

The Jewish Post & Opinion • National Edition

Volume 78, Number 1 • October 12, 2011 • 14 Tishrei 5772
www.jewishpostopinion.com

KAVANNAH FOR SUKKOT

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

Here's a *kavannah* (an intentional focus) to take with you into your *sukkah*.

The root of the Hebrew word for *sukkah* roofing material, *s'chach* (סכך), means *to protect, to distance strange elements*.

But how can a roof that is open to the sky, like the roof of a *sukkah*, protect us? What kind of protection are we talking about?

It's the kind of protection we enjoyed as a people when God brought us out of Egypt, when we lived not in houses, but in *sukkot* or booths. So for a moment now, we want you to imagine that we are there, that *we are them*, and that God has just brought us out of Egypt.

We and our children stand at the edge of a vast wilderness. As we look out, it seems endless. And we wonder, what will we do when the food runs out, and maybe more importantly, what about the water? A person can survive for perhaps three days without water. And what about shelter? How will we shield ourselves and our children from the sun and the wind?

When we look out, we see nothing that would give us any assurance of survival. And yet, we step forward into that wilderness.

And that is what is *still* required of us. As Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches us, we are called to step forward on the basis of no concrete guarantees that we can see in this world, to act *l'sheim shamayim* (לשם שמים), that is, for the sake of heaven, and for the sake of Torah—for the sake of the good—even when everything we see and our experience tells us that it won't work, even when we will be ridiculed and reviled for it.

For that is what our faith requires of us, to act for the good in spite of our experience to the contrary. The scripture says that we were fed with manna and made to live in booths to teach us that it is not by bread alone, nor by shelter alone, that we live. And the *sukkah* is a reminder of all that.

If it could speak, our *sukkah* would say: At this time of harvest, when you are tempted to think that *you* were the one who produced this wealth, when you think that it is on the basis of your own power alone, REMEMBER, it is an illusion. Remember Who sustained you then and Who sustains you now. And remember that you are not alone. And that the good you accomplish for the sake of heaven cannot be accomplished alone.

For the Torah (Leviticus 23:39) says: *tachogu et chag Adoshem* (תחוגו את-חג-ה'—you shall celebrate the festival of God), which means that in addition to holding a feast, we are to form a festive circle around God and the sanctuary of God's Torah. It means that, for the moment, we give up living separately to join ourselves to the nation assembled around God. For the real joy in life is not to be found in the well-being of individuals. Only in our all joining together can we make God's Torah a reality on earth.

And what does the *lulav* have to do with all this?

On Sukkot, we are commanded to rejoice before the presence of God for the gifts that God has given us. We are told: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the beautiful tree, leaves of palm branches, and twigs of myrtle, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Adonai Eloheichem seven days." (Leviticus 23:40)

This tells us, our rabbis say, that God has given us the right, even the duty, to stretch out our hands and grasp the good things of this earth and to obtain happiness in the presence of God.

These gifts of the harvest for which we offer a blessing are sometimes understood as a kind of harvest bouquet. But there is another way to understand the word "gifts." The rabbis understood the *lulav* to be representative of the different ways in which God is revealed—that is, in the different

spiritual and moral gifts of the people who form the nation of God.

There are those who are an immediate revelation of God's glory, like the *etrog*, the color and scent of which is immediately apparent. There are those who strive upwards to do what is right, straight and strong, like the palm-tree (*kapot t'marim*—כפת תמרִים). There are those who, like the myrtle, flourish in the midst of whirlpools (*anaf eitz avot*—ענף עץ עבות—ענף עץ עבות). And there are those who blossom in the middle of the wilderness, like the willows (*arvei nachal*—ערבי נחל). In joining them together in one combined union, the failings of one are balanced by the perfection of the other.

So in honor of Sukkot, for the rest of our *devar Torah* we propose that you work at discovering those gifts. We want you to find the person in your *sukkah* or the sanctuary of your synagogue that you know the *least*. If there's no one that you don't know, then you will have to work extra hard to discover the hidden gifts of a person you already know.

You are to spend 10 minutes with this person. During that time, ask questions that will help you get to know the person. Find out what their gift is. And allow that person to ask questions of you so

they can do the same. Listen carefully, because afterwards you will introduce that person and his or her special gift to the group.

Whatever our gifts might be, and whatever position in life they have allotted to us, the *lulav* teaches us that—

- Whether we are like the willow, without its own fruit, without even resisting strength, even if we are only able to prove our worth as baskets for carrying and keeping;
- Whether like the myrtle we shine forth in our own beauty;
- Whether like the date palm, quietly and without glory, with hard, strong unyielding work, we produce that which is most useful and helpful; or
- Whether we sparkle like the splendid fruit of the splendid tree—

Any and every sphere of life can be full and honorable

Any sphere can in its own way achieve perfection and beauty if only it is lived in the presence of God.

Chag Sameach!

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here!](#)