



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 1, 2012

Sukkot Day 1

**Change Your Venue,
Change Your Life**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5773 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

One of the big questions we all ask, especially as we begin a New Year: “How can I start anew? How can I make a clean break with the past and turn a new page in life?”

Even when we are serious about creating change in our lives, and even when we embark on a new course, why is it that we so often gravitate back to our old patterns, no matter how much we try to change?

Sukkot answers this question for us and provides us with a blueprint for change in a most original and refreshing way.

All change begins with the simple yet deeply elusive: Change yourself. But for some reason, our minds understand that answer but our hearts do not. Emotionally and practically we are far more trapped than we imagine in our past routines. Thus we need an extra shove to jolt us out of our inertia.

Enter Sukkot with its command to leave our homes and comfort zones and move for seven days (the cycle of time) into a portable hut.

A unique perspective on the sukkah, the message of Abraham – the first of the special guests (*ushpizin*) whom we invite into the sukkah on day one, coupled with the lesson of the bumblebee and the mysterious smuggler of mysterious goods – all offer us a powerful and surprisingly relevant lesson from the humble sukkah:

This simple shack is a game changer. It contains the secret of real and lasting change – how to get unstuck and discover new vistas that can forever alter the course of our lives.

Change Your Venue

CHANGE YOUR VENUE, CHANGE YOUR LIFE: THE LESSON FROM THE FIRST OF THE *USHPIZIN*

1. The Smuggler (Joke)

At the US/Mexico border a guard sees a man crossing into the United States. The man is riding a bicycle and has a box balanced on the handlebars. The guard pulls the man aside, tells him to get off his bicycle and opens the box, but all he finds inside is sand.

The next week, the same man is there again. Again with the box. And the box contains nothing but sand.

This goes on every day for two months: the man comes across the border on his bicycle with a box balanced between the handlebars, and every day they open the box but find nothing but sand.

One day, many years later, the guard (now retired) meets up with the man by accident. And he decides to ask him, "Look buddy, back then you drove us crazy. Every day for two months you came in on your bicycle with that box of sand ... I know you were smuggling something. Now that the statute of limitations is up, would you mind telling me: what was it?"

The man answers, "Bicycles."

Sometimes what is obvious evades our sight, because we are prisoners of our own tunnel vision ... of our lock-step behavior ...

2. Starting Anew

One of the big questions we all ask, especially as we begin a New Year: "How can I start anew? How can I make a clean break with the past and turn a new page in life?"

The simple yet deeply elusive answer is: Change yourself.

For some reason, our minds understand that answer but our hearts do not. Emotionally and practically we are far more trapped than we imagine in our past routines.

Thus we need an extra shove to jolt us out of our inertia.

Enter Sukkot with its command to leave our home and comfort zone and move for seven days (the cycle of all time) into a portable sukkah.

Settle in the sukkah (*ba'sukkot teishvu*)¹ live there in a permanent way, (*teishvu k'ain toduru*),² dwell there just as if it were a permanent dwelling.

And when you do so, things will change. For when you change your venue, you change your fate (*mazal*).³

When nothing changes, nothing changes.

The definition of insanity, Einstein said, is doing the same thing again and again and expecting different results.

3. Game Changer

Sukkot is a game changer – the first and “mother” of them all. It teaches how to change your location, your mindset, your space, so that new vistas will open up.

And if that formula sounds familiar – it should.

Because it is exactly what God told Abraham to do, when he commanded him: Lech Lecha – “Go from your land, your birthplace, the home of your parents, to the land that I will show you.”⁴

¹ Leviticus 23:42.

² *Sukkah* 28b.

³ See *Rosh Hashana* 16b. *Baba Metzia* 75b. Talmud Yerushalmi, *Shabbat* 6:9.

⁴ Genesis 12:1. See *Rosh Hashana* 16b.

Abraham's response to that command changed the world forever. Had Abraham not embarked on his odyssey, we would not have a "Promised Land," we would not have a Jewish people, we would not have the encounter with God at Mount Sinai, we would not have Judaism, and all the contributions and movements it spawned. We would not have the principles of the Torah, which define the basic human rights that are the bedrock of our modern democracies.

Now imagine what you can accomplish if you follow his example!

If you are thinking - "that was Abraham and this is me" - think again. Abraham's story is included in the Torah for the precise reason that it is meant to serve as a model for every one of his descendents. The first command to the first Jew - *Lech Lecha* - is a command to each one of us: Move away from your home and your comfort zone!

4. The Message of Sukkot

This is the underlying message of Sukkot, when we are told *Lech Lecha* - move out of your home and dwell in a sukkah.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that when we enter the sukkah on the first night of the Sukkot festival, we invite Abraham to join us. He is our first guest, the first of the seven *ushpizin* (as they are called).

So says the Zohar:

When we sit in the sukkah ... Abraham and the five righteous ones, and David with them, make their abode with us. We should rejoice each day of the festival with these guests who abide with us.⁵

On the first night and day of Sukkot, Abraham empowers us with his many virtues and qualities and with his historic *Lech Lecha* journey, which would change the destiny of the world.

⁵Zohar III, Emor 103a.

5. Strange Directions

Let us explore the meaning and significance of this journey.

Why did God say to Abraham: “Go from your land, your birthplace, the home of your parents, to the land that I will show you”?

I mean isn't this a very strange way of giving directions? Because when you tell someone to travel, you specify the *destination* in detail, but you don't need to describe over and over again the point of *departure*. After all, the person knows where he/she is leaving from.

But here God tells Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace, and the home of his parents – three descriptions of his *present* location – and then, when it comes to the destination, He only tells him vaguely to go “to a land,” without naming it or even hinting at where it is.

6. The Inside Story

Chassidic thought, which gives voice to the inner dimension of the Torah, explains that in truth this verse is really a commandment issued by God to each of us: “Go on a journey of self-discovery. Leave behind anything that might hold you back. And then I will show you the landscape of your divine soul – the true you.”

If you want to discover your higher self, if you want to a fresh start – this is the secret.

Many people get inspired and motivated to go on a journey of self-discovery.

Others find themselves stuck in their lives, at times in unhealthy situations, and they are determined to finally break free and move on.

Some are trapped in bad relationships, by oppressive work conditions, by difficult neighbors, and of course – the most challenging enemy of all: by their inner ghosts. Others struggle with unhealthy habits and addictions, which make them feel out of control.

But then they reach a point of “enough is enough,” and so they embark on a journey, all inspired, excited ... they pack their bags and set out on their way... only to end up coming right back where they started, repeating the same old patterns! How many of our New Year resolutions last more than a day?

As the old African proverb goes: “You can outrun that which is running behind you, but not that which is running inside of you.”

Your good intentions are certainly pure and real. When you decide to leave, you really want to get someplace. You may even know where you want to go – you have the destination in mind. But then why is it that you cannot seem to maintain your new course toward change?

The reason is because even as you see your destination ahead, your *past* is holding you back. You have so many things weighing you down, so much baggage.

So the key to meaningful change is not so much knowing the new destination and how to get there, it’s knowing how to unload the past, so that it shouldn’t shape your future and bring you back to your old patterns.

7. Freedom from Subjectivity

By telling Abraham, “Leave your land, your birthplace, the home of your parents, and go to the land that I will show you,” God instructed us, his descendants, that there are three steps to unloading the past – three forms of subjectivity we need to leave behind when we set out on the journey of self-renewal and self-discovery:

- “Your land” represents the first level of subjectivity – the influence of society and community ... peer pressure, which affect us in deep and profound ways. We all want to be liked and accepted by others, and we adjust our behavior accordingly.

- The “home of your parents” represents the second level of subjectivity – parental influence, which can be so subtle that we don’t even recognize it. Often, we don’t realize how deeply the attitudes and expectations of our parents, which shaped us at our most impressionable age, permeate our own attitudes and behavior, for good and for bad.
- “Your birthplace” represents the third level of subjectivity – inherent self-love. Each person is blinded by his or her selfish interests; no one is immune from that.

This does not mean that we must completely discard all good things that we have learned from our parents or our community, but it means that, first of all, we must become aware how these influences affect our behavior, our opinions, and our thought patterns. Only then can we begin to know who it is that we are and what it is that we think, know, and believe.

Similarly, personal bias or self-love – which isn’t a crime in itself – becomes a crime when we don’t acknowledge it, and when it begins to distort our vision.⁶

Ask yourself: Are you able to identify where you blindly follow convention (or politically correct opinions) and where your path is truly your own, arrived at by you through careful consideration?

If Abraham could do it, so can you.

⁶“Bribery (bias) blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.” (Deuteronomy 16:19)

8. Abraham's Journey and You

Abraham's journey was far more than a geographical excursion. It was a transition from the comfort zones of conformity and self-absorption to the greatest heights of transcendence – a journey from the mortal to the immortal.

Abraham grew up in an environment where the “politically correct” way was deep self-interest. (Sound familiar?) His was a pagan world that was consumed with its own way of doing things, with the ways of all flesh, with the natural inclination of humanity is to serve itself.

But, despite that, Abraham pioneered a new path. Resisting all pressures – rejecting all the influences of his life, his family, culture and community – Abraham searched for something true and eternal, something that transcends society's subjective whims and nature's transient forces.

A lone man pitted against an entire world, Abraham discovered that the only true certainty in life is the absolute commitment to one's divine calling, to the mission for which each individual has been uniquely chosen.

Abraham was the first to take this journey. But not the last.

God's call resounds through history, and it beckons to each one of us – especially on the first day of Sukkot, when we sit in the sukkah with Abraham at our side:

“Will you live a life driven by existential interests, or one aspiring to transcendence? Will you get stuck in your old ways or turn a new page?”

9. Two Choices

At each moment of your life, in each encounter you experience, you have two choices: 1) to be mediocre or 2) to be great.

Sylvia comes home from school one day with her report-card showing average marks of B+. Her father calls her over and says: “Listen Sylvia, either you get A+ or F. Excellence or failure. Anything but mediocre...”

Will you follow your selfish, immediate needs, or will you transcend your natural self and reach beyond yourself – to your essence, to who you truly are? Will you just suffice with the confines of the forces that have shaped you, or will you go beyond yourself?

As you go through your life's journey, you will come to a fork in the road and face this question many times. Reading Abraham's story and recalling it on the first day of Sukkot is a tremendous inspiration. Abraham "the father of all nations" – the first man to discover transcendence – teaches that the only real response to doubts and confusion is to embrace your unwavering calling.

10. In the Spirit of Abraham

As we celebrate Sukkot with Abraham on this day, here is a humble suggestion:

Think carefully and then write down where you are in your life: Are you trapped in your comfort zone? What fears and uncertainties keep you paralyzed? And then ask yourself: "What is the most certain thing in my life? What do I know is real with absolute and unconditional surety?"

Take your question into the sukkah and the answer is bound to come to you. Because it is clear that when you change your venue, you change yourself.

At your sukkah table bring up the same question to your family guests. Provoke them by asking how sitting in the sukkah – which is so different than sitting in your usual seats in the comfort of your home – can elicit new and spontaneous changes and solutions to old problems.

Remember Sukkot is meant to be a game changer. It is meant to teach you how to change your location, your mindset, your space.

Why? So that new vistas will open up.

Every experience in your life – and especially this one – presents you with the opportunity to achieve greatness. Will you rise to the occasion?

11. The Challenge of the Sukkah: Dare the Impossible

The sukkah challenges us. Provokes us. It challenges our comfort zones, our fears and inhibitions. It dares us to be different – to think different, to act different.

The sukkah entreats us to get beyond our hesitations, by considering the many things that may seem impossible to do simply because our minds tell us that they are impossible.

For example, according to the laws of aerodynamics, a bee is incapable of flight.

The French mathematician M. Sainte-Lague proved it in 1934 while working as a lab assistant to the entomologist Antoine Magnan, who then reported it in the introduction to his book *Le Vol des Insecte*. It would seem this is because the bee's body weight is not in the right proportion to its wing capacity (in terms of size and beats per second).

But thankfully somebody forgot to tell the bee!

The bee is not exactly an aerodynamics buff and therefore does not care too much for scientific equations and calculations. So it does what it was born to do ... which is FLY!!!

12. Taking Off in Flight

We all can fly, but we need to get our self-imposed limitations out of our heads and mindsets ... and Sukkot provides us that opportunity.

Some ad agencies, who need to create impressive campaigns for their clients, will take their creative teams to a completely new venue – like an amusement park or some other whacky place – in order to elicit ideas they would never come up with in their conventional offices and conference rooms.

Many forward thinking and cutting edge technology developers intentionally hire inexperienced programmers and designers, who have not been jaded by past web models, so that they come up with completely fresh and new concepts.

But ... long before all the contemporary methods and schemes to evoke innovation, we Jews had the simple, humble sukkah. It may be just a mere makeshift shack, which takes a few hours to construct (compared to the years of building a solid home). It may be cramped and uncomfortable (not that it needs to be). It may not have all the comforts and luxuries of our homes (since it is exposed to the elements).

And yet ... this modest sukkah can – if we only allow it – change the course and destiny of our lives!

So enter the sukkah. Fly. Soar. Brainstorm with family and guests in new and innovative ways.

And have a safe flight. See you when you land.

Bon voyage. Amen.