



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 13, 2011
Sukkot Day 1

The Secret of Love



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart”*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Sukkot Day 1 >

The Secret of Love

October 13, 2011

2011

SUKKOT 2011

ABSTRACT

One of the important challenges facing us today as we celebrate Sukkot is how to make it personally relevant ... how to make it come alive ... how to answer our children when they ask us: “Why do we eat in a makeshift hut?” Or, “Why do we wave four species for seven days?” Is it enough to tell them that the Torah says so and that we have been keeping this tradition for thousands of years?

Mechanical holidays celebrated by rote will ultimately lead to waning observance. Likewise, perpetuating our rich heritage – in a crowded marketplace aggressively competing for our time and attention – cannot depend merely on guilt or fear or blind commitment. It must include a personal dimension that makes the tradition *indispensable* to our lives.

With charming anecdotes, witty stories and psychological insights, this sermon deciphers and demystifies the power of the sukkah and the four species, and translates their symbolism into a formula for healthy relationships and a model for enduring love. This holiday teaches us the secret of connections – the two key ingredients vital in building and maintaining a loving relationship.

1. The Telegram

When Golda Meier became Prime Minister of Israel, she received a telegram. (Anyone here remember those days prior to emails, faxes and text messaging?) It was from then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and it welcomed her into the diplomatic community. To ensure that Golda not think that Israel will get any preferential treatment because Kissinger was Jewish, he wrote to her: "I would like to remind you that I am three things and in this order: My first priority and loyalty is that I am a proud American citizen. Second, I am Secretary of State of the United States. Third, I am a Jew."

The sharp-witted Golda shot back a telegram to Mr. Kissinger stating: "Thank you for your message. After reading your telegram I am sure we will have an excellent working relationship, because here, in Israel, we read from right to left..."

2. Right to Left, Left to Right

The difference between Hebrew and English is not just directional, with English being written from left to right, while Hebrew is written from right to left. The two languages also reflect two different worlds, which seem incompatible and irreconcilable – the world of faith and the world of modernity.

My friends, our challenge today is to bridge these two worlds and show how the Hebrew Torah is absolutely relevant to our secular world. Today, we must fuse these two – left to right and right to left – universes.

Relevance is the key word and fusion the primary objective.

So now we ask: How can we experience Sukkot as a process of personal growth and improvement? How can we integrate its message into our lives, routines and aspirations?

As we are all no doubt aware, mechanical holidays celebrated by rote will ultimately lead to waning observance. Likewise, perpetuation of our rich heritage – in the modern crowded marketplace which aggressively competes for our time and attention – cannot depend merely on guilt, fear or blind commitment. It must include a personal dimension that makes the tradition *indispensable* to our lives.

3. The Challenge of Sukkot

In this respect, Sukkot raises its own unique challenges. The two primary features and mitzvahs of Sukkot are “dwelling in the sukkah” and “taking up the four species.”

As the Torah instructs us:

“Dwell in booths for seven days ... in order that your generations shall know that I housed the Children of Israel in booths when I took them out of the Land of Egypt.”¹

“And you shall take for you on the first day, the fruit of a beautiful [citron] tree (*etrog*) and branches of date palms (*lulav*), and twigs of the plaited [myrtle] tree (*hadassim*) and willows of the brook (*aravah*), and you shall rejoice before God, seven days.”²

What do we answer our children when they ask us why we must do these things? Why must we dwell for seven days in a makeshift hut with a roof of palm fronds, tree branches, reeds, or bamboo, where we eat all our meals and conduct all the activities of the day which we regularly would do at home?³ And why do we wave four species, in six different directions, for seven days?

Is it enough to tell them that the Torah says so and that we have been keeping this tradition for thousands of years? How do we explain these admittedly odd traditions and make them personally relevant and meaningful for our children – and indeed, for ourselves – today?

4. The Sequence

We can understand the answer by looking closely at the sequence of the holidays in this Hebrew month – *Tishrei* – which is filled with *Yomim Tovim*.

¹ Leviticus 23:42-43.

² Leviticus 23:40-41.

³ Talmud, *Sukkah* 28b; *Rambam*, *Laws of Sukkah* 6:5; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 639:1.

For it is not a random accident that the festive holiday of Sukkot follows closely behind the Days of Awe – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. And that this sequence of the holidays actually reflects a beautiful and fluent rhythm, presenting a model for all human relationships: the relationship between you and God, between you and your spouse and loved ones, between you and your friends, and even between you and yourself.

A college student who came home for the holidays was having a conversation with his elderly *Zeide*.

“So vot are you studying at school, my Yankele?” asked the grandfather in his thick Yiddish accent.

“Zeide, I am studying psychology, sociology and philosophy.”

“Vot is that?”

After Yankel explained the meaning of these three courses, the grandfather exclaimed: “Things are so different today. In the *shtetel* we learned about these things, but without all these fancy names and without having to pay a hefty tuition to boot. What you call today sociology was simply one person in our community fighting with another. What you call today philosophy was what happened when someone fought with God. And what you call psychology was someone who was fighting with himself...”

5. The Left Hand and the Right Hand

This progression of the holidays is dramatically illustrated by the romantic words of the *Song of Songs* – “his left hand is under my head, his right hand embraces me”⁴ – which are explained by the Zohar (“Book of Splendor”), the classic Kabbalistic text as follows:⁵

⁴Song of Songs 2:6.

⁵Zohar I 64a-b. III 214b. See Ohr HaTorah Shir HaShirim p. 697

The first half of the month, and specifically the first ten days of *Tishrei* – the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* beginning with Rosh Hashana and ending with Yom Kippur – correspond to “his left hand is under my head.” Sukkot, the second half of the month, corresponds to “his right hand embraces me.”⁶

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are called “Days of Awe,” while Sukkot is called “Time of Joy.” What does this mean?

Awe is feeling that you are standing in the presence of something far, far greater than yourself, thus it evokes a sense of utter nullification and suspension of self – a healthy measure of distance – from the greatness surrounding you.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we stand with awe before God Who is our King, our Creator and our Judge, the one and only absolute Ruler of all existence with absolute authority over our lives. We sense the healthy distance between us, creatures, and God the Almighty.

Awe corresponds to the “left hand” (the hand of strength and restraint, of *gevurah*) and causes us to feel how far we mortals are from the immortal. This feeling is not meant to demoralize or weaken us. Quite the contrary. “His left hand is under my head” – His left hand is supporting us and helping us put life in perspective so that we see just how miniscule is our material reality and how much higher we can reach.

The 19th century Chassidic leader, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, once said that Judaism teaches us how small we are and how great we can become.

Without knowing how small we are, you can delude ourselves into thinking that we have already achieved ultimate greatness.

⁶ More specifically: Elul, the preparation for Tishrei, corresponds to the words from the Song of Songs: “I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me” (6:3). The first ten days of Tishrei – the Ten Days of Teshuvah which begin with Rosh Hashana and end on Yom Kippur – correspond to “His left hand is under my head.” Sukkot corresponds to “His right hand embraces me.” Hoshana Rabba corresponds to “He shall kiss me with the kisses of His mouth” (1:2). And finally Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah correspond to the actual union itself, which begins the Divine state of “pregnancy” until the Divine birth of new souls of Israel on the seventh day of Passover, the day of the splitting of the Red Sea.

The brilliant Hebrew poet, Chaim Bialik was once in Meah She'arim looking for a shul where he could to recite *Kaddish* on his father's *yahrzeit*. He saw a local Yerushalmi boy and asked him (in Yiddish): "Where can I find the closest shul?" Staring suspiciously at the bareheaded Bialik, the boy replied: "A shul is only for Yidden." "How do you know that I am not a Yid?" asked the surprised Bialik. (Mind you this dialogue is all in Yiddish). "Because you are walking without a kippah on your head," exclaimed the boy. Bialik responded: "The entire heaven (*kipat shomayim*) is my kippah." Without missing a beat the youngster shot back: "Oh, no. Too big of a kippah for such a small head!"

6. Moving from Left to Right

But then we move from left to right.

A vibrant relationship cannot survive on awe alone. It requires an equal measure of closeness and love, and most importantly, of integration.

To use an example from nature, when we stand in awe of an ocean in a thunderstorm, we may feel inspired and uplifted, but we are likely relating to that awesome sight from a distance. If we were to plunge in and immerse in the water, we could not stand there awe-struck.

So, too, in our relationship with God. A relationship by its very definition requires closing the distance. It requires a mutual connection.

So, following the Days of Awe, we move into the Days of Joy.

The Days of Awe represent the yearning for something greater. They peak on Yom Kippur, a day which is totally beyond us. That is 25 hours when we don't eat, when we barely sleep, and when we confine ourselves in the synagogue praying. In doing so, we try to free ourselves from the material life that keeps us from being uplifted.

But then comes the second half of the month – the time to integrate what we just experienced – the time to celebrate.

7. Why Celebrate?

Why are we celebrating?

Because, during the Days of Awe, we entered into the palace of the King, and we were blessed to experience the awe of His presence. We renewed our contract with our Creator, we were remembered by Him, and we passed His judgment. Now we have left the palace, and we are ready to begin to dance in the streets – expressing the joy we feel at what we just experienced in the King’s inner sanctum.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we touched base with the very quintessence of our souls and bonded with God. In those Days of Awe we crowned God the King of the Universe, we actualized the power of *teshuvah* to transform the past and invigorate the future, and we drew forth from heaven life, sustenance, and well-being for the year to come. But the trepidation in standing before the divine throne eclipsed the joy we felt.

On Sukkot, the veil of trepidation recedes and the Days of Awe erupt into a week-long Festival of Joy – a joy that reaches its climax in the celebrations of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

In the language of the Kabbalistic and Chassidic masters: Our experience of the Divine in the Days of Awe is in a form of *ohr makif* (surrounding light) – an energy that surrounds and encompasses us, for “His left hand is under my head.” On Sukkot, the Divine enters and embraces us in a form of *ohr pnimi* (internal light), as “His right hand embraces me.” And therefore, what transpires is expressed with great joy and celebration, which reveals the concealed light that is hidden⁷ within the experience of awe.⁸

⁷ The revealed joy of Sukkot is also reflected in the fact that Sukkot begins with the appearance of the “full moon” (on the 15th of the month). Rosh Hashana, which began *Tishrei*, coincided with the birth of the new moon. Sukkot, when the moon is fully visible, represents the revelation of what was hidden and concealed on Rosh Hashana.

⁸ We see this alluded to in the gematria (numerical value) of the word *sechach* (sukkah covering) which is made up of the letters samech (60), chof (20), chof (20) totaling 100. This number reveals the power of the 100 sounds of the shofar on Rosh Hashana. Samech corresponds to the 60 tekiyot, chof to the 20 shevorim and chof to the 20 teruot. Additionally: The “Clouds of Glory” of the *sechach* come from the clouds of incense offered on Yom Kippur. The seven days of Sukkot correspond to the seven days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. (Mishnat Chassidim and Pri Etz Chaim Shaar HaSukkot at the end. Siddur im dach 235b. Ateret Rosh Shaar Yom HaKippurim 36a ff).

8. Sukkah and the Four Species

Now we can begin to understand the deeper significance of the primary mitzvahs of Sukkot – dwelling in the sukkah and taking up the four species – and their personally relevant application.

As the joy of Sukkot begins to internalize the intensity of the Days of Awe, first we enter and dwell in the sukkah, which surrounds us completely in its embrace. We sit in the sukkah and internalize it.⁹ Then, the next morning, we take up the four species which we draw close to our heart, and further internalize the experience.¹⁰

The sukkah and the four species represent the two critical elements necessary in a relationship:

- 1) A surrounding love – to be completely enclosed (encircled, encompassed) by the embrace of the sukkah. We sit inside of the sukkah, but like an embracing hug, the sukkah remains outside of us.
- 2) An internalized love – one that penetrates the heart and becomes integrated into our faculties, as we draw the four species close to us, in one bond, *agudah achas*.

9. The Secret of Enduring Relationships

The sukkah and the four species – and the entire cycle of this month of holidays – uncover for us the secret of healthy and enduring connections with others. They teach us tremendous lessons in how to build and maintain love in our human relationships, which reflect our loving relationship with God.

Maimonides writes¹¹ that the *Song of Songs* is really a parable; it is a story of the love between man and God (from which evolves the love between husband and wife).

⁹ As the verse states: *Ba'Sukkot taishou*. *Taishou* means not just to dwell, but to sit within, to internalize the Sukkot experience.

¹⁰ In the words of the verse: *Ve'lokachtem lochem* – take within yourself, internalize – the four species, and join them as one bond, *agudah achas*.

¹¹ *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Teshuvah 10:3.

A healthy loving relationship must have a balance between “his left hand is under my head” and “his right hand embraces me.”

First, a relationship has to have the “left hand under my head” – which translates into respect for the other’s boundaries, the recognition that each partner’s individuality must flourish unhindered. If one spouse feels annihilated by the other, the relationship will be compromised.

At the same time, a relationship has to have “his right hand embraces me” – for love means that there is a closeness and intimacy between the two, to the point that they bond into one entity, “one flesh.”¹²

A couple was having domestic difficulties in their marriage. They apparently loved each other deeply, yet they kept on butting heads and getting into arguments, which was overshadowing their feelings for each other and slowly eroding their relationship.

The couple came to see a great Rebbe. After intently listening to them describing their challenges, he told them: “When you are close when you should be apart, you will be apart when you should be close.”

10. Two-Handed Arrangement

Essentially, a relationship is a two-handed arrangement – it needs two elements to thrive: space and boundaries (awe/respect, the left hand) and closeness (joy, the right hand).

The Kotzker Rebbe perhaps said it best: “If I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not [complete] and you are not [complete]. But if I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am and you are.”

In simple English: for a relationship to be real it needs two distinct individuals – two unique circles – that freely choose to become one. For, only then, as they become one, can they retain their individuality.

¹²Genesis 2:24.

In practical terms this means that at times the partners in every relationship need “space” and “time-out,” to step back and just be themselves. By no means is this an affront to closeness or to love. Rather, this actually enhances the relationship, by allowing each partner to be himself or herself, and to bring that self into the union.

But together with respect and space, a relationship must also have closeness and intimacy.

A dysfunctional schnorrer was getting ready to go on another ten-month trip trying to raise some money. His long-suffering wife pleaded with him: “Won’t you send me a letter this time? Just one little letter. It would mean so much to me to hear from you, when I’m so worried and lonely when you’re gone.” She insisted until he finally agreed. He didn’t see the point, but if it would make her happy, he would send a letter.

Two months went by. Three months... eight months pass. And finally the mailman arrived and lo and behold, there was a letter from the schnorrer. His wife tore it open with trembling fingers, and she read:

Dear wife,

I am here, and you are there.

Sincerely,

Your husband.

Does this sound like anyone you know?

This type of distance is unhealthy and dysfunctional. Even if he’s not gone for months at a time, his wife feels like he might as well be.

Unlike this schnorrer, a healthy loving relationship requires intimacy – closeness, friendship, care and real communication, where both spouses speak and listen to each other.

11. Kabbalistic Insight (Optional)

The Kabbalah explains that the psycho-spiritual nature of all developmental growth processes have two primary stages.

First comes the *makif* stage, in which we surround ourselves with the experience. Next comes the *pnimi* stage, when we allow the experience to penetrate us, and be integrated and internalized.

Every relationship consists of *makif* – the loving embrace of the sukkah, when we engulf each other in an all encompassing union, yet we remain distinct entities (“his left hand is under my head”). And *pnimi* – the personal experience, when we internalize the love within and fuse as one (“his right hand embraces me”).¹³

12. Lessons for Today

Being that we are in the baseball playoff season, we can use the game as a lesson for us: Someone once defined a baseball game as a place where 40,000 people who need exercise watch 18 people who don't.

¹³ There are many levels of *makif* and *pnimi*, relative to our level of growth. On each level, we first begin with an experience on a *makif* level, and then proceed to internalize it. With each internalization, a new, higher level emerges in a form of *makif*, until we integrate that as well. And so we climb from level to level.

In brief the Tishrei journey goes like this: The revelation of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur becomes manifest on Sukkot in a revealed way. But on Sukkot, it is still in a form of *makif*. On Shemini Atzeret this revelation is retained in a *pnimiyus*, internalized. And then higher levels of *makif* are revealed during the *hakofot* of Simchat Torah.

More specifically: The joy of Sukkot begins to internalize the *makif* of the Days of Awe. Yet, this too is in stages. First comes the sukkah, which itself is *makif*, surrounding us completely in its embrace. We sit in the sukkah and internalize it. Then we take the four species which we draw close to our heart, and further internalize the experience.

We circle the Torah platform each day, seven circles on Hoshana Rabba, and then seven circles of unrestrained dance on Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah – circles of *makif* that in turn become internalized in our personal lives. With our relationship intact – both the hugging *makif* and the kissing *pnimiyus* – we then are ready to take on the world anew.

As we celebrate Sukkot let us not be “observant” Jews watching others play the game. Instead of looking at the holiday with the detached demeanor of a spectator, let us become players in the game, by finding personal relevance in the holiday and applying it to our lives.

Here is a suggestion that may help:

Using the two mitzvahs of the holiday – the sukkah and the four species – as a model, ask yourself whether your primary relationships have the proper balance between space and intimacy, between respect and closeness. In which area are you stronger? What can you do to supplement any area of weakness? Concentrate on the area that you want to improve.

Look around at your sukkah. Study its encompassing embrace. Examine the four species. Identify their internalized personalities. Watch as you bring them together, close to your heart.

At the holiday table initiate a discussion about these two ingredients and invite everyone into the conversation. If nothing else, you are guaranteed to have an engaging and entertaining experience. But most likely, everyone involved will learn something new.

Equally important is that you will have brought Sukkot to life in people’s minds and hearts, showing its powerful relevance to our contemporary struggles.

Let us use Sukkot wisely and learn from its many hidden messages.

By learning how to love each other better, and loving God better, we create a channel to bring down all the blessings. As we say in the *Amidah* prayer: *Borcheinu Avibnu kulonu ka’echad*, “Bless us our Father [as we stand] all together as one.” Amen.