



## HIGH HOLIDAYS

Chol Hamoed Sukkot

Love and Hate:

Las Vegas Shootings vs. Falling in Love With Your Sukkah

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## LOVE AND HATE

### LAS VEGAS SHOOTINGS VS. FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOUR SUKKAH

#### ABSTRACT

With the recent tragic murders in Las Vegas – in one of the worst mass shootings in the USA, leaving over 58 dead and over 500 wounded – we are all left stunned, wondering: what is our world coming to?

The holiday of Sukkot couldn't come at a better time. Its message of love and embrace stands in stark contrast to the anger and hate we are witnessing. And indeed, the Sukkot message offers us both hope and an antidote to the pain in our troubled world.

A sukkah – the temporary hut we dwell in during this holiday – reminds us of the temporary dwellings G-d made to shelter and protect our ancestors in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. A sukkah demonstrates our faith and awareness that that G-d is our true source of security, not our physical abodes and man-made structures.

A famous question is asked: Since we sit in sukkot to commemorate the shelter G-d provided us upon leaving Egypt, why don't we celebrate Sukkot right after Passover? Why do we do so only six months later, in the fall?

The classic answer is that dwelling in Sukkot specifically in the autumn, when the general population returns to the comfort of their homes, demonstrates the power of our faith in G-d.

The first Rebbe of Ger, the Chidushei HaRim, takes this idea to another level with a magnificent explanation, one that is hinted to in the acronym of the word "Sukkah" itself.

His explanation coupled with two beautiful stories, one of a man who kissed his *sebach*, and another who created *sebach* out of aluminum, teaches us how Sukkot elicits a deep love and purity within each of us.

## 1. Las Vegas Murders

With the recent tragic murders in Las Vegas – in one of the worst mass shootings in the USA, leaving over 58 dead and over 500 wounded – we are all left stunned, wondering: what is our world coming to?

The holiday of Sukkot couldn't come at a better time. Its message of love and embrace stands in stark contrast to the anger and hate we are witnessing. And indeed, the Sukkot message offers us both hope and an antidote to the pain in our troubled world.

## 2. Story: Kissing Heaven

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi began to disseminate his teachings in White Russia and Lithuania (circa 1772), many young men flocked to him and became his ardent followers, despite the prevailing opposition to the Chassidic movement. They found that Chassidism injected a new vitality and joy in serving G-d that was lacking in “establishment” Judaism at the time. Among the new Chassidim were the two sons of one of the leading Torah scholars of the time.

One day, they approached Rabbi Schneur Zalman with a dilemma that had been occupying their minds for some time: should they try to win over their father to the Chassidic approach to serving G-d, or is he perhaps too set in his ways to change at this point in his life.

“Does he perform mitzvot with joy?” asked Rabbi Schneur Zalman.

“Every year,” related one of the sons in reply, “when we finish building our sukkah, father climbs onto a bench and kisses the *sebach*, the foliage covering the Sukkah.”

“In that case,” said the founder of Chabad, “he is fine the way he is.”<sup>1</sup>

## 3. The Power of a Kiss

Let me ask you: Why would anyone kiss their... *sebach*?!

We naturally kiss our loved ones, our children, people we care about. Why in the world would anyone kiss some evergreens or bamboos?!

The same question may be asked about the Torah scroll we kiss as we carry it out of the ark and then return it back to the ark. We also kiss it when we get an Aliyah. And of course, on Simchat Torah we don't only kiss it, we dance with it for hours on end!

What type of strange behavior is this? Imagine someone who has never witnessed Simchat Torah coming into a synagogue and seeing the exuberant dancing with the Torah scrolls!

Did you ever see someone – even a great lover of Shakespeare – dance with the complete works of his literature?! Or a music connoisseur dancing not with the music, but the musical notes of Mozart?!

Why do we kiss and dance with Torah scrolls? Why do we kiss a siddur when we open or close it? Why do we kiss our tzitzit? And why would a Jew kiss his *sebach*?

The answer is simple: because for us Torah and mitzvot are not just a book and a bunch of rituals. Torah

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.meaningfullife.com/sukkot-stories/>.

and mitzvot are, as we say in the evening service, *chayeinu v'orech yomeinu*, “our life and the length of our days.” They are the source of our spiritual sustenance and lives. Like oxygen.

Torah and mitzvot are life itself. We therefore love, kiss and embrace our life—just as we love, kiss and embrace our loved ones.

This is especially true for the mitzvah of Sukkot.

#### 4. Why Don't We Celebrate Sukkot In The Spring?

We celebrate Sukkot by dwelling in a foliage-covered booth, known as a sukkah. The Sukkah personifies simplicity and innocence. It is a temporary structure made of simple, natural materials.

Anything but natural foliage for its cover would disqualify the Sukkah. The Sukkah, at its essence, is about leaving the safe and comfortable environment of our homes for the ephemeral simplicity and temporary hut of the Sukkah.

The reason for this is clearly stated in the Torah:

*For a seven-day period you shall live in Sukkot. Every resident among the Israelites shall live in Sukkot, in order that your generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in Sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your G-d.*<sup>2</sup>

Dwelling in a Sukkah reminds us of the temporary dwellings G-d made to shelter and protect our ancestors after they left Egypt.<sup>3</sup> When we were unsheltered G-d sheltered us. When we were wandering from place to place, G-d protected us.

So to remember and know that G-d is our true source of security, not our physical abodes and man-made structures, we leave our comfortable homes and dwell in portable and temporary Sukkot huts. For a full week, we exchange our regular home for a home which leaves us at the mercy of the elements, demonstrating our trust in G-d's providence and protection, as our ancestors did when “following Me in the wilderness, in an uncultivated land.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 23:42-43.

<sup>3</sup> The Talmud (Sukkah 11b) documents a disagreement between the Sages as to the meaning of these “booths:” Rabbi Eliezer says that these booths refer to the miraculous clouds of glory that shielded us from the desert sun, while Rabbi Akiva maintains that these “booths” refer to the actual booths or huts that the Israelites built while in the desert to serve as their dwellings. However, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 625:1) cites only the former opinion.

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 2:2.

This raises an obvious question, as asked by the Tur<sup>5</sup>: Since we sit in Sukkot to commemorate the shelter G-d provided us in the wilderness upon leaving Egypt, why don't we celebrate Sukkot right after Passover, when we began sitting in Sukkot for the first time? Why do so a full six months later, in the fall?

## 5. Sukkah as an Act of Faith

The Tur answers the question he poses:

If we would be building and dwelling in Sukkot after Passover, which is in the spring, the nations of the world would say that we did so to protect us from the sun, and not because it is a Mitzvah commanded to us by G-d.

Now that we build and dwell in Sukkot in the fall, when the general population goes back indoors to protect themselves from the harsher elements, everyone sees and knows that we are doing so only because we are in love with G-d, and we trust Him implicitly. Though it may be cold or uncomfortable, we dwell in Sukkot because it's a Mitzvah that G-d commanded, not because it's comfortable or due to some other ulterior motive.

## 6. Getting To Know The Sukkah

The first Rebbe of the Gur Chassidic dynasty, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, known as the Chidushei Ha'Rim, takes it a few steps deeper:

The verse states: *Every resident among the Israelites shall live in Sukkot, in order that your generations should know (yaidu) that I had the children of Israel live in Sukkot when I took them out...*<sup>6</sup>

The operative word here is *yaidu* – which means to know (from the word *daas*), which means internalized and intimate knowledge. The Torah word for intimacy is *daas*. As it is written regarding the intimate union of Adam and Eve: *And Adam knew Eve.*<sup>7</sup>

In order to truly know and appreciate Sukkot one must have *daat*, one must have achieved a level of intimacy with G-d and with His Sukkah. Knowledge is more than belief, more than faith, more than wisdom (*chochma*), or even understanding (*binah*). Knowledge of something means an intimate connection with the thing that you know; your essence completely connects with its essence.

The Talmud teaches that a person does not sin unless bedeviled by the spirit of folly.<sup>8</sup> All year round, when one is tempted to transgress, it is not because the person is a bad person, but because at that moment a foolish

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<sup>5</sup> Orach Chaim 625.

<sup>6</sup> Chidushie Harim, Chag HaSukkot, p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 4:1.

<sup>8</sup> Sotah 3a.

impulse came over the person, a spirit of folly shrouded the person's soul and clouded his judgment. If not for that fool-hearted folly, the person would never sin.

When one knows G-d intimately and internally he is not capable of sin. Inevitably, if one is susceptible to the spirit of folly and the ability to act foolishly, then that person is not in touch with *daat*, intimate knowledge, and thus cannot sit in and experience the Sukkah, which requires *daat*. Every resident among the Israelites shall live in Sukkot, in order that your generations should know (*yaidu*)...

When are you certain to be in touch with your *daat*? At which time of year are you guaranteed to be in the “know,” when your essence is connected with the essence of G-d in an intimate and knowing way?

Right after Yom Kippur, when all our follies and foolish sins have been forgiven and we are as pure as fresh snow.

That is why we celebrate and dwell in Sukkot right after Yom Kippur, at this “knowing” time, when every Jew has come to intimately “know” G-d in a way that only Yom Kippur allows us to.

Only at this time of year, when we are free of all folly and in touch with our *daat*, can we connect and get to “know” the Sukkah on the deepest level.

Indeed, this purity is hinted to in the four Hebrew letters of the word Sukkah (*samach, vov, kof, hei*), which are an acronym for: *Vayomer Hashem Salachti Kidvarecha – And the Lord said, “I have pardoned them in accordance with your word.”*<sup>9</sup> These are the dramatic words we say following Kol Nidrei on the eve of Yom Kippur, declaring that G-d has forgiven the people, and has wiped the slate clean, returning us to our purity.

Sukkot is the culmination of the purity achieved on Yom Kippur.<sup>10</sup>

The sukkah is thus worthy of a kiss and a hug. When a Jew feels the intimate love and embrace of the sukkah – the divine hug it represents, protecting us as it did in the wilderness – then he will certainly reciprocate the love by kissing the *sechach*!

## 7. Story: When Aluminum Sechach Is the Holiest Sechach

Here is another beautiful story that captures the pure and loving connection that a Jew has with Sukkot, related by Rabbi Avraham Berkowitz:

After seventy years of Communism, building a sukkah in public in Russia is like the thawing of the snow at the end of the winter. Even in the farthest reaches of Siberia it warms the Jewish heart.

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<sup>9</sup> Numbers 14:20.

<sup>10</sup> See Ateres Rosh Shaar Yom HaKippurim 36a, that the sechach of the Sukkah is generated by the cloud of incense offered on Yom Kippur.

In the last decades, Judaism has come to life across Russia--and when it comes to the festival of Sukkot it is really an open miracle, since this holiday was almost completely forgotten because of the dangers and risks of attempting to put up a sukkah or obtain a lulav and etrog under the oppressive Soviet regime.

Here is a story I heard a few weeks ago, while I visited Kazan, Russia, a city in the largely Muslim Tatarstan region.

After a beautiful morning prayer service in the synagogue led by the Chief Rabbi of Kazan, Yitzchok Garelik, I was introduced to Moshe Adinov, a middle aged dentist and a regular participant in the daily minyan (prayer quorum). I asked him how it came to be that he comes to synagogue every day. He told me the following remarkable Sukkot story that I must pass on to you here, as I remember him telling it to me:

“My father was R’ Nachum Eliyahu Adinov. He was a sofer (Torah scribe) in Kazan before World War II. He kept the traditions in our home, but of course there was no Jewish school. I went to public school even on Shabbat. A lot of tradition was weakened. Nevertheless, I remember growing up with as many Jewish traditions and holidays as were possible.

“My father was afraid for my future. He always warned me not to repeat to others what we did at home. ‘Be a Jew at home and a Russian in the street,’ he said. I would have never been accepted at the university had I been a practicing Jew.

“We lived in a small wooden home – not in an apartment building like most people. We had a *besedka*, basically a porch, in the back of our home. Every year we’d celebrate Sukkot. My father would cover the roof with leaves and foliage. We’d invite over many Jewish friends. The secret was that the only sukkah in town was in our house. My father would make kiddush on wine, tell stories and gently speak to us, and this memory of Sukkot always stayed with me.

“My father died in 1965, and I inherited the house. I wanted to keep that Sukkot tradition alive, to continue the tradition for my children. I thought that, due to his limited means, all my father was able to do was put up trees and foliage. I wanted to do better than him! I had friends in the steel industry, and every year since 1965, I put up a sturdy aluminum roof on the besedka. I was proud that I continued my father’s tradition.”

“In 1998, Chabad-Lubavitch sent Rabbi Yitzchok Garelik and his wife Chana here. It was so beautiful to have a young Jewish family celebrating in public what I always did secretly. It was incredible for me. That year, Rabbi Garelik said to me, ‘Reb Moshe, tomorrow night is Sukkot--I want you to come to the beautiful sukkah we built.’ When I walked into the sukkah, I saw Rabbi Garelik in his holiday finest, holding an overflowing glass of wine, candles glowing on the table, its flames reflected in his sparkling eyes – and foliage, branches and trees above his head!

“I couldn’t contain my emotions. I began to cry. I suddenly realized that the foliage my father used to cover the Sukkah was the way it is supposed to be, and for the last 30 years, by placing an aluminum roof on the Sukkah,

I wasn't doing it the right way. I had only meant to make the sukkah more beautiful! But I didn't know better...

“Rabbi Garelik asked me to tell my story, and then he said to me: ‘Your father is looking down from Heaven with all the great Jews of the past and smiling – and I promise you, G-d had the utmost pleasure from the beauty of your sukkah with the aluminum roof more than any sukkah in the world with the appropriate foliage, because you did it with such love and sincerity!’

Since then, I have continued to learn and grow in understanding our traditions. Since then, my family and I are involved as part of the community, and today we celebrate all the holidays with their rich fullness.”<sup>11</sup>

## 8. Love vs. Hate

My friends, as we celebrate and sit in our Sukkot with our families and friends, with loved ones and strangers alike, all surrounded by the embrace and the divine protection of the sukkah – let us remember and declare for the entire world to hear, that our love for G-d and our trust in Him – as engraved on our USA currency: In God we trust – is more powerful than any hate in the world.

Our love G-d translates into our unconditional love for each other. Every human being was created equally in the divine image – “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” (in the words of the Declaration of Independence) – and by that virtue alone every individual is worthy of our love.

Sukkot is about celebrating our love and trust in G-d.

*Every resident among the Israelites shall live in Sukkot, in order that your generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in Sukkot when I took them out of the land of Egypt.*

*That your generations should know.* Think about that – for over 3300 years we have been dwelling each year in Sukkot, so that our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren should know – intimately know – that our greatest strength and most powerful security is not man-made, but one that comes from G-d Himself.

And we dwell in the sukkah in the cooling autumn, exposed to the elements, but knowing that we are coming from Yom Kippur, when we were renewed, like pure newborns, clean and without foolishness or folly.

And with this intimate innocence we embrace and kiss the sukkah and the *sebach*, out of unadulterated and uninhibited love.

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11 [http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template\\_cdo/aid/321468/jewish/The-Aluminum-Sukkah.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/321468/jewish/The-Aluminum-Sukkah.htm).



Right after Yom Kippur, when we are pure newborns, clean and without foolishness or folly, we are pure enough to place the proverbial aluminum on our Sukkot because we in our innocence just want to give our best and most precious to do what G-d wants.

Right after Yom Kippur, when we are pure newborns, clean and without foolishness or folly, we can know the Sukkah, and the Sukkah can know us. We can love the Sukkah as the Sukkah loves us. We can embrace the Sukkah as the Sukkah embraces us.

I see no better way to counter the hate and anger of others than with an even more powerful love for G-d and for each other

Good Shabbos, Shabbat Shalom, and a Frelichen Sukkos!

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