



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5777 • 2016

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 17, 2016
Sukkot Day 1

**Shady Business:
Sukkot and the Elections**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5777 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

The presidential elections are approaching. A more volatile, stranger and unpredictable race to the White House is hard to remember. Politics has turned into entertainment, if not plain farce. We have never seen anything like this before. What can Sukkot teach us about presidents, elections, leadership, and who to vote for? How are we Jews to view these elections?

Two candidates, one who refuses to release his tax returns, another who released state secrets to her private email. One with perplexing hair, both with Jewish heirs.

Should you vote Democrat or Republican?

Enter Sukkot, when we learn about leadership from the *Ushpizin*, the Jewish leaders of yore. Our leaders have taught us that we have one job to do – to turn the world of today, “David’s fallen sukkah,” into the world of tomorrow, the “sukkah of peace, which is spread over us, over the Nation of Israel...” and over all the world.

Building a sukkah and celebrating in it are the greatest election choices we can ever make.

SHADY BUSINESS: SUKKOT AND THE ELECTIONS

1. The Great Debate (Joke)

Chag Samayach! Happy holiday!

Talking about debates, did you hear this one?

The Pope was seriously considering evicting the Jews from Rome. The Jews of course didn't want to leave so the Pope offered them a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, they could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave.

The Jews realized that they had no choice. But none of them wished to debate and be the cause for the Jewish expulsion. Until the synagogue janitor volunteered to do the job. So in default of anyone else, the janitor was made the representative of the Jewish community and was appointed to debate with the Pope.

Now as the Pope couldn't speak Hebrew and the Jew couldn't speak Latin (or Italian) it was agreed that it would be a silent debate, in pantomime.

The day of the great debate came. Pope faced janitor, and the debate began.

They sat in silence for a while then the Pope held up three fingers. The janitor held up one in return. The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. The janitor pointed down to the ground. The Pope took out the wine and the bread and the janitor brought out an apple.

The Pope stood up and said, "I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay."

When asked later by the cardinals the Pope told them what happened: "I held up three fingers to symbolize the Trinity, and he held up one to symbolize that there is one G-d in common, and pointed to the ground to say that He is here with us. I took out the bread and the wine to say that we are cleansed of our sins through Jesus and he took out an apple to remind me of our original sin! He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile the Jewish community had crowded around the janitor wondering what happened. "Well," said the janitor, "First he help up three fingers to indicate that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I help up one finger to tell him that not one of us was leaving. Then he waved his hand all around indicating that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I pointed down to the ground to let him know that we were staying right here."

"And then?" asked a woman. "I don't know," said the janitor. "He took out his lunch and I took out mine."

2. Presidential Debate

This debate between the Jewish janitor and the Roman pope may be a humorous opening to a Sukkot sermon; however, it is unfortunately reminiscent of some of the presidential debates we have been witnessing recently. Two candidates seem to be pointing fingers, one finger, two, three, at each other, and then take each other "out to lunch" - "out to lunch" as in craziness.

During this High Holiday season everybody is discussing the presidential debates and upcoming presidential elections. These debates have become highly watched spectacles. Almost like the coliseum of old. As someone told me: The Trump Clinton debates are more entertaining - and depressing - than any other TV show. Should I vote for Hillary Clinton or for Donald Trump? Who will be better for America? Who will be better for Israel? Who will make America great again? Who is better suited to put out the fires raging through the Middle East, and bring an end to the wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children?

Both candidates are historically unpopular. For some, the choice is simply between the lesser of the two evils.

I would like to present a unique take on all this - as seen through the eyes of Sukkot, the seven-day holiday we are now beginning to celebrate.

Long before Trump and Clinton, long before this country was even founded, long before all the nations of the world today were born, we Jews have been sitting in Sukkot with our families and friends.

So we have a long history that shapes our lives today. A history that transcends politics. A spiritual legacy that goes beyond red and blue. Sukkot reminds us to think about our great Jewish leaders and forefathers – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, David, all the *Ushpizin* guests who visit our sukkahs¹ - true leaders who are not driven by polls and pundits, who lead by example and are driven by humility, dedicated to a higher cause, not self-interest.

Sukkot offers us an opportunity to discuss the Jewish approach to life in general, leadership in particular, and the approach a Jew should take to voting for a president.

Perhaps a sukkah, a warm cocoon of loving, is a place for healthy debate, where different people from different vantage points may engage in healthy discussion, with the goal of uniting with each other.

But first, let us put the sukkah into context so that we ensure any debate is a holy debate, one that leads to people coming closer, not being driven further apart.

3. Sukkah: True Security

On Sukkot, Jews all over the world move out of their comfortable homes and – as they have done for over 3300 years – spend the next seven days eating and dwelling in makeshift, fragile huts, with relatively no protection from the elements.

Why do we do this? Because, as the Bible instructs: “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”.²

Dwelling an entire week in a Sukkah reminds us of the temporal nature of existence. And the source of true and everlasting security.

¹ See Zohar III, Emor, 103b.

² Leviticus 39: 42-43.

The material world is not our home. We must never succumb to the illusion that our man-made structures and mortal edifices are our natural environments. Corporeal life is a means, a road that leads us to a deeper, spiritual reality.

The transitory Sukkah reminds us that we are just travelers in this impermanent material world; we are spiritual beings on a material journey, not material beings on a spiritual journey.

Material success and prosperity can create the powerful illusion of invincibility. Despite the utter irrationality of feeling secure with anything temporary – and materialism, whether it is money, food or energy, is fundamentally ephemeral – the power of success is such that it can actually brainwash us into thinking that we are safe in its embrace. The fact is, the more dependent we become on the material, the less secure we really are. Like an addiction that can never be sated, the more we rely on forces that inherently cannot provide true security and safety, the harder it is to break the habit.

Comes Sukkot and wrenches us free from the stranglehold of material comforts. Dwelling in a Sukkah reminds us the source of true security in this hostile world. Not our man-made structures, not our concrete, steel, walled and gated homes, not any of our mortal creations can protect us from... mortality and from mortal enemies. True security comes not from our material structures but from our spiritual ones – from the Divine “clouds” that surround and protect us. The Sukkah reminds us that true and lasting power is derived not from human drives and innovations, but from the all-enveloping Divine presence.

For seven days – the full cycle of time – we make our material homes a temporary dwelling, and our Sukkot our permanent dwelling. During this time, we dwell in little huts where we eat all our meals and conduct all the activities of the day which we regularly would do at home.

Why would anyone want to leave their comfort zones, the warmth and expanse of a sprawling living room, feasting on a mahogany table in an elegant dining room, and instead move into a bare, unadorned, possibly cramped and cold Sukkah?

The answer is because the plain Sukkah remind us of our total dependency on a Higher presence – that our seemingly sturdy man-made shelters are nothing in the absence of His care.

Sukkot is the ultimate antidote to the illusion and distraction that our security comes from the circus of entertainment and even politics – including the presidential debates and elections. Sukkot reminds us of the eternal forces that transcend the immediate here and now.

It reminds us not to get too caught up in the impermanent vicissitudes of shifting political winds.

4. What is Truly Important he Zohar: “Shade of Faith”

Regardless whether you support Candidate Clinton or Trump, or neither of the two, the Sukkah lifts us up above the fray and teaches us what is truly important.

The brilliance of the Sukkah lies in its sheer simplicity. This small little hut, so fragile and flimsy, teaches us the mystery of true invincibility: Only when we are ready to surrender our own self-made delusions of power and comfort, only when we are ready to replace our dependence on material comforts and trust in financial wealth for dependence on the ethereal and trust in the sublime, can we ensure that our affluence and prosperity will not self-destruct.

Therein lies perhaps the most important lesson for the future of the United States. The Founding Fathers in their brilliance recognized that for a nation to endure it has to be built not on transient and temporal underpinnings, but on an unwavering foundation. An empire built on self-made success and material affluence ultimately will self-destruct under the weight of its self-worship. The core foundation of the nation they established is therefore built not on business prowess and financial prosperity, but on the “self-evident” truths, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The simple Sukkah reminds us all that our security comes from the “unalienable rights” endowed upon us all by our Creator.

As presidential politics is going through unprecedented disruptions, Sukkot gives us all pause to rise above both candidates and commit not to the path of the self-glorifying empires before us, whose self-absorption brought on their own demise, but to the path of humility, one that reclaims the Divine values that this country was built upon, and reinfuses those values into our homes, businesses, economies and man-made structures.

5. The Zohar: “Shade of Faith”

The Zohar,³ the classic work on Jewish mysticism authored two-thousand years ago by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, describes the sukkah as *tzilah d'mehimnusa* – Aramaic for “shade of faith.”

This description is based on the verse from Song of Songs, *In his shade I delighted and sat, and his fruit was sweet to my palate*,⁴ and on the verse from Isaiah, *And a sukkah shall be for shade by day from the heat, and for a shelter and a refuge from storm and rain*.⁵

The verse from Isaiah is also quoted by the Talmud⁶ which uses it to teach that we should sit in the “shade” of the sukkah, and to mandate that the *schach* be no higher than 20 cubits (about 30 feet), for otherwise it cannot provide shade.

Why the intrinsic connection between “shade” and the sukkah?

A clue comes in the discussion that follows, where the Zohar lists the *Ushpizin*, the seven Jewish leaders who come to visit us as guests in the sukkah. What can this juxtaposition, which is clearly not coincidental, teach us about the Jewish idea of leadership in general and the Jewish approach to the presidential election in particular?

³Part III, Emor, 103a.

⁴Song of Songs 2:3.

⁵Isaiah 4:6.

⁶Sukkah 2a.

6. Roof vs. Schach

Why is it that when you sit in your house all year long, under your solid ceiling and permanent roof, it's not considered as if you were sitting in the shade? Why only when sitting under the *schach*, the leafy greenery of a temporary, and rather flimsy roof, is it called sitting in the shade? Does not a roof of tar and brick and mortar provide better and more reliable shade than a roof of palm fronds and evergreen branches?

The term *tzel* means "shade" but also implies "protection." On a revealed level, we require less faith and less protection when comfortably situated in a home. When traversing the wilderness, when homeless, when wandering, when sitting within four flimsy walls and beneath a flimsier roof of temporary flora, we require much faith, much protection, the "shade of faith."

The power of the Jew is found in the ability to dwell even in impermanence, and to ultimately turn the impermanence of matter into the permanence of spirit.

7. The Fallen Sukkah of Exile

We live today in a world of impermanence. Ever since the destruction of the Temple, the world is like a sukkah that has fallen – as we said in the Grace After Meals last night and after every Sukkot feast, *May the Merciful One restore for us the David's sukkah that has fallen.*⁷ Because G-d's protection – embodied by the sukkah – has left us, we are homeless in exile.

There is homelessness that is literal and homelessness that is figurative. This year, with millions of refugees gushing forth from the four corners of the world, the fallen sukkah is no longer a Jewish reality but a global one. The impermanence of the world, of its structures, of its boundaries, is what we call exile, displacement.

⁷Cf. Amos 9:11.

No matter how comfortable we are in our homes, we must also remember that impermanence is the reality of the world today. This impermanence, this exile, will last until the world, the entire world, every molecule of creation, from Jew to gentile, animal to beast, fruit to vegetable, ocean to mountain is embraced in the warm cocoon of the “sukkah of peace,” as we recited last night during the *Maariv* prayer:

Spread over us the sukkah of Your peace. Blessed are You, Lord, who spreads the sukkah of peace over us, over His entire people Israel, and over Jerusalem.

It is our job, through our righteous deeds and Torah learning, to effect this change, to bring permanent peace into a world of impermanent uncertainty.

This Jewish higher service is embodied in the mitzvah of the sukkah. Unlike a home, which is permanence squared, the sukkah is about the impermanence of the world. The sukkah is about shading the world from its many challenges. The sukkah is about living in the shadow of light even in the darkest wildernesses. As the Jews traversed the wilderness, G-d provided them with a sukkah, shelter from the storm. It is our job to replicate that shelter today, by building sukkahs, sitting in them, celebrating in them, and showing the world what it truly means to be a Jew.

This will ultimately lead to the global sukkah, the permanent and everlasting home for the One G-d and the unified world, as He promised us through the Prophet Amos:

On that day, I [G-d] will raise up the fallen sukkah of David, and I will close up its breaks, and I will raise up its ruins, and build it up as in the days of yore.⁸

⁸Cf. Amos 9:11.

8. Jewish Leadership (Story)

Which brings us back to the presidential elections and what it means to elect a leader of the free world. But even all the power that a president has, he is still only a human being – he is not all powerful and his power is not permanent. And this is what we Jews must always keep in mind.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Beritchev, the 18th century Chassidic Master, famously prayed as follows:

Lord, Master of the universe. I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah Sasha of Berditchev, I come to You with a message from Your people Israel. What do You want of Your people Israel? What have You demanded of Your people Israel? For everywhere I look it says, “Say to the Children of Israel.” And every other verse says, “Speak to the Children of Israel.” And over and over, “Command the Children of Israel.” Father, sweet Father in Heaven, how many nations are there in the world?

.... The Russians, what do they say? That their Czar is the greatest ruler. The Prussians, what do they say? That their Kaiser is supreme. And the English, what do they say? That George the Third is sovereign. And I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berditchev, say: “*Yisgadal v’yiskadash shmei raboh* – Magnified and sanctified is Your Name.”⁹

9. Erect Sukkoth, Elect Leaders (Conclusion)

We Jews have always known one thing: leaders come and go; civilizations come and go.

Think about it: the Egyptians came and went, the Assyrians came and went, the Babylonians came and went, the Persians rose and fell, the Greeks rose and fell, the Romans came, and they too have fallen. All their leaders, their kings, their Pharaohs, their popes, their prime ministers, and their presidents have come and they have all gone.

Nothing in this world is permanent, except the one true permanent Creator of it all.

⁹See addendum to Kedushat Levi, p. 154.

The approach a Jew must take to the upcoming elections – and also to our internal debates between right and left, pro this or anti that – must be to connect to what is permanent in life.

As Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said: “The world exclaims this and the world exclaims that ... but I exclaim, ‘Magnified and sanctified is Your Name.’”

Perhaps it is a bit idealistic, but we Jews are nothing if not idealistic. The argument to vote for one candidate over another is not the focus of the Jew.

The focus of the Jew is made clear on Sukkot. That is, focus less on trying to understand an imperfect and impermanent world and focus more on bringing perfection and permanence to this world.

We Jews learn leadership from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, David, Sarah, Rebeca, Rachel, Leah, Devorah and Esther. Our leaders have taught us that we have one job: To turn the world of today, “David’s fallen sukkah,” into the world of tomorrow, the “sukkah of peace spread over us, over His entire Nation of Israel...” and over all the world.

And these role models help inform us of the standards we should expect from our current leaders.

It may sound naïve, but the fact is that the world has changed due to the Jewish people holding on steadfastly to our eternal values, personified by our spiritual leaders through the generations. So though there may be much to be cynical about today, we must continue to maintain our highest standards, and not allow anyone to drag us down.

History is witness to the fact that ultimately our unwavering commitment can and will impact even local politics...

Building and sitting and celebrating in a sukkah is the greatest election statement we can ever make.

Chag Sameach!

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