

True Security

by Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz

Succos is synonymous with simcha. This is the Yom Tov of joy and happiness, which is appreciated all the more coming as it does immediately after the awesome days of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. Still, it is difficult to fully understand the manner in which this Yom Tov is celebrated and marked. If we are celebrating the simcha of harvest time then why dwell in temporary frail huts and why, in the midst of joy, read the somber words of Koheles proclaiming that all is vanity? ולשמחה מה זה (קהלת ב"ב) "And of joy what doth it accomplish?", might well be the question we ask of the Succos observance; in the midst of affluence and prosperity, why take up residence in a flimsy succah with a fragile roof and why read the challenging and disturbing philosophy of Koheles?

Man instinctively seeks security. Strength is usually equated with security as riches are with power. Governments, like individuals, rely for their security upon a strong, well-equipped military force, and even the State of Israel is no exception to this rule. Yet we as Jews have been taught to place our trust far more in the Almighty than in the might of our arms. The mezuzah on the door always gave the Jew a greater sense of security than locks and alarm systems. Our wisdom is to be found in the Hebrew word for wisdom—חכמה which has been interpreted to mean מה כח and כח מה—what indeed is strength? To know where safety and security rests—in the hands of G-d and not in arsenals—is the ultimate חכמה. The question is how shall this lesson be taught? Our answer is through the 'lauch'—the sequence of holidays and the physical displacement of the Jew and his family from the house to the succah!

תודעני אורח חיים שובע שמחות את פניך (תהלים ט"ז)

"Thou makes me know the path of life, in thy presence is fullness of Joy" is explained by the מדרש to mean that the Days of

Awe teach us the “way of life” while the “fullness of joy” is revealed to us through the observance of Succos. The חז"ל are telling us that there is a cause and effect relationship between Rosh Hashonah—Yom Kippur and Succos. The מכתב מאליהו goes a step further and links the months of Tammuz, Av and Elul to this פסוק תהלים in פסוק He suggests that during the three weeks from י"ז בתמוז to י"ז באב we experience a deep sense of יאוש—of despair, not only because we recall חורבן but because we are disillusioned with the world around us and feel insecure and unsafe—for good cause. Certainly the generation that witnessed the Holocaust experiences these troubling emotions anew. Yet comfort follows this period of mourning, for despairing of the world, we shed our illusions and reject our reliance upon man and our own physical strength. This realization in turn brings us to repentance and renewal—thus is our odyssey from Tammuz to Av to Elul.

The progression then is: ‘Yiush’ followed by נחמה which comes from self-recognition, which spurs one on to תשובה climaxed by Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. Succos, the festival of simcha; is the final station in this journey—to serve G-d with authentic happiness distilled from the awe and reverence of the ימים נוראים. We experience this ultimate ‘simcha’ only after we have been cleansed of our illusions, purged of our delusions and return to G-d—under whose protection we now dwell—symbolized by the succah.

From Rosh Chodesh Elul to Simchas Torah we recite לדרוּ ה' אורי וישעי. The reason for this custom now becomes vividly clear—כי יצפני בסוכה ביום רעה “In the day of trouble He will hide me in his succah”—is the key פסוק. Note that it does not say *house* but *succah*. The same is true of our תפילה “And spread over us the succah of Thy peace”—not a house but a succah. For we ask for real security—that which is provided not by the strength and power represented by man’s might and technological prowess, but by G-d whose השגחה and protection is symbolized by the succah—where there can be no illusions of

our strength but which is strong and secure if we merit the Almighty's protection.

Similarly on Succos we add to the ברכת המזון the phrase הוּפְלַת הַדָּוִד הַנּוֹפֶלֶת We pray for the restoration not of the House of David but the Succha of David—a strange choice of words to depict מַלְכוּת, Kingdom! Certainly a royal *house* is far more appropriate than a royal *succah*. But the Maharal answers this question with the same approach we have developed in this sermon. He states that “every kingdom is called a house so as to indicate its power and strength, just as a house is stable and strong. The Kingdom of David however is referred to as a succah for this kingdom is divinely ordained and is protected and sheltered from on high—as is the succah.”

Thus our observance of Succos and our reading of Koheles is very understandable. Our simcha is complete, not when the harvest is reaped and our barns filled to overflowing, but when we dwell in the succah and realize that our security is in G-d's hands. We read Koheles to impress upon ourselves that all material riches and mens' power are illusory and indeed הַבֵּל for שְׂמֵחָה can only be realized if it be אֶת פְּנִיךָ—in G-d's presence. This wisdom הִיא תָּבוֹא לָנוּ only when we have learned well the lesson of אֲוֵרָה חַיִּים a way of life illuminated for us by the Days of Awe which precede the שְׂמֵחָה .