



## **OF PAPER BIRDS AND BOTTLES OF WINE**

**T**oday's paper chains, tinsel and laminated pictures are heirs to a millennia-old tradition of decorating our succot — but in earlier times, the decorations were often edible. The Talmud<sup>1</sup> mentions nuts, peaches, pomegranates, bunches of grapes, wreaths of grain, and flasks of wine, oil and flour. Interestingly, this delicious décor was off-limits; during the seven days of Succot, we may not use succah decorations for any purpose other than decoration. As recorded in the *Shulchan Aruch*:<sup>2</sup>

אוכלים ומשקים שתולין בסוכה כדי לנאותה,  
אסור להסתפק מהם כל שמנה, אפילו נפלו.  
*One may not make use of food and  
beverages which have been hung in the  
succah for decoration, even should they  
fall.*

This is part of the law of *muktzeh machmat mitzvah*, which prohibits personal benefit from items designated for fulfilling a mitzvah, so long as they are eligible for this mitzvah.<sup>3</sup> However, the application of *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* to succah decorations is perplexing; in what way are succah decorations “designated for mitzvah use”? Decorations are our spontaneous additions; we are not obligated to decorate the succah, and the succah is kosher without any decorations at all!<sup>4</sup>

Answering this question might shed light on more than the laws of succah decorations; this application of *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* to decorations highlights the benefits of our mitzvot, as well as the value of our personalizations of those mitzvot.

### **Degrading a mitzvah**

The prohibition against co-opting mitzvah paraphernalia for other ends has multiple roots; one of them is the concept of *bizui mitzvah*: degrading the mitzvah for which the object is dedicated. As explained in the Talmud:<sup>5</sup>

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב אסי אסור להרצות מעות כנגד נר חנוכה. כי אמריתה קמיה דשמואל אמר לי: וכי נר קדושה יש בה? מתקיף לה רב יוסף: וכי דם קדושה יש בו? דתניא, "ושפך" 'וכסה' - במה ששפך יכסה, שלא יכסנו ברגל, שלא יהו מצות בזויות עליו, הכא נמי שלא יהו מצות בזויות עליו. בעו מיניה מרבי יהושע בן לוי: מהו להסתפק מנויי סוכה כל שבעה? אמר להו: הרי אמרו אסור להרצות מעות כנגד נר חנוכה.  
*Rav Yehudah cited Rav Asi: One may not count coins by the chanukah. When*

*I said this before Shemuel, he replied, "Is a lamp holy?"*

*Rav Yosef challenged: But is blood holy? For we have learned [regarding the mitzvah of covering blood after shechitah], "[The Torah states] 'He shall pour' 'And he shall cover' — that which he uses for pouring, he shall use for covering. He shall not cover it with his foot, so that mitzvot will not be degraded for him." With the chanukiah, too, the point is that mitzvot not be degraded for him [even if the object is not holy].*

*They asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: May one make use of succah decorations at any point in the seven days [of the holiday]? He replied: Have they not said that one may not count coins by the chanukiah?*

We see here that succah decorations, like the *chanukiah* and the mitzvah of covering blood after shechitah, must be treated with respect. Therefore, we may not use them for our personal benefit.

Rabbi Yehuda Froman<sup>6</sup> notes two different ways to understand this concern for degrading mitzvot. In one approach, items that are dedicated for mitzvot receive **quasi-sacred status**. Mitzvah activities are inherently holy, and that holiness attaches to the entities we use when fulfilling mitzvot.<sup>7</sup> In a second approach, though, the issue is **the attitude** of the person who performs the mitzvah. We are concerned less with violating the mitzvah item, and more with detracting from our own respect for mitzvot.

Rambam adopts the second view, writing regarding the method of covering blood after shechitah:

וכשמכסה לא יכסה ברגלו אלא בידו או בסכין או בכלי כדי שלא ינהוג בו מנהג בזיון ויהיו מצות בזיון עליו, שאין הכבוד לעצמן

של מצות אלא למי שצוה בהן ברוך הוא והצילנו מלמשש בחשך וערך אותנו נר ליישר המעקשים ואור להורות נתיבות היושר, וכן הוא אומר נר לרגלי דבריך ואור לנתיבתי.

*And when he covers it, he should not cover it with his foot, but with his hand, or a knife or utensil, lest he treat it in a degrading way, and mitzvot would then be degraded for him. The honour is not for the mitzvot themselves, but for the blessed One who commanded them, and who saved us from feeling our way in the dark, and who arranged a lamp for us, to straighten the crooked, and light to show the paths of righteousness. And so it says, "Your words are a lamp for my feet, and light for my paths."<sup>8</sup>*

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## Customizations are vital elements of our religious growth, ensuring that we see our own personalities manifest in the Torah we practice, and in our relationship with G-d.

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Per Rambam, we treat mitzvah items with respect in order to protect our respectful attitude toward G-d and toward the lessons of G-d's mitzvot. Along similar lines, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook wrote regarding the prohibition against degrading mitzvot, "One must recognize that the mitzvot of G-d are wondrous strategies, from the wonders of the Perfect Intellect, to make a person eternally successful."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we dare not treat these mitzvot in degrading ways, lest we fail to learn their lessons.

## Decorations: The Power of Personalization

Within the vision of Rambam and Rabbi Kook, the rule of *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* ensures that we will respect our mitzvot, and we will be open to learning "paths of righteousness" from them. Applying this protection to our succah decorations adds a dimension, demonstrating the need to respect not only our **formal mitzvot**, but also **the spontaneous customizations we add to them**. We must treat these customizations with respect, in order to reap their religious benefits.

The same respect for personalization is seen in the Torah's enforcement of personal vows. While several passages from Tanach<sup>10</sup> inveigh against taking such vows, halachah still honours and enforces these verbal commitments. Indeed, Rabbi Moshe Sofer used the language of vows when he emphasized the importance of taking on additional, extra-halachic, personal practices:

כי כל האמור להלכה בש"ע היא תורה נתונה לכל ישראל בשווה ואין בודד במועדיו, אכן מי שאין לו אלא תורה אפילו תורה אין לו כי זה נעשה מצות אנשים מלומדה ואב לבנים יודיע, ע"כ כל המתחסד עם קונו ניכר במעלליו מה שלבו בודה לשם ה' להזיר נזיר מכל מה אשר ידבנו לבו ובזה אין סגנון א' עולה לשנים כי אין לב ב' בני אדם שוה באהבת ה'

*All of the halachah contained in the Shulchan Aruch is that which was given equally to all Israel, with no one excluded. Yet he who possesses only Torah does not really even possess Torah, for then his performance becomes merely habit and custom passed on from generation to generation. He who would achieve piety before his Creator will be recognized by his deeds — by those practices that he originates for the sake of heaven — to become a nazir from*

whatever his heart chooses. In this no two individuals are alike, because no two people love G-d alike.

**Chatam Sofer 1:197**

Of course, personalization is not limited to creative restrictions; we may also customize the way in which we fulfill Divine commands. For example, the Talmud records the ways in which various sages prepared in advance for Shabbat: “Rav Safra singed the head of the animal. Rava salted the fish. Rav Huna lit the candles. Rav Pappa braided the wicks. Rav Chisda chopped the beets. Rabbah and Rav Yosef chopped wood.” Closer to our own era, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin wrote:

כל גן יש בו מין אחד שהוא העיקר, אלא שסביביו נזרע עוד הרבה מינים מעט מעט, כך כל איש ישראל מלא מצות ה', אבל כל אחד יש לו מצוה א' ביחוד להיות נזהר בה ביותר כדאיחא במכילתא פרשת בשלח רנ"א כל העושה מצוה אחת באמנה זוכה כו', ובירושלמי קידושין סוף פרק א' על המשנה כל העושה מצוה אחת מטיבין לו כו' ומפרש בירושלמי שעושה מצוה אחת בזהירות יתירה.

*Each garden has one central variety, and small quantities of other varieties are planted around it. So, too, each Jew is filled with the mitzvot of G-d, but each has one special mitzvah in which he is extra careful, as is seen in Mechilta [Beshalach 251], ‘One who performs a single mitzvah, faithfully, is worthy of Divine inspiration.’ And in the Jerusalem Talmud [Kiddushin 1:9], regarding the statement, ‘One who performs a single mitzvah is given good things,’ they explain that this refers to a person who designates a single mitzvah for himself,*

and never violates it.

**Haamek Davar to Bamidbar 24:6**

These customizations are vital elements of our religious growth, ensuring that we see our own personalities manifest in the Torah we practice, and in our relationship with G-d. Jews whose Shabbat table or succah reflects their own tastes may feel a greater attachment to the mitzvah, and may be more open to learning its lessons.

The halachic protection of succah decorations under *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* demonstrates the realization that these personalizations aid our religious growth. If we were free to designate a decoration for our succah, and then to use the decoration instead as a snack, we could lose respect for the decoration, the succah it adorns, and the lessons of that succah. Therefore, halachah steps in to safeguard our customization, much as it safeguards our vows and minhagim.

One lesson of *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* is to recognize that all of our personalizations matter insofar as they are significant to us, regardless of how major or minor; a child’s paper bird is as protected as an expensive ornament. Another lesson is to recognize the impact of our personal attitude; even if a decoration were to fall and I did not plan re-attach it, I would not be allowed to deconsecrate it by using it for myself. And in a third lesson, we see here that decorating the succah should not be the exclusive province of our young children and

grandchildren. Adults, too, need to see themselves reflected in the succah — and our children and grandchildren will benefit from that as well.

May we find ways to personalize our observance of mitzvot, and may we respect those customizations, and so may we merit the light which illuminates for us the paths of righteousness.

## Endnotes

1. *Shabbat* 22a.
2. *Orach Chaim* 638:2.
3. Note: This is not part of the rabbinic legislation we usually call “muktzeh”; it applies beyond Shabbat and Yom Tov. It is also worth noting that elements of the *muktzeh machmat mitzvah* prohibition are biblical.
4. Rabbeinu Asher asked this question in *Shu”t Rosh* 24:9. Of course, we generally value *hiddur mitzvah* [beautification of mitzvot], but it is clear that this is neither integral nor obligatory.
5. *Shabbat* 22a.
6. *MiMaayan Mecholah* Vol. 8 (5759) <http://asif.co.il/wpfb-file/mimaayan-8-128-155-pdf/>
7. This would seem to be similar the idea expressed in the Talmud (*Beitzah* 30b), that items dedicated for mitzvot are viewed as *hekdesh*, dedicated to Divine service. For more, see Tosafot, *Beitzah* 30b, *aval*, Tosafot *Shabbat* 22a *succah*, and Ramban cited in *Ran Beitzah* 17a.
8. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shechitah* 14:16.
9. *Ein Ayah to Shabbat* 22a.
10. See *Devarim* 23:23 and *Kohelet* 5:4, as well as Yiftach’s vow in *Shoftim* 11.

