from Parshat Emor which is in the Book of Leviticus or Vayikra in Hebrew. Beginning at verse 33 in Chapter 23, we are commanded to live in booths and to bring gifts to the temple mount commemorating the harvest festival, so that we will remember that we had to live in booths when we were brought out of Egypt. We are also commanded to take the four species and rejoice before the Lord for seven days. The haftarah for that first day is taken from Parshat Pinchas from the book of Deuteronomy or Bemidbar in the section in which the sacrifices are offered at the temple mount as an expression of thanksgiving. We read the same selection of Pinchas every day throughout the chag. Thus, are we commanded concerning the symbols of Sukkot – the sukkah, the lulav and the etrog and sacrifices which lacking the temple after its destruction became prayer and deeds of lovingkindness. As if the sages knew what was to come, we begin the selection of Emor with the commandment to leave the corners of the fields for gleaning by those who had no fields of their own. It is for that reason that we read the Book of Ruth during Sukkot because it is that act of lovingkindness that leads Ruth to Boaz.

Having considered all these various symbolic elements in the observance of Sukkot, I find myself wondering why I have distinct memories of the events around the High Holy Days when I was a young boy, and I can clearly remember the model seders we had at Pesach time. However, I have no memory of a sukkah or marching with the lulav and etrog or even ever shaking one and I went to shul all the time as a teenager. When Tim Bishop, our caretaker, tore down the old Sukkah he found beautiful panels that

obviously were from the original sukkah because they are decorated in such a way that their use is unmistakable. When I saw them on Sunday last weekend, getting ready to put together our new sukkah which you'll get to enjoy later, I could only conjure up vague memories of having seen them a long time ago. Yet my only memories of Sukkot are of Ida Orvitz, Zichrona Le'Bracha, and the candy apples that she had made which was our reward for coming to the hakafot on Simchat Torah.

If this is all I can conjure up from my Hebrew School education, then it is no surprise that so few of our youngsters relate to any of these celebrations. I can only remember one particularly mouthy teenaged girl shouting that she had no desire to march around the synagogue with a silly flag. So how do we approach the teaching of the significance of the symbols of Sukkot today – the sukkah, the Lulav, and the Etrog? If we stop to think about it there is much here that will resonate with today's generation of youngsters, although not for the reasons that the Torah suggests.

While we are supposed to eat and sleep in the sukkah for seven days, regardless of the weather in order to remind us of the hardships faced by the Children of Israel wandering in the deserts of Sinai for 40 years, we can use the sukkah as a way of approaching the idea of thankfulness for the plenty that we inherited as creatures on this planet. We all know that the entire globe faces the existential threat of climate change, and there are more than a few people who see nothing to take immediate action about. But Sukkot provides us with an opportunity to be reminded about how our lives are shaped not by our own free will alone but by the bounties of nature within which we abide and play. That's certainly one way of reflecting on the fact that while the sides of our modern sukkah are made of canvas and have windows and a door that not only zip up or down but have mesh instead of

glass to protect us from the elements. But the roof has to be made so that we can see the stars so our bamboo mats layered on bamboo poles allow us, if it were at night, so we can see the stars and thus the heavens and understand how little we are compared to the universe. As well, the sukkah must provide more shade than sun, so that we understand that we are being sheltered by the beneficence of HaShem. It is also a custom to share the bounty inside the sukkah with guests, so we are reminded that we are one people, not a disparate group of individuals. We make our way as the Jewish people together.

Similarly, the four species that we shake daily during the middle days of the chag, must be perfect and put together just so, not because Judaism demands perfection as an end in itself because we are reminded that while the species represent the perfection capable in the natural world, we must aspire to perfect ourselves because we are created in the image of HaShem. If you read the English translations of the verses, we recite on Hoshana Rabba, you would hear the words Hoshana and pleas to help us to become better human beings, to save us, to provide us with that which was promised as we read the end of Numbers and the Song of Moses just before he dies.

During the times when I found myself in Israel after the High Holy Days, there was a very special feeling about ending the fast of Yom Kippur and hoping that the year ahead would be good not just for me but for my entire family and then seeing everyone begin to build their sukkot. We go, as a people from pleading for another year of health and prosperity and peace and then go about building a tangible reminder of the fact that we have to be invested in this quest personally and set about building our year through adherence to the commandments of the Torah by building the sukkah, prayers for help in becoming better human beings and acts of lovingkindness

by sharing our bounty with others in our sukkahs, whether at home or at shul.
Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach.