

Succot: To Go Out of the Fortress and Be Joyful

My home is my fortress.

This has been the case since the dawn of history, when human beings sought protection from the terrors lurking outside: enemies, inclement weather, prying eyes. Animals, too, seek or create safe spaces for themselves in caves, burrows, tree tops, and so on. Plants also use biological methods such as poisons and unpleasant odors to protect themselves from hungry creatures. There is an entire branch of alternative medicine today that is based on avoiding lectins in the plants which we happily consume on a regular basis.

The world is cruel, and one person's sustenance is another's death sentence. Every living thing, it appears, needs the protection offered by fur, produced by poison, or secured by our reinforced steel doors.

And it is not just protection we require. Every living thing needs a clear, defined border; even the one-celled amoeba with its surrounding membrane which enables its existence. Our borders define us.

The word "cholesterol" - and especially "bad cholesterol" - is considered man's sworn enemy. From a certain age, our cholesterol levels become a frequent topic of conversation. But cholesterol is the secret of existence! Cholesterol is fat, and this fat produces the borders of the cell. Without it (whether "good" or "bad") no cell could exist, nor could any living organism. Our cholesterol is our most basic boundary.

While our defenses and borders guarantee our existence, they are also the source of our suffering. They are the reason we experience loneliness, anxiety, anger, and humiliation.

We create our protective boundaries - consciously or subconsciously - from an early age, in order to guarantee our existence. Unfortunately, these methods of protection do not disappear after the danger passes. No, they stay with us forever, in case the danger should resurface. Just like an antivirus program, we acquire more protective measures daily. They do not replace one another, but pile up, and become a hindrance instead of a means of protection. They become walls of loneliness and alienation. Like cholesterol, which is meant to protect us and distinguish us from what is not us but gradually lines our arteries and strangles us from inside, so, too, do our boundaries and protective measures transform gradually from a blessing of existence to a stifling fortress of borders and defenses.

We go to a doctor to help us balance our cholesterol levels, and we go to a therapist to help us balance the unnecessary protective layers which strangle our vitality.

And then comes Succot...

There are a few very important mitzvot on Succot, the most significant among them is simply going out to the Succah! We leave our homes, our fortresses, our security, our four walls,

and go out into a necessarily-shaky structure, open to the four winds, to mosquitos, snakes, and neighbors, to the star-filled sky, to rain, and to dust.

Furthermore, in this Succah we are told to fulfill the main mitzvah of the holiday, which is to be happy! Succot is also called **The Holiday**, and it is the only one in which the Torah commands us to be joyful.

“You shall rejoice in your festival” (D’varim 16: 14) and **“you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.”** (Vayikra 23: 40)

We are not sent out of our homes to spend seven days entirely exposed to the elements. Tradition respects our legitimate need for protective boundaries, without which we cannot exist. But it also beckons us once a year to leave our fortress, shake off the excessive protective layers and boundaries which we have accumulated since early childhood, those layers which used to protect us and now serve to separate and alienate us.

Does tradition guarantee that if we dare leave our burrow we will discover the lost joy of childhood, covered up over the years by protective layers? Or are we being asked to leave our safe space into the realm of fear, and consciously initiate a connection to the joy of life?

I think the answer is both.

Sometimes we need to be pushed out of our four walls - be they ideological, spiritual, or physical - with the promise that somewhere out there a great joy awaits. And even if it is not there - because of fears, cold, and unpleasantness - then we must create joy ourselves!

I wish us all a process of meaningful introspection on this Succot holiday. May we rediscover the free joyousness which has been forgotten behind protective walls and borders. And may we find the strength and courage to create it, if it does not appear on its own.

We do this a moment before the winter weather drives us back into our warm and protective fortresses. But if we have **really** dared to go out into the Succa and celebrate with joy, perhaps we will return home slightly different, slightly renewed.

May you have a joyful holiday,

Elisha