



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 22, 2016  
Shabbat Chol HaMoed

**Five Stories, Five Key  
Lessons for Sukkot**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## ABSTRACT

What better way to express the beauty and warmth of Sukkot than through a story? As we celebrate Shabbat Chol HaMoed Sukkot, this sermon presents five stories and five lessons to capture the heart of Sukkot.

The first deals with a question posed by the mayor of Berlin to Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Levin, the city's chief rabbi: Why do we not ask *Ma Nishtana* on Sukkot? His answer will astound you.

The second explains the sacredness of Shabbat and Sukkot, time and space, as revealed in a debate between the Voorker Rav and the Kotzker Rebbe.

The third focuses on the Berditchiver Rebbe's unique custom of inviting simple Jews to his sukkah.

The fourth solves the mystery behind disappearance of the world's most beautiful sukkah, the sukkah of the Lolever Rebbe.

And the fifth contains a beautiful, novel explanation of why the mitzvah of the sukkah is the most comprehensive and all-encompassing mitzvah of all the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

## FIVE STORIES, FIVE LESSONS FOR SUKKOT

### 1. Why is this Night Different than all Other Nights?

It happened (circa 1772) that the mayor of Berlin was invited to the Passover Seder of the city's chief rabbi, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Levin. The mayor was seated at a gorgeously bedecked table with glittering silver and shinning glasses, the finest china and tableware of the highest quality.

When the children began to ask the *Ma Nishtana*, the four questions beginning, "Why is this night different than all other nights," the mayor politely inquired:

"Why, when you are sitting in the highest comfort of your regular homes, safe and sound, why then do the children ask *Ma Nishtana*? Would it not make more sense to ask this question, why is this night different, in the sukkah, when you break your routines and move out of your comfortable homes into portable shacks, surrounded by temporary walls and a roof that admits sun and rain?"

The question is a good one: Why do we not recite the *Ma Nishtana* on Sukkot? Is sitting in a hut under greenery any less different than refraining from eating leavened product or eating matzah? Is shaking a *lulav* any less different than dipping a vegetable in salt water or bitter herbs in *charoset*? Is lounging under a canopy of green *schach* any less different than reclining on a pillow at the Seder?

The wise rabbi of Berlin replied, honestly and candidly: "Throughout our history, we the Jewish people, have sadly become acclimated to pain and suffering. In every generation, the haters of the Jews endeavored to butcher us, to exile us from our land, to evict us from our homes. Heart-breakingly, they succeeded too many times to count. We have become accustomed to displacements from our homes. For this reason, as a child sits in a sukkah, a temporary hut, a "homeless" shelter of sorts, the child does not wonder at the abnormality, for this is normal for the Jewish child. When, however, we sit around a royal table, with a royal feast spread before us inside a permanent home, then the child asks, "*Ma Nishtana* – why is this night of comfort and permanence different than all the other nights of homelessness and hurt throughout history?"

*The Lesson:*

Never take for granted the gifts we have today. Our grandparents would never believe their eyes if they saw the freedom and prosperity we, their descendants, are blessed with today. It would have been unimaginable for them to think that one day their grandchildren could celebrate Judaism, including Sukkot, in comfort and in freedom, without fear of informers, persecutors, killers and all the other discrimination we have suffered over the years.

We must never forget what our forbearers went through so that we may have the blessings we have today. And this awareness behooves us to not become apathetic and complacent in our gifts. We must commit with equal passion to perpetuate the tradition, today in comfort, with the same zeal of our ancestors as they sacrificed their lives for Judaism.

As we sit in our portable Sukkot let us remember how so much of our history was “impermanent” and “insecure.” This teaches us that we are stronger than structures, and that we may learn the deepest lessons from the temporary things in life, like the sukkah, more so than from “permanent” matter. The impermanent Sukkah of our history imbued us with eternal strength, more powerful than any structure can provide.

As they say, that which doesn't kill you makes you stronger. In the words of the Torah: The more they were oppressed, the more they proliferated and spread.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Shabbat and Sukkah, Time and Space

Sometime in the mid 1800's, the Voorker Rav and the Kotzker Rebbe were discussing the relative merits of Sukkot and Shabbat.

Comparing the different mitzvot that are observed on Sukkot, the Voorker Rav declared, “I prefer the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah over the mitzvah of shaking the four species. After all, when you let go of the *lulav*, you let go of the holiness, whereas when you are in the sukkah you cannot let go; the sanctity completely surrounds you.”

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 1:12.

The Kotzker Rebbe nodded his agreement, but responded, “Yes, it is true that the sukkah has this advantage but, when compared to Shabbat, even the sukkah falls short. After all, one can walk out of a sukkah, but one can never walk out of Shabbat. No matter where in the world a person is and no matter his or her level of observance, Shabbat always remains Shabbat. The 24 hours of Shabbat are completely enveloping.”

In praising the sukkah, the Voorker Rav was lauding the concept of *kedushat makom*, the sanctity of space/place.

The Kotzker Rebbe countered that with praise for the Sabbath, he was lauding the concept of *kedushat z'man*, the sanctity of time. For space is bound only to the location affected by that space, in contrast to time which is all encompassing. Space can be abandoned (or even destroyed), as opposed to time, which is not physical, and therefore its sanctity can never be undone or abandoned.

*The Lesson:*

We are charged with sanctifying and refining both space and time. Within the embracing walls of a sukkah, we elevate and transcend space. Within the embrace of Shabbat, we elevate and transcend time.

When Shabbat and Sukkot come together – like this day, Shabbat Chol HaMoed Sukkot – we elevate and transcend both time and space.

### 3. The Berditchever's Guests

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, the famed 18th century Chassidic master and lover of Israel, was known for specifically inviting the simplest Jews to his sukkah – the peddlers, the farmers, the pure and simple Jews. Indeed, the Berditchever would go out of his way to intentionally invite Jews that, on the surface, seemed to be ignorant, to sit within the embracing four walls of his sukkah, where they joined him in feast, in song, in celebration, and in words of Torah.

People would wonder at Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's custom of inviting simple Jews rather than the scholarly elite. Could the holy Rebbe not find more respectable guests to grace his holy sukkah?

Once, a few brave students asked the Berditchever for the reasoning behind his custom.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, with a glint in his eye, replied:

“In the End of Days when the Messiah comes and the righteous ones will be invited to sit in the sukkah fashioned from the skin of the leviathan, I desire to be among the invitees. But, certainly, the doorman to the sukkah will bar my entry and say: ‘What audacity for a simpleton like you to try to enter into a sukkah with the greatest souls that ever lived!’ Perhaps I will then be able to humbly respond: “I too invited simple folk into my Sukkah, and I wasn’t embarrassed by them...”

*The Lesson:*

We all have our comfort zones. They may be comfortable, but they are not conducive for growth. On the contrary, they usually lead to stagnation.

Sukkot (as in story #1) takes us out of comfort zones. The Berditchever Rebbe teaches us that our Sukkot should also include going out of our social comfort zones, by inviting people that may not be on your status level. Welcome people of all backgrounds, even those we may deem “simple.”

Inviting all types of Jews to your Sukkah cultivates Jewish unity. Additionally, getting out of your comfort zone is the key to all growth. And finally: When you invite to your table those who seem “simpler” than you, you too will be invited to tables of those greats who you may be “simpler” than. By overlooking the differences and shortcomings of other, our shortcomings are also overlooked.

#### **4. The Mystery of the World’s Most Beautiful Sukkah**

The Lelover Rebbe, Rabbi Dovid Biederman of Lelov, was a disciple of the Seer of Lublin, who in turn was a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch and a contemporary of the Berditchever Rebbe.

Known for his outstanding love of the Jewish people, the Lelover Rebbe – who lived in the latter half of the 18th century – was also famous for the outstanding beauty of his sukkah. Its walls were composed of twelve magnificent wooden panels, each exquisitely engraved with the insignia of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Every year, people would come from far and wide to marvel at the Lelover Rebbe's sukkah and celebrate in its luxury and beauty.

But then, one year, as the grapevine reported from mouth to ear, the Lelover Rebbe built an ordinary sukkah, of ordinary wood, nothing glamorous at all. Everyone wondered: Why did he not put up the magnificent sukkah as was his usual custom? What happened to the twelve breathtaking wooden panels?

No one knew the answer, and the Lelover Rebbe himself was silent on the matter. Thus, the matter remained a mystery – if it was a detective novel, perhaps it would have been entitled, *The Mystery of the Disappearing Sukkah*.

Until one day the mystery was solved and the truth of the most beautiful sukkah ever came to light. The one who solved this mystery was a poor tailor named Zalman. Zalman and his family lived in a shack at the edge of town, near the forest. This shack was utterly threadbare, a hut of a home that was less sheltering than the flimsiest sukkah.

Zalman related how the past winter was so terribly freezing that living in his *nebach* of a shack was almost like living in an ice-box, in a sub-zero refrigerator, but even worse, for at least a fridge protects you from the wind!

The blustery situation became so bad that Zalman's baby boy fell terribly ill. The doctor came to check on the child and told Zalman that if he didn't make a fire to warm up the house and his family, the boy would have difficulty recovering and his situation would deteriorate.

Zalman was at a loss – where would he ever get the necessary funds to buy wood for his furnace to warm his home so his baby son could recover?

Zalman had no clue, but he knew that he could always go to the saintly Lelover Rebbe for help.



It was a bone-chilling night. Trudging through the snow and ice, the poor tailor finally made it to the door of the holy Rebbe.

"What brings you here in such terrible weather?" the Rebbe asked the tailor.

"Please help," replied Zalman. "My son has fallen ill, but my home is freezing cold, and I have no money to buy wood to build a fire!"

The Lelover Rebbe turned his compassionate eyes to heaven, and then suddenly, his face lit up with a big smile.

"I have no money to help you, however, I have good strong wood that will burn for hours upon hours, days upon days, twelve solid panels of wood that will warm your home and, surely with heaven's help, cure your boy of all his ills."

And then the Lelover Rebbe gave Zalman, the poor tailor, his twelve sukkah panels, each carved with the symbols of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was enough wood to warm up the tailor's house all winter and cure his baby son of his illness.

*The Lesson:*

The most beautiful sukkahs in the world are not those made of fancy wood; but those that warm the world. We must use our precious items to save precious lives and make the lot of the poor and less fortunate easier to bear.

## 5. The Most Comprehensive Mitzvah in the World

By way of introduction to this story, I want to mention that every mitzvah focuses upon and perfects another part of our individual bodies. For example: charity elevates the hand that gives charity; kosher food elevates the mouth that eats it and the digestive system that processes it; *tefillin* elevates the arm/mind and head/heart upon which they are wrapped. Furthermore: when we walk to do a mitzvah our legs are elevated, when we study Torah, our minds are refined, our reproductive organs are made holy when they bring new sacred life into this world; even our clothing is elevated when we dress in a refined way.



Indeed, there is a book by the 16th century sage Rabbi Elazar ben Moshe Azikri, called the *Sefer Charedim*, dedicated to explaining the mitzvot and their corresponding human limb or organ.

The following story demonstrates the part of our beings – or our whole selves – elevated by the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah.

Sometimes in the early 1900s, the Rebbe of Kalashitz, Rabbi Chuna Halberstam, had the following conversation with the head of the Beth Din of Tarna, the great scholar Rabbi Meir Arik.

The Kalashitzer Rebbe quoted his grandfather, the Shinever Rebbe, that the sukkah is the sole mitzvah that encompasses the entire human being, from his head down to his shoes.

Rabbi Meir Arik asked: “Does not the mitzvah of pilgrimage to the Temple three times a year also encompass the entire human corpus? After all one enters with his entire body, head to toe, into the Temple?”

The Kalashitzer Rebbe responded: “My grandfather did not say that the sukkah was the only mitzvah to cover a person from head to toe; rather, he said, ‘from head to shoes.’ One is prohibited from entering the Temple Mount while wearing shoes. Thus, though entering the holiest place on earth does indeed encompass a person from head to toe, it does not encompass a person from head to shoe. The only mitzvah that includes one’s *entire* being down to one’s toes and even one’s shoes, is the mitzvah of the sukkah.”

*The Lesson:*

Sukkah is all-encompassing, more than any other mitzvah. The Temple is sacredness squared; for this reason, one may not bring any lowly matter, such as shoes, into the Temple. A sukkah is also sacred, but it allows for baser matter to enter so that it may be elevated.

There are two types of holiness in our lives, and both are necessary: 1) the sacred place that is removed from this mundane world, into which mud may not be dragged – this sacred place is our personal temple; and 2) the sacred place into which even mud is welcomed and made to feel like gold, our personal sukkah.

Sukkot thus is a rich holiday, which provides us with a mosaic of many personal and transformative lessons – five key ones we outlined here:

1. Gratitude: Appreciating our blessings today in context of the “sukkot” impermanence of Jewish history.
2. Sanctifying time and space.
3. Unconditional love: Welcoming all into our sukkah regardless of stature.
4. Helping others.
5. Elevating our entire beings.

Sukkot endows us with the power to live our lives all year round by these creeds.

In that merit may we all be blessed on these last days of the holiday with deep joy and celebration, all in good health. And may we merit to celebrate together in the greatest sukkah gathering of them all – “a great congregation will return there,”<sup>2</sup> when G-d will “bring us together from the four corners of the earth”<sup>3</sup> and “the world will be filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.”<sup>4</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Jeremiah 31:8.

<sup>3</sup>Daily Liturgy.

<sup>4</sup>Isaiah 11:9. Maimonides, end of Mishne Torah (Hilchos Melachim 12:5).