

Between the Lines

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Andy Shugerman

Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20

ראה את מעשה האלהים כי מי יוכל לתקן את אשר עותו בשעה שברא הקב"ה את אדם הראשון נטלו והחזירו על כל אילני גן עדן ואמר לו ראה מעשי כמה נאים ומשובחין הן וכל מה שבראתי בשבילך בראתי תן דעתך שלא תקלקל ותחריב את עולמי שאם קלקלת אין מי שיתקן אחריך ולא עוד שאת גורם מיתה לאותו צדיק

Consider God's doing! Who can straighten what He has twisted? (Eccles. 7:13). When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, He took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him, "Consider My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! All that I have created, for your sake I created it. Pay heed that you do not corrupt and destroy My world; for if you corrupt it there is no one to repair it after you. Not only that, but you will bring death to that righteous man (Moses)."

After the High Holy Days, I sometimes feel torn between feelings of hope and feelings of doubt regarding humanity's prospects for improvement. At the very least, it helps me to know that our ancient Sages understood this emotional tension.

Perhaps "there is nothing new under the sun" (Eccles. 1:9); that verse and the one quoted in the passage above represent the submissive pessimism within Ecclesiastes. The rest of this midrash, then, adopts a more proactive stance as it imagines God instructing the first human to care for creation. This rabbinic understanding of human ecology asserts that the world is meant to be awe-inspiring, that God created it for our sake, and that we must protect it from irreparable harm.

As much as I cherish this reading of the midrash, its final sentence challenges us to consider the repercussions of humanity's initial and continued failures to uphold God's vision for our role in creation. The midrash points to God's punishment of mortality for Adam and Eve's disobedience, implicating them specifically for Moses's eventual death. This tragic teaching directly connects the Torah's beginning and end in a solemn counterpoint to our upcoming celebration on Simchat Torah, during which we mark the conclusion of one year's Torah readings and the beginning of the next.

This puzzling mix of positive and negative views of our place in nature reminds me of another rabbinic appraisal of humanity. In a talmudic passage (BT Eruvin 13b), the students of Hillel and Shammai debate whether or not humankind should have been created at all. After two and a half years of deliberation, the schools "voted and concluded: 'It would have been better had humankind not been created; but now that humankind exists, let it probe its ways.'"

This year, I find such a blend of "opti-pessimism" strangely reassuring. Accepting that human civilization has long been deeply flawed clarifies my duty to understand this history and to leave the world better than the way I found it. I do not know if this will be enough, but I pray that it will get me started.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Sukkot

October 15, 2011

17 Tishrei 5772

Numbers 29:23–29:28

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, rabbinic fellow and director of Planned Giving, JTS.

Shlepping. If I am going to be totally honest about it, that's my strongest association with Sukkot. Shlepping dishes, food, napkins, utensils, kids, and guests outside and then all back in again. For some, it is a trek across a back porch or lawn. For my city-dwelling family, it involves the careful loading of a shopping cart, a trek down the elevator, through the basement, and out to the back alley. Unload the cart. Eat. Reload the cart. Repeat every few hours and don't forget the ketchup.

In my mind's eye, I maintain quite an idealized image of Sukkot. I imagine a beautiful sukkah, resting on a lush green lawn, surrounded by trees not quite yet at the peak of autumn. I sit with my family and friends, leisurely enjoying a delicious meal (which appears magically, costs nothing, and requires no cleanup), under a radiant blue sky during the day and a glittering canopy of stars at night.

The tension between ideal and real: exactly where we should be, four days after Yom Kippur.

After all, didn't we just leave our synagogues with stomachs empty but hearts full of promise for living up to our ideals? Didn't we just resolve to be kinder, gentler, and more generous, to go for the best that is in us? Within days of our most sincere resolutions, within days of leaving synagogue refreshed and feeling head-in-the-clouds about the possibilities for renewal that are now ours, we are brought back down to earth.

In the clouds or down to earth: exactly the dispute the Talmud records between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. The Torah's injunction to "live in booths [sukkot] seven days . . . in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 23:43) does not describe the Israelites' actual sukkot. What were the Rabbis referring to then? Rabbi Eliezer (BT Sukkah 11b) posits that the sukkot were the clouds of glory in which God resided, hovering protectively over the Israelites on their journey. His is a vision of a people in close contact with their God, physically reminded of God's presence and living in a particularly acute spiritual state. The people lived in the sukkah of God's presence.

Rabbi Akiva (ad. locus) disagrees. Rabbi Akiva insists that the Israelites lived in actual booths, which they made for themselves. By extension, this means that the sukkot were deconstructed and reconstructed at each stage of their journey. There was, by definition, a lot of schlepping involved.

The disagreement crystallizes the question we experience as we come off the idealistic high of Yom Kippur and back to our real, everyday lives. Are we living with our head in the clouds, in fantasy, where we feel God's presence at every moment as we did on Yom

Kippur? Or are we living here on earth, where we are vulnerable, our houses shaky? Where we need to build booths to remind us of God's presence? Where, in fact, there is a lot of schlepping involved?

Our man-, woman-, and child-made sukkot bring us back to reality, but in a way that eases us in. The reality is that the ideals that we envisioned on Yom Kippur are going to be hard to carry out. We may have ended *Ne'ilah* with a sense of God's presence, in an acutely spiritual state in which we were in tune with our highest ideals, and felt, in our bones, the assurance of God's mercy and God's assistance in achieving them. And for a few days, we are able to pull it off. We are kinder to our families. More generous with strangers. We begin to put into practice our best intentions from the High Holiday season.

But it is difficult to keep it up. Lest we grow cynical too quickly or give up too easily as we return to our everyday lives, the Torah hands us another holiday. What a gift Sukkot is, despite the schlepping involved. For without it, we would be thrust all too quickly back into the daily grind. We can manage living up to our highest ideals of self for a few days, but it would not last. We need another week of chag, followed by the last send-off of Shemini Atzeret, to dwell in God's presence. Not in the clouds, not in full-day prayer marathons, but here on earth, be it on the lush green lawn or in the back alley.

Sukkot provides us with a testing ground, as it were, for those good intentions we promised to fulfill just a few days ago. It is not easy to be patient when your pot of soup ends up sloshing all over the lawn or to be generous when you're spending so much time and energy preparing for the holiday or to be happy when you're exhausted from all the schlepping or to be consciously present and enjoying time with family and friends when you're anxious about the work piling up back at the office. The commandment to take more time off, to dwell in sukkot of our own design, eases us back in.

Moreover, Sukkot adds the one last ingredient that truly seals off our *teshuvah*, and that is joy. "You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God seven days, in the place that the Lord will choose; for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy" (Deut. 16:13–12). After so much seriousness, after 10 days of repentance and a full day spent in fasting and confession, we have forgotten that the essence of meaningful living is joy. The phrasing of the mitzvah to rejoice is noteworthy, and many commentators take up the point. "You shall have nothing but joy," *v'hayita akh sameakh*.

What is the limiting word *akh* (above)—meaning "but," "only," or "just"—coming to teach us? Ibn Ezra and Sforno understand it most famously to mean that our happiness is to be at the exclusion of sorrow or negative feelings. But I find myself taken with the commentary (cited by Nehama Leibowitz in her commentary on the Sedra) of Moshe Hefetz, a 16th century Italian scholar:

Idleness is a source of evil-doing and sin . . . How then could the Almighty command us to rejoice by means of a cessation from work? . . . The rejoicing ordained by the Torah is one which is not overdone, leading to levity and riotousness. It is to lead us to a happy frame of mind according to the path of moderation . . . This is the meaning of the phrase 'because the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy,' implying that you should indeed work and not sit idle and then you will be really joyful, that is with a true joy and inspired by the right purpose.

Hefetz's focus on the interplay of work and joy brings me right back to the reality of our lived Sukkot experience: it is a lot of work. And it comes on the heels of Yom Kippur, when, with our head in the clouds, we set for ourselves the loftiest goals for self-improvement. By inviting us to re-enter our normal routines slowly, to adjust in a different way to the *teshuvah* we've done, we are given a chance to adjust. By commanding us to do so "with

nothing but joy," we are reminded that our *teshuvah* is incomplete if we cannot find joy in the day-to-day, no matter how much schlepping is involved.

The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee and Harold (z"l) Hassenfeld.

A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

One of my sweetest memories from my time as a rabbinical student at The Jewish Theological Seminary relates to the holiday we welcome this week, Sukkot. I fondly recall my first year, when I joined a devoted Women's League for Conservative Judaism group that was lovingly decorating one of the sukkot that stood gloriously at the heart of JTS. What stands out most in my mind's eye is the lush greenery composing the *skhakh* (roof) of the sukkah, fruits and decorative leaves hanging from the latticework. This vivid image speaks volumes about the agricultural roots of this pilgrimage festival. Leviticus 23:39–40 declares, "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you will keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; the first day will mark solemn rest, as well as the eighth day. And you will take on the first day the fruit of a goodly tree, date palm fronds, the bough of a leafy tree, and the willows of the brook, and you will rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." While dwelling in booths characterizes Sukkot observance, so too is binding together and shaking "the four species," a quintessential aspect of the holiday. What is symbolized by gathering of a *lulav* (palm), an *etrog* (citron), *hadassim* (myrtles), and *aravot* (willows)?

Though two of the most often heard explanations describe these species as representing the human being and the nation of Israel (see Vayikra Rabbah 30), Nogah Hareuveni (z"l), founder of Neot Kedumim, the biblical landscape reserve in Israel, offers a different and refreshing interpretation based on the commentary of Maimonides. Rambam, he notes, writes: "It seems to me that the four species are symbols of rejoicing at leaving the desert (where neither fig, grape nor pomegranate could grow, and where there is no water to drink) and arriving at a place of fruit bearing trees and streams of water. To memorialize this, one takes the choicest fruit of the earth [fruit of a goodly tree] and the best of the fragrances [bough of a leafy tree] and the most beautiful of leaves [date palm fronds] and the best among plants, that is to say, willows of the brook" (Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed*, III:43). Accordingly, Rambam understands the four species as representing the transition from desert wandering to settlement in the Land of Israel. Hareuveni takes this notion a step further, describing each of the species in their natural settings: "Date palm fronds . . . shaded the Israelites during their encampment in desert oases . . . willows of the brook are the trees that grow along the banks of the Jordan River . . . at the border of Moav and on the rivers of Babylon . . . and the leafy tree . . . is a tree with dense foliage [like those] found covering the hill country of Israel when they entered the land in the days of Joshua" (Hareuveni, *Nature in Our Biblical Heritage*, 77–78). Though not directly addressing the fruit of the goodly tree, it is clear that this specimen list suggests permanent and peaceful rooting of the nation in the Land of Israel, as represented by sweet produce.

Creatively, Nogah Hareuveni describes the *arba'ah minim* (four species) as the environmental narrative parallel to the decidedly historical declaration of the first fruits (see Deut. 26:5–10, recited by the pilgrim recounting the journey to Israel). Bringing these species together, then, reminds of the long, arduous, and blessed route to Israel—wandering, liminality, possession, and finally rootedness.

May we all have the privilege of dwelling in the sukkah, gathering the four species and undertaking a blessed (albeit less arduous!) journey to Israel in the coming year.

The publication and distribution of A Taste of Torah are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.