

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's Topsy-Turvy Sukkah

The hallmark of a true sage of the *mesorah* (tradition) is the radical embracement of a paradox. On the one hand, the *talmid chacham* is completely beholden to the Torah received from previous generations. But simultaneously, he has the ability and obligation to breathe new life into these ancient sources by offering innovative interpretations and novel theories.¹ It is the proper balance between these two poles that allows the *talmid chacham* to stay true to the timeless *mesorah* while making the eternal Torah timely and relevant to the people of his generation.

This description is perfectly apt for Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Rebbe of Chabad (henceforth “the Rebbe”). His adherence to the Torah of previous generations in general, and to the teachings of his predecessors in particular, is well known. He was a master of both *nigleh* and *nistar*,² with, of course, a particular expertise in the voluminous discourses of his predecessors. Every *ma’amar* (Chassidic discourse) he delivered began with a citation and analysis of a previous Rebbe’s Torah, and it was these ideas that created the contours of his thought. However, through a rigorous textual and conceptual analysis of these earlier teachings he was able to develop a sophisticated and comprehensive thought system of his own, which is striking in its



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innovativeness.³ It was this new/old philosophy that fueled Chabad’s singular activities in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Rebbe’s approach to the mitzvah of sukkah is a prime example of his interpretive method and philosophy. In this essay, I will summarize what I understand to be his central thesis regarding the nature of the sukkah and contextualize it within the broader framework of his thought.

A Transient World

Masechet Sukkah opens with a debate regarding the status of a sukkah that is higher than twenty *amot*. Rava explains that the debate depends on if a sukkah is a “permanent dwelling,” and therefore even a structure of this height is suitable for the mitzvah, or a “temporary dwelling,” and therefore such a tall structure is disqualified.⁴ The fact that we follow the latter opinion is often used as the foundation of a homily regarding the take-away message of the sukkah. For example, here are the words of Rav Yehonatan Eibeschitz:

ההנה יעצה לנו התורה בסוכות שהוא סוף
ימי תשובה לקבל על עצמנו גלות ולהיות כל

העולם נחשב בעינינו כתוהו וכצל ולכך אמרו
(סוכה ב.) צא מדירת קבע ושב בדירת עראי
להורות כי גרים אנחנו עלי ארץ מבלי קבע.

*Behold, the Torah counselled us that on Sukkot, which is the end of the days of repentance, we should accept upon ourselves an exile, so that the entire world will be in our eyes like nothing and like a shadow. And therefore they said (Sukkah 2a) “leave your permanent dwelling and stay in a temporary dwelling” to teach that we are strangers on this world without any permanence . . .*⁵

According to Rav Yehonatan Eibeschitz and others,⁶ the temporary nature of the sukkah represents the fleetingness of this world. Living in a sukkah for a week engrains within us that we are mere travelers, temporarily lodging in the hallway of this world while on a journey to the palace of the next world.

The Nullification of the World

On the surface, there is much in Chabad thought that would confirm this conclusion. One of the central tenets of Chabad philosophy is acosmism — a belief in the illusory nature of the world. When our eyes observe the world that surrounds us

and perceive a physical reality teeming with diversity, we are in fact being fed an illusion. In truth, nothing exists other than God — *ain od milvado* in the most literal sense possible. If we had spiritual eyes we would be able to see through the façade of reality and recognize the hidden true nature of the cosmos — simple divinity.⁷

And while other Kabbalistic schools exhorted their students to not dwell on this radical idea,⁸ Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Chassidut, did just the opposite. Throughout *Tanya* he encourages his readers to contemplate the nothingness of our world and even the complete dissolution of the self into the light of the simple unity of Hashem.⁹ This contemplative service, known as *bittul*, is identified by the Alter Rebbe as the general principle underpinning all of Torah and *mitzvot*:

וזהו יסוד כל התורה להיות בטול היש לאין
וכל השלשה דברים שעליהם העולם עומד
היינו תורה ועבודה וגמ"ח כולם ענינם בטול
היש לאין.

*And this is the basis of the entire Torah, that there be the annihilation of being (yesh) into nothingness (ayin), and all the three things on which the world stands, that is Torah, worship, and charity, are all aspects of the annihilation of being into nothingness.*¹⁰

In the context of Sukkot, such a philosophy would seemingly lead one to Rav Yehonatan Eibeschitz's understanding of the sukkah's symbolism. If the goal of our service is to pierce the illusion of reality and see nothing other than Hashem, then the sukkah stands as a reminder that nothing in this world is as permanent, or even as ontologically stable, as it seems.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe on the Four Species

The midrash, *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:9, has a very cryptic comment on the four species:

פרי עץ הדר זה הקב"ה שכתוב בו (תהלים קד) הוד והדר לבשת
כפות תמר זה הקב"ה שכתוב בו (תהלים צב) צדיק כתמר יפרח
וענף עץ עבות זה הקב"ה דכתיב (זכריה א) והוא עומד בין ההדסים
וערבי נחל זה הקב"ה דכתיב ביה (תהלים סח) סולו לרוכב בערבות
בִּי-ה שמו.



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"The fruit of a beautiful tree" (etrog), this is The Holy One Blessed be He as it states, (Tehillim 104) "He is clothed in glory and beauty." "Branches of a date palm" (lulav), this is The Holy One Blessed be He as it states, (Tehillim 92) "The righteous one flowers like a date." "A branch of a braided tree" (hadasim), this is The Holy One Blessed be He as it states, (Zechariah 1) "He stands between the myrtles (hadasim)." "Willows of the valley" (aravot), this is The Holy One Blessed be He as it states, (Tehillim 68) "Who rides in the skies (aravot) with his name "Y-ah."

What is the midrash trying to teach us by associating the four species with God? R. Schneerson, *Sha'arei HaMoadim*, Sukkot pp. 151-152, suggests that one of the goals of the mitzvah of taking the four species is to bring God into our lives through the performance of mitzvot. The midrash is trying to convey the message that by taking the four species, we are actually "taking" God into our lives.

Torah To Go Editors

Hashem Is Here, Hashem Is There...

But this description of the nullification of the world is only one pole of the great paradox elucidated in *Tanya*.¹¹ Once the Alter Rebbe understands the unity of Hashem to mean that from Hashem's perspective nothing exists other than Him, this simple sense of unity also grants great significance to this world. Everything that we perceive in our world is permeated with divinity and can be a conduit of experiencing Hashem.¹² Our *mitzvot* and service are not only intended to condemn this world to nothingness, but also to draw divinity into it.¹³ This pole will reach its peak in the times of Mashiach when the world

will be purified to the degree that human beings will be able to stand "without being nullified in their very existence" and perceive the "Divine light that will be revealed to them . . . without any cloak."¹⁴

The Rebbe's First Address — Hashem's Garden

As early as his first *ma'amar* as the leader of Chabad, the Rebbe outlined what he saw as the mission of his generation. He focused on a midrash¹⁵ that describes "*Ikar Shechinah*" as originally occupying "*tachtonim*." When Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the *Shechina* ascended to the first heaven, and with the next six major human sins the *Shechina*

continuously ascended until it reached the seventh and highest heaven. Then seven *tzadikim*, beginning with Avraham, merited to lower the *Shechinah*, level after level, until Moshe, the seventh *tzadik*, merited to bring the *Shechina* back to the land.

After dissecting the midrash's key terms, the Rebbe concluded that "*Ikar Shechina*" refers to the highest levels of divinity and "*tachtonim*" refers to "this lowly world." In other words, the ideal home for the *Shechina* is not the higher spiritual worlds, but our physical one. He then made the striking assertion that would define Chabad under his tenure:

שנמצאים אנחנו בעיקבתא דמשיחא, בסיומא
דעקבתא, והעבודה – לגמור המשכת
השכינה, ולא רק שכינה כ"א עיקר שכינה,
ובתחתונים דוקא.

We are now very near the approaching footsteps of Mashiach, indeed, we are at the conclusion of this period, and our spiritual task is to complete the process of drawing down the Shechinah — moreover, the essence of the Shechinah

— *within specifically our lowly world.*¹⁶

Previous generations tended toward a more spiritualized service, with the goal to "extricate [oneself] from the straits of contraction ... and to rise ... into the hidden world in which the light of the *Ein-Sof*, the completely hidden God, gleams and shines as it were."¹⁷ According to the Rebbe, as we approach the days of Mashiach, our focus must shift from the heavens to finally bringing the *Ikar Shechina* back to its garden, to our lowly world.

To clarify this radical assertion, the Rebbe cited the above-mentioned eschatological prediction of the Alter Rebbe — that when Mashiach comes, the physical world will no longer hide the presence of Hashem but we will be able to perceive reality in its true form and see Hashem everywhere. It is the mission of the last generation to demonstrate the divinity of the *tachtonim* — of all that seems lowly and secular.

The charge to cultivate a *dirah be-*

tachtonim engendered a conscious revolution in many poles of religious thought and practice.¹⁸ Focusing on the "*tachtonim*" created an inverse hierarchy in which items, activities and places that were previously considered more overtly "spiritual" became secondary to specifically the more physical and seemingly secular. The example that is relevant for our discussion is the changed perspective on how the world outside of "the four cubits of halacha" should be perceived.

If previous generations of yeshiva students were taught to stay in the Beit Midrash, far from the dangers of the outside world, this was because the *Shechina* was still in the seven heavens. However, in order for our generation to complete its mission, the Rebbe felt that we must begin to see the entire world in the messianic light — as Hashem's garden and home.¹⁹ Therefore, now is the time to take the spiritual energies amassed in previous generations to go everywhere — from secular college campuses to Katmandu — in order to demonstrate that even such places are, in truth, a wellspring of divinity.²⁰

The Rebbe's Temporary/ Permanent Sukkah

With this background, let us briefly look at the Rebbe's conception of the sukkah as a temporary dwelling.²¹ While he shared Rav Yehonatan Eibeschitz's sukkah-world analogy, his take away message had a different spin. The Rebbe noted that in light of our ruling that the structure of the sukkah is "temporary," it is striking that we find the exact opposite language regarding how we are supposed to behave in the sukkah. The Mishna²² says that "all seven days

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a person should make his sukkah permanent (*keva*) and his house temporary (*arai*),” and Rashi explains that one’s main place of living for the duration of Sukkot should be the sukkah. This idea is underscored by the Talmud Yerushalmi’s source for this halakha:

כתיב בסכת תשבו ואין תשבו אלא תדורו.
כמה דאת אמר וירשתם אותה וישבתם בה.

It is written: “In sukkot you shall sit (teishvu)” and the phrase “you shall sit” means nothing other than “you shall dwell.” As you must say [of this verse concerning the settling of Eretz Yisrael]: “You shall possess it and you shall dwell in it (ve-ye-shavtem bah)” (Devarim 11:31).²³

The dwelling in the Land of Israel certainly has a permanent aspect to it as that is where the Jewish people will live for all of eternity. So while the sukkah is structurally temporary, life should be lived there in a permanent fashion.²⁴

The Rebbe said that the same dichotomy is true of the world around us. The world as we see it is truly a transient place of little value, not worth our time and attention. But this is only accurate if we think

of our world solely in terms of what our eyes currently perceive. If we understand the notion of Hashem being revealed through each and every aspect of this world and the mission of creating a *dirah be-tachtonim*, then we must begin to live our lives in a “permanent” fashion. Every action and interaction in all four corners of the world can help reveal the true divine nature of reality.

This idea is applicable to the full gamut of human experience. Even a simple and temporary hut that is comprised of the “leftovers of the granary and harvest” can become a home for the *Shechina*.²⁵ Being honest in business and mentioning God’s name to colleagues helps build the equivalent of the *mishkan* in the office.²⁶ Helping a single not yet observant Jew put on tefillin in Alaska lets Hashem crack through the surface of reality in yet another location. Fighting poverty in America while inspiring the American public to lead moral lives filled with biblical values can reveal God in non-Jewish society in heretofore unimaginable proportions.²⁷ These activities as well as every other activity in our lives are all part of creating a *dirah*

be-tachtonim, the ultimate permanent (*keva*) home.

Conclusion

While the Rebbe and his generation were ultimately unsuccessful in completing the *dirah be-tachtonim*, on the 28th of Nissan 5751, less than a year before his debilitating stroke, he left marching orders for his followers:

מה עוד יכולני לעשות כדי שכל בני ירעישו ויצעקו באמת ויפעלו להביא את המשיח בפועל לאחר שכל מה נעשה עד עתה לא הועיל והראי' שנמצאים עדיין בגלות ועוד ועיקר בגלות פנימי בעיני עבודת השם. הדבר היחידי שיכולני לעשות למסור הענין אליכם ... ואני את שלי עשיתי ומכאן ולהבא תעשו אתם כל אשר ביכלתכם.

What more can I do to motivate the entire Jewish people to clamor and cry out, and thus actually bring about the coming of Mashiach? All that has been done until now has been to no avail. For we are still in exile; moreover, we are in an inner exile in regard to our own service of God. All that I can possibly do is to give the matter over to you . . . I have done whatever I can; from now on, you must do whatever you can.²⁸

May we merit to complete this mission.



Endnotes

1 For a beautiful description of these two poles, see the article of *mori ve-rabbi* Rabbi Michael Rosensweig, “Mesorah as a Halachic Source and Sensibility” printed in the summer 2011 edition of *Jewish Action*. It is available at https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/05/2011/mesorah_as_halachic_source_and_sensibility/

2 For a record regarding the Rebbe’s profound scholarship, see Nechemia Polen, “The Rebbe: Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson by Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem M. Friedman (review)” *Modern Judaism* 34:1 (2014), 127-129.

3 This adjective is taken from the writings of Rav Feital Levin, one of the select cadre charged with transcribing the Rebbe’s oral discourses. In his book *Heaven on Earth: Reflections on the Theology of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menahem M. Schneerson* (Kehot, 2002), a summary of the Rebbe’s “comprehensive and consistent theological system,” Rav Levin writes the following in his forward: “It appears justified to maintain, as this book does, that the general thrust of the Rebbe’s theology, whilst firmly rooted in classic Chasidic teachings, is strikingly innovative. Indeed, even those relevant perceptions that were expressed previously are no longer isolated thoughts, but are now incorporated into a total system.” It is important to note that Rav Levin reports that the Rebbe read and edited this book before approving it for publication, making it an authoritative primary source for the Rebbe’s philosophy.

4 *Sukkah* 2a and 7b.

5 *Ya’arot Devash, Derush* 6 (*Or HaSeifer*, 1983), pg. 134.

6 See *Shalmei Todah* on Sukkot, pg. 20-22 that similar ideas were expressed by the Chida, Gra, *Kli Yakar* and Rabbeinu Yonah.

7 *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*, chapter 20-22 and the opening chapters of *Sha’ar ha-Yichud ve-haEmunah*. A good illustration of this idea

is a story regarding the Alter Rebbe on his deathbed (recorded at (www.likkuteitorah.com/Tzav--for%20interim%20web%20posting.htm):

...there is a well-known story relating that, on his deathbed, the Alter Rebbe gestured toward the ceiling and asked his grandson and eventual successor, the Tzemach Tzedek, what he saw there. “I see wooden beams,” replied the Tzemach Tzedek. “I see only Godliness,” his grandfather said.

8 *Nefesh HaChaim* 3:3,6.

9 See, for example, *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*, chapter 33.

10 *Torah Or, Parshat Noach*, 11a. Translation from Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God: The Kabbalistic Theosophy of Habad Hasidism*, trans. Jefferey Green, (SUNY Press, 1992), 144. See there for a broader analysis of this contemplative process.

11 Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God*, 131-138.

12 See, *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim* chapter 41, 52. For a clear explanation of the matter see Nissan Mindel, *Rabbi Schneur Zalman Volume 2: The Philosophy of Chabad* (Kehot Publication Society, 1974), 124-125.

13 *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*, chapter 36-37; *Likkutei Torah, Drushim le-Rosh ha-Shanah*, 61a. For more sources and an analysis see Dov Schwartz, *Mah’shevet Habad* (University of Bar Ilan Press, 2010), 118-119.

14 *Tanya, Likkutei Amarim*, chapter 36.

15 Midrash Rabbah, *Shir ha-Shirim* 5:5

16 *Bati LeGani* 5711, end of chapter 3. English translation is from http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/115098/jewish/Basi-Legani-5711-Chapter-3.htm.

17 *Halakhic Man*, 61. This is Rav Soloveitchik’s description of the Alter Rebbe’s explanation of the shofar’s sound. While for Rav Soloveitchik the chassid (*homo religiosus*) stands as a foil to halakhic man, the Rebbe’s articulation of the final stages of Chassidut

brings them much closer together. This is highlighted by the fact that Rav Soloveitchik quotes the midrash of *Ikar Shechina be-tachtonim* as a source for halakhic man’s this-worldly orientation (*Halakhic Man*, pg. 55) – the same midrash that the Rebbe made into the cornerstone of his philosophy.

18 See Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 6-27; Alon Dahan, *Go’el Aharon: Mishnato ha-Meshihit shel R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (Contento de Semrik, 2014), 38-62 for a summary. Dahan’s book is based on his dissertation, *Dirah be-Tahtonim: Mishnato ha-Meshihit shel R. Menahem Mendel Schneerson*, (submitted as a doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University Press, 2006).

19 For a beautiful articulation of the Rebbe’s positive view of our world in light of these ideas, see his emphatic address from January 26 (10th of *Shevat*) 1972, available at http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/253998/jewish/Its-a-Beautiful-World.htm.

20 See, for example, *Likkutei Sichot* volume 33, pg. 275; *Inyanah shel Torat ha-Chasidut*, chapter 21; Rav Levin, *Heaven on Earth*, 128-138.

21 See, *Likkutei Sichot* volume 9, pg. 91; *Torat Menachem* 5713 volume 1, pg. 24.

22 *Sukkah* 28b.

23 Yerushalmi *Sukkah* 3:9. Translation is from the Schottenstein Edition.

24 This dichotomy is sharpened according to the approach of Rav Michael Rosensweig, “*BeInyan Mitzvat Sukkah*” (*Beit Yitzhak* 30) 285-297, that the *cheftza* of the sukkah itself needs to be treated as a *keva* home despite its temporary structure.

25 See *Torat Menachem* cited above.

26 *Torat Menachem* 5750 volume 4, pg. 192.

27 See, for example, http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/558041/jewish/Turning-Disappointment-into-Food-for-the-Hungry.htm.

28 *Torat Menachem* 5751 volume 3, pg. 119.



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