



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 9, 2014

Sukkot Day 1

**A Topsy-Turvy World:
Education Lessons From a Hut**



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart 5775 Enter the Heart”

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ABSTRACT

Is this world upside down or outside in? When people worship the body and ignore the soul, value the peel and forget the fruit within, then we have a topsy-turvy reality. But what do we do about it and how do we ensure that our children see life as it should be seen: inside out?

A fascinating Talmud explaining the mysterious words of today's *Haftorah*, illuminated by an enchanting story with Rebbe Yechezkel Taub of Kuzmir, reveals for us the power of the Sukkah and its revolutionary lessons in educating our children.

Our *Haftorah* speaks of global war and darkness. Then it prophesies that all the nations will make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the Festival of Sukkot. What is the connection?

This sermon answers that question via a story of one father whose plea overturned a decree of heaven and allowed him more time on earth to educate his children in Torah. It is a story that teaches how we must use our sukkahs - which represent the Clouds of Glory - to create cocoons for our children, and prepare them and the world to the time when all darkness will be banished and to the “spreading of a shelter (sukkah) of peace upon us, and upon all Israel, and upon Jerusalem” - *hapores sukkat shalom aleinu v'al kol amo Yisrael v'al Yershalayim*.

A Topsy-Turvy World

A TOPSY-TURVY WORLD: EDUCATION LESSONS FROM A HUT

1. The Jewish Atheist (Joke)

When a Jewish atheist heard that the best school in town happened to be Catholic, he enrolled his son. Things were going very well until one day the boy came home and said he had learned all about the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost. His father, barely able to control his rage, seized his son by the shoulders and said: “David, this is very important, so listen carefully. There is only one God, not three. Only one God – do you hear me? – and we don’t believe in Him!”

2. On Education

Some may see this anecdote as just another piece of humor. Some may see it as expressing the paradox of so many Jewish people – atheists believing in one God. And some may see it as hypocritical – how could you send your kids to a Catholic school and not expect them to learn about the Trinity?

But what I take away from this humorous story is the bottom line: It is all about education – educating ourselves and educating our children.

Let me say it again: It. Is. All. About. Education.

Generally speaking, there are two extreme approaches we tend to take in educating our children:

- 1) One approach is to wall-off our children from the outside world ... to remove all foreign influence and distance them from any alien substance. Many Jews do this, setting up insular communities, sending their kids to private Jewish schools, shopping only in kosher stores, patronizing businesses owned by people in the community, working only in Jewish-owned companies, etcetera, etcetera.

2) A second approach – similar to that of the atheist parent – is to expose our children to the world ... to live in diverse communities, to shop in all kinds of stores, to send our kids to the same schools every other kid goes to, to allow them to explore and find their own paths and fend for themselves. Hopefully, with good parenting and healthy values, they will conquer the world and the world will not conquer them.

Most of us educate somewhere in between these two extremes, trying to find the right balance between shielding our children (which is becoming increasingly difficult in this technological era) and allowing them to explore.

Is there a tool that can help us in this difficult dance?

Yes.

It is called the sukkah.

The sukkah teaches us the correct way to educate, by stressing the importance of education and the purpose of education.

To understand how the sukkah does that, we need to better understand the importance of the Festival of Sukkot, the Festival of Huts, and that importance is underscored in today's *Haftorah*.

3. The Haftorah

The Haftorah we just read is prophetic, cryptic, frightening and perplexing.

The Prophet Zechariah¹ forecasts that a day is coming when the nations of the world will rise up against Israel and plunder Jerusalem. On that day, God shall wage battle against those nations, as He did at the Red Sea. The Mount of Olives shall split and all shall flee. And, says Zechariah, this is what shall happen next:

¹ Zechariah 14:1-21

*And it shall come to pass on that day that there shall be no light, only fleeting light and thick darkness. But it will be one continuous day, which will be known as God's, not day and not night, but at evening there will be light. On that day, the living waters shall flow out of Jerusalem ... And the Lord shall become King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one, and His Name shall be one.*²

Then, the entire world will be like one flat plain, while Jerusalem stands tall like a mountain. All the nations that attacked Jerusalem shall wither away. And those that remain will make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the Festival of Sukkot, and they shall be blessed.

To sum up: the nations will attack, God will destroy them, that day will be dark with only an insubstantial light, to be followed by real light and the rush of living waters. And, in such a utopian world, all the nations will come to Jerusalem for the Festival of Sukkot.

Cryptic to say the least. And, no doubt, many questions have arisen in your mind at this point. Unfortunately, answering them all is beyond the scope of this talk. However, by focusing on one key verse from Zechariah, I believe we can learn an invaluable lesson about Sukkot in general and about education in particular, especially the education of our children.

4. "No Light" or "Fleeting Light"?

After describing the attack on Jerusalem, Zechariah depicts that day of global war in a seemingly contradictory way. He says:

And it shall come to pass on that day that there shall be no light, only fleeting light [yikarot in Hebrew] and thick darkness [v'kiparon].

Why all this verbiage? Once we know that *there shall be no light* what does it add to tell us that it is *only fleeting light and thick darkness*? If there is *no light*, how can there be *fleeting light*? And, if there is *no light*, is the reference to *thick darkness* not superfluous?

²Zechariah 14:6-9.

Additionally, the Hebrew of the verse is very peculiar. The term for “fleeting light” – *yikarot* – is related to *yakar*, meaning something valuable, expensive, precious. What does that have to do with “fleeting light”? And the word for thick darkness – *kiparon* – is elsewhere translated as “floating” and “curdling/coagulating.”

Why these peculiar word choices here? What does *yikarot v'kiparon* really mean?

5. The Talmud Answers

The Talmud³ answers:

*This refers to the people who are honored (yakar) in This World, but will coagulate (kafoi) in the World to Come.*⁴

And then it cites this example:

As was the case of Rabbi Yosef the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who fell faint and went into a trance. When he recovered his senses, his father asked him, “What did you see?” He replied: “I saw a topsy-turvy world: the upper were beneath and the lower were on top.” His father replied: “My son, you saw a clear world. And we, how are we there?” [He answered:] “Just as we are here, so are we there. And I heard them saying, ‘Happy is he who comes here with his learning in his hand.’”

The Talmud highlights the dichotomy between worlds. There is *Olam Hazei*, this physical world, and there is *Olam Habah*, or *Olam Ha’emet*, the World to Come, the World of Truth.

What is valued here on earth is not necessarily valued up above in heaven. Those that are honored and idolized on earth, begin to coagulate, congeal, thicken and darken in the World of Truth.

³ Pesachim 50a.

⁴ The opinion cited here is that of R. Yehoshua b. Levi. The Talmud brings two additional opinions: “Said R. Eliezer: This means, the light which is precious [yakar] in this world, is yet of little account [kapuy] in the next world. R. Yochanan said: This refers to *nega'im* and *ohaloth*, which are complex [deep/heavy] in this world yet shall be light [easily understood] in the future world.”

In other words, the World to Come is topsy-turvy: What is here precious is there cheap. What is here scoffed at is there priceless.

Now the words of the Prophet Zechariah take on a whole new meaning: *And it shall come to pass on that day that there shall be no light, only fleeting light and thick darkness...*

War on Jerusalem, on truth and Godliness, is darkness, but this darkness is the kind that has *fleeting light and thick darkness*. In such a time, people on earth will hold dear what is valueless in heaven, people on earth will honor those who coagulate in the World of Truth, people on earth will deem precious that which is meaningless in heaven.

We see this in our daily lives: Who of us has not been at times seduced by the lure of the impermanent elements of material life, by instant gratification and superficial and temporary delights? Even as we succumb to the distractions of this physical world our minds know how fleeting these forces are in comparison to the eternal and immortal values that we cherish.

Yet, that is the nature of the material universe: It's an upside down world. Look around. What do you see? I see – paraphrasing the above-mentioned Talmud – I see “*a topsy-turvy world: the upper were beneath and the lower were on top.*” People worship things that will never last, they take comfort in transient pleasures, they pursue that which has no spiritual value and easily disregard that which is precious in heaven.

To this, Rabbi Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi conveys the solution: “Happy is he who comes here with his [Torah] learning in his hand.” Torah bridges the gap between heaven and earth. We on earth were given the Torah, which is true light that never fades or disappears. When we embrace the everlasting Torah on earth we connect to eternity.

6. The Sukkah

Now, what does any of this have to do with Sukkot?

I'm about to explain.

A key mitzvah of Sukkot is dwelling in a sukkah, a hut with a roof fashioned of palm fronds or tree branches. This hut is meant to remind us of the Clouds of Glory – the *Ananei Hakavod* – which surrounded the Israelites in the desert wilderness and created a cocoon that transcended the earthly environment and established an atmosphere of complete and pure spirituality.⁵

The generation of the wilderness was called the *dor deah*, “the generation of knowledge,” for it was a generation steeped in divine wisdom and in celestial understanding. After leaving Egypt, they received the Torah from God at Mount Sinai and then the rest of their lives was spent in the womb of Torah, protected by the Clouds of Glory. They had not a care in the world, no need to earn a living (as manna rained down from heaven), and so all they did was study Torah in preparation for entering the Promised Land.

And thus they were able to make a slice of heaven here in earth.

The purpose of the sukkah is to replicate that cocoon and to remind us of how we, too, can bridge heaven and earth. If, in the beginning of the year we establish a set order of study – of immersion in Torah – and educate our children to do the same, then indeed we can bridge anything, even worlds.

7. Heavenly Truth (Optional Story)

Just how powerful this kind of education can be is illustrated by the following story about Rebbe Yechezkel Taub of Kuzmir, the grandfather of the first Rebbe of Modzitz:

It was Friday night in the city of Kuzmir. As Shabbat set in, a man arrived at Rebbe Yechezkel’s *Tish*, the ceremonial Chassidic gathering where inspiring melodies were sung and the mysteries of the universe deciphered. None of the hundreds of Chassidim that were present recognized this traveler. Throughout the songs, the stranger stood opposite the Rebbe and stared directly at him. The Rebbe continued in

⁵See Likkuei Torah Bamidbar 37b; et al.

his usual way with Shabbat songs. At the end, the Rebbe wished his guests “Gut Shabbos” and went off to his room. The traveler left as well. No one asked about his unusual behavior; in fact, no one spoke to him.

This repeated itself throughout Shabbat. In the morning, and at the Third Meal, the stranger reappeared and continued to stare at the Rebbe unabashedly.

When the Rebbe gave over Torah teachings, his lofty words, delivered in a very sweet and pleasant voice, caused everyone present to forget his own problems and feel attached to the Heavenly Father. But suddenly, the Rebbe’s voice rang out: “Why are you staring at me so much? Don’t you recognize me?”

Immediately thereafter, the Rebbe prayed *Maariv*, the Evening Prayer, and made *Havdala*, the ceremony separating Shabbat from the normal workweek.

There was one Chassid present who was really curious about what the Rebbe meant by his words to this strange man. He was so intent on finding out that he followed the stranger man out of the *shul* and asked him what this encounter with the Rebbe was all about.

“Oh, it’s a long story,” replied the man, trying to avoid answering. But the Chassid insisted on hearing the story, and the man began his tale:

“Some twenty-two years ago, I left *Olam Hazeih*, this physical earth for *Olam Ha’emes*, the World of Truth.”

The Chassid began to tremble, seized with a terrible fright. Could it be that he was speaking to some kind of spirit or ghost? Reassuring him, the man said, “Allow me to speak, and then you’ll understand everything.

“Twenty-two years ago, I was a *melamed*, a teacher of young children. Even though my livelihood only allowed me to have some black coffee and black bread, and no meat, fish or fancy clothes, I never complained, and neither did any member of my family. We accepted our lot in life with love.

“Around that time, I contracted a severe case of pneumonia. The doctors attempted to treat it, but I could tell by the look on their faces that they didn’t hold out too much hope for me – my days on earth were

numbered. You can just imagine what it's like for a young man of twenty-two years to leave this world and leave behind a young widow and two small children!"

The man continued, "You know, when a person departs from this world, he still thinks he's alive. So it was with me - I merely thought that I didn't have the strength to get up. But then I saw that my wife and children were crying, and that the *Chevra Kadisha*, the Jewish burial society, arrived to begin their holy work in preparing my body for burial. It was then that I realized that I had left this world, and my heart completely broke. I thought, 'Who is going to care for the welfare of my two little children? Who will ensure that they receive a proper Torah education?'

"Perhaps I should have been concerned over what was happening to my soul, but all I could think about was the future of my children - it was unbearable. My soul began to feel the absence of the body, and it began to rise, higher and higher, turning and rising, and I was thinking: 'What will happen now? How will I end up?'

"Suddenly, I felt different than before, and didn't understand why I had risen so high. I saw thousands upon thousands of souls, and the soul of another young man came up to me and asked, 'Who are you, and where are you going?' I felt as if I knew him, and I asked, 'Perhaps you can tell me where I can find out why my soul was taken from the physical world at such a young age, and who's going to watch over my children. Who will ensure that they should go in the ways of holiness and Godliness?'

"'You are in the World of Souls,' the man answered. Pointing off into the distance, he said, 'Over there, the Heavenly Tribunal, the *Beth Din Shel Maalah*, sits and judges who is fit to enter the heavenly realms. I will tell you something that can be very helpful to you. You should go to that distant place where the judges are. Among them is a *tzaddik*, one of the righteous men of his generation, a man of the physical plain. He was chosen to be on the tribunal because he is so righteous and because he can accurately represent the souls coming from the physical earth. As he is intimately familiar with the physical plain and its many challenges, he can find merits for your case, argue for it, and fully understand it.' Upon finishing his advice, the soul of this young man vanished.

“So I went to the place which he had told me about, and I tried to find this *tzaddik*, this righteous judge. Not before long, the judge who was sitting in the middle called me and asked in a very pleasant and sensitive voice, ‘What do you want?’

“I began to cry profusely and was so overcome with emotion that I could not speak. The *tzaddik* reassured me that he would listen carefully to every word of mine. It took all my strength to rein in my emotions, and I was finally able to cry out to the heavenly court: ‘How could it be that I was taken away at such a young age from the world, and left behind young orphaned children without any guidance?’

“The *tzaddik* then asked me, ‘Do you mean that your only concern is for your children, that they should grow up to be God-fearing and refined?’

“I responded, ‘Of course! My whole life was dedicated to education! We lived in abject poverty only so that I could give the proper education to my children!’

“I watched as the judges deliberated over my case, and then the *tzaddik* called me over to give their decision: ‘The clear and pure words that you have uttered before us indicate that they are completely true, and we have decided to allow you to remain in the physical world for another twenty-two years, so that you can raise your children and educate them in the ways of Torah.’

“That *tzaddik* was the Rebbe Yechezkel of Kuzmir. It took me a long time to find him, and it took me all of Shabbat to recognize him. But it was him. He was the one who interceded for me in heaven and made sure that I was granted additional time on earth to educate my children in Torah.

“And once I recognized the *tzaddik* through his awesome melodies and words of Torah – it was at that very moment, when I was certain that he was that righteous man of earth who had helped me in heaven, that Shabbat concluded and the Rebbe said to me: ‘Why are you staring at me so much? Don’t you recognize me?’”

8. Back to the Message of the Haftorah

And that brings us back to the message of our *Haftorah*.

The world is a battleground. Raw materialism wages war against holiness and the awareness of a higher presence amongst us.

And when that happens, there is no light; only a fleeting light and a heavy darkness. What seems real isn't. It's a topsy-turvy inside-out world: We see the body and not the soul; the glove and not the hand within; we value the surface level of existence ignoring what is beneath and within. We can worship the "peel" of the fruit and consider that more real than the fruit itself, when in truth it's the other way around.

But there is an antidote to this confusion and battle called the sukkah, a cocoon of education and Torah that brings true light and true water to the shrouded world. The sukkah allows us to perceive and experience reality as it truly is. It turns the world inside out, and exposes the soul as being primary and the body secondary.

This is the message of Sukkot. The sukkah is an incubator, a think-tank, a cocoon. But it's not a cocoon that walls you off from the world but rather a cocoon that protects you from the world so that you may change *it* and it not change *you*.

This is the key to education and this is our responsibility as parents:

Some people think we have to wall off our kids from the world; others think we have to throw them into the world to fend for themselves. Both of these extremes are ultimately flawed: The *dor deah* "generation of knowledge," walled itself off, and that's why they remained in the wilderness, never entering the Promised Land. On the other hand, just tossing children into a dark battleground will ensure a painful struggle, even if at the end there will be light.

But there is a third option – build sukkahs, build Torah cocoons, build tabernacles and tents, build oases and safe havens where your children (and yourself) can be completely at ease in a pure security blanket. In this shelter of light and truth, they will learn everything divine, they will incubate their souls, and they will cultivate their spirits. For eight days teach them and teach them some more, saturate your sukkah walls with as much light and holiness and Torah and positive conversation and song as possible.

And after, when your child walks out into the world, the world will be no match for your child.

And the Lord shall become King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one, and His Name shall be one.

This indeed is how we literally transcend heaven and earth.

9. The Global Sukkah (Conclusion)

As we sit in the sukkah, may it indeed be the Will of Heaven that we educate our children in the way of Torah. May we create for them cocoons of complete security and peace, not so that they may forever remain there, but so that they may then walk out into the world to use what they have learned to transform the darkness of the world into light. And, as we say in the Sukkot Grace After Meals, *Harchaman hu yakim lanu et sukkat Dovid hanofelet* – “May the Merciful One restore for us the fallen sukkah of David,⁶ which will ultimately lead to, in the words of last night’s prayer, to *hapores sukkat shalom aleinu v’al kol amo Yisrael v’al Yershalayim* – to spreading the shelter (sukkah) of peace upon us, and upon all Israel, and upon Jerusalem.

And then the entire world will indeed rise up and make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Sukkot as one people under one God.

Ah Frelichen Sukkos and Happy Sukkot! Chag Samaeach! And a Gut Yom Tov!

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⁶Cf. Amos 9:7.