

Succot: Go Outside and See the Stars

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Dear Friends,

Yom Kippur has just ended, and already we are leaving our permanent homes and moving into our temporary, decorated shelters - our Succot.

Succot...

Bnei Yisrael's first stop in the Exodus from Egypt is called "Succot", suggesting that the festival of Succot symbolizes the first stop on one's journey from slavery to freedom, from the narrow places (Mitzrayim) into the vastness of the Wilderness. Succot is still located in Egypt, before the crossing of the Red Sea. Hence, it is an in-between stop – no longer slavery but not yet freedom. Succot is like a way-station. For the wizards among us, it is a little like platform nine and three quarters, and it is only accessible to those who know how to look.

If Pesach is the holiday on which we hurriedly leave the House of Bondage, Succot is the holiday in which we are already outside of that house, but have not reached the other side. The Egyptians are still pursuing us. Nothing is secure. We can even return if we so wish. Hence, the fragile Succah often leans on our permanent house, allowing us to change our minds!

The Succah has very clear Halachic requirements. It is very important to maintain the balance between that which is covered and that which is exposed, with the former being larger than the latter. However, it cannot be entirely opaque; it is required that we be able to see the stars through the covering.

The Exodus from Egypt is not the first. The very first exodus is that of Avraham, who embarks on the great Hebrew journey. Just like the Exodus from Egypt, Avraham's journey is actually a series of small, continuous ones. He is required to leave repeatedly, sometimes by Divine command, sometimes because of drought, hunger, or territorial disputes. As his story unfolds, we understand that it is not one of an ongoing physical journey; rather, it is the story of his (and our) journey of faith.

At the beginning of his story, Avraham embarks on his journey because in his homeland he is infertile. The Hebrew word is Akar - which means two things: uprooted, and also essence! The Pshat is that he has no offspring, hence the essence of his uprooting - i.e., exodus - is from infertility to fertility. The Torah hereby suggests that fertility, abundance, and blessing are part of the process of continuous exodus. In Avraham's case fertility does not happen immediately; not even gradually. Even after he leaves Ur Kasdim with his father, the only abundance Avraham experiences is economic. That abundance has no special meaning for him. He wants

an offspring. After a long stop in Haran, Avraham embarks again on a journey – this time to the Promised Land. Once in Canaan, he walks its length and its breadth, searching, praying and hoping. But still his hopes are not realized. Having no choice, he continues on to another country – to Egypt – the land of the fertile Nile River. Yet even there he does not find the kind of fertility and blessing he desires.

By now he is old, anxious, and in despair.

And then, in one of his great moments of crisis, God calls out to him, telling him to go out once more – only this time to come out of his tent and see the stars:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying: 'Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield, thy reward shall be exceeding great.' And Abram said: 'O Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go forth childless... Behold, to me You have given no seed... And He brought him forth outside [of his tent], and said: 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them'; and He said to him: 'So shall thy seed be.' And he had faith in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness. '(Genesis 15:1-6)

God and circumstance cause Avraham to leave over and over. He has had enough. But this current call is not for a geographic journey. He is being told to come out of the protection of his home and into the night filled with stars.

The hoped-for fertility – the creativity, the blessing, the abundance – these are all concealed beyond our immediate vision. In order to acquire the vision Avraham reached at the beginning of the paragraph above, one needs to leave any and all narrow and limiting boundaries - Ur Kasdim, Egypt, the protective tent/home - and step out into the night, into the darkness, stand under the endless canopy of twinkling stars - more than can be counted.

Avraham's journey does not end here. The happy end is still in the distance. He is only in the "Succot" stage of his life – that in-between stage: no longer "there", but not yet "there". This stage, however frustrating and shaky, is the most important one! What we wish for has not yet happened, and all we experience is doubt and great anxiety. This stop is where our faith is tested!

"And he had faith in the LORD" – Avraham had faith in the God of the Exodus, the God of Freedom. He understood that fertility is dependent on freedom, and freedom is a continuous process of exiting. He understood that the God of Freedom is the power that brings a person out, peels off his limiting layers one at a time, one opacity at a time, one wall at a time. He peels off layers of false beliefs: that cement walls provide security, that possessions guarantee happiness, that stability bestows eternal life. At the end of the process, all that is left are pieces of cloth, some branches, and a sky filled with stars.

But there is one more illusion to shed: the illusion that the stars are actually real! To understand that they, too, are not what we think they are. They too – says God to Avraham – are just a metaphor through which to glimpse the kind of fertility he is seeking. Avraham will have to gaze at the stars in order to see beyond them.

One of my favorite researchers, whose work I have been following for a number of years, is Donald Hoffman, a prize-winning professor in the field of brain science at the University of Irvine in California. He claims – and proves – that what we see with our sense of sight is very far from the truth or from reality. Rather, what we see, he claims, is comparable to the icons on our computer desktops. The icons are never the “thing” itself, but only a graphic symbol representing a deep wisdom that is not visible to the human eye. Time and space, he argues, are fiction created by the human brain. Evolution favored those who could see and act upon the metaphors and representations of truth, and not necessarily those who could see the truth itself! Recognizing that humans do not see Reality as it is, Hoffman became curious as to what we DO see. He began researching human consciousness, and the human ability to get beyond the boundaries of our senses and our rigid thinking, and to “see” (not with physical eyes) the infinite truth that lies beyond the “screen”. Hoffman wishes to discover the operating system of the universe.

He does not call the operating system God. After all, he is a professor of science at a prestigious university. But God peeks out of all of his research.

Avraham is called upon to both go out and to have faith; to exceed the limitations of his senses, and to have faith that what his physical eyes see is NOT the real thing; to know that the fountain of creation and fertility lies beyond them. What he sees as reality is only a limited, barren construction of his brain - albeit wondrous - and no more. He is being asked to enjoy his sense of vision while casting serious doubt on the validity of what he sees; to know that visible reality – as beautiful as it may be – hides true Reality, just as the desktop does not present to the viewer the operating system of the computer.

And this requires tremendous faith! The Succah symbolizes human faith as one goes out to seek the fountain of existence. The Succah is important, of course, but the process of stepping out into it is what is central. Once in the Succah, it is not the cute decorations that are important, but rather the stars that we can see between the branches. And these stars are also not the ultimate truth. They too are like twinkling decorations, icons on the elaborate screens that are our brains.

Faith that there is a Reality beyond the visible screen carries a great reward: those possessing that faith will discover an operating system of endless fertility, abundance, and blessing - the fountain of creation. In this blessing they will find ultimate joy, joy that is not dependent on anything, the joy of Succot:

"You shall keep the feast of tabernacles seven days, after you have gathered in from your threshing-floor and from your winepress. And you shall rejoice ... the LORD your God shall bless you in all your increase, and in all the work of your hands, and you shall be altogether joyful." (D'varim 16:13-15)

God - that hidden operating system - will pour His blessing unto you, though what you will see is only "YOUR increase and the work of YOUR hands".

Avoda Shebalev – Service of the Heart

The Succah is a metaphor. Anyone wishing to find truth, blessing and joy in the Succah itself is bound to be sorely disappointed. So when we go out into the Succah (if you don't have one, a mental one will work too) remember that we are on an ongoing and endless journey of leaving formulas, of peeling layers of illusions, of shattering visual "truths", of dismantling constructions we have created in order to avoid doubt and insecurity.

Just be careful! You don't really need to destroy anything, not even dismantle or peel away. You just have to have faith that beyond the walls of your consciousness there are infinite stars twinkling, and beyond them is the operating system – the Creator, in spiritual terms – from whom, and from Him alone, blessing and joy originates.

Shabbat Shalom and Mo'adim L'Simcha,

Elisha