

Rabbi Lamm's Drashot for Sukkot

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INDISPENSABILITY: MYTH AND FACT

Recently, I paid two calls upon two different individuals. One was a condolence call to a mourner sitting shivah. The other was a sick call to a patient in a hospital. By a remarkable coincidence, each of these told me of something he had learned from his experience, and the results were identical.

"From my experiences during this confinement, away from my normal activities," each of them told me, "I have discovered a marvelous truth. To my great relief, I now realize — that I am not indispensable. I had always thought that if I took time out, away from my business or practice, all of it would collapse hopelessly. Now I see that I have been away from my office, my business, my home; and while all might have benefitted somewhat by my presence, I might have done things

somewhat differently, nevertheless, my absence proved to be no disaster. It is both a welcome and a humbling thought: I am not as crucial to their survival as I thought I was! From now on, therefore, I shall give more time to my wife and my children, to discovering the wonders of the world about me, to attending to my synagogue, to developing my own mind and cultural level. I never realized I could do all these things and get away with it. Now I learned — and not only I but my family as well will be the beneficiaries of my discovery."

I believe all of us can appreciate the simple truth in these remarks. I submit to you, therefore, that the good Lord has given us an easier and more pleasant way to learn that truth than by suffering. He has given us the sukkah and the festival of Sukkot.

The essence of Sukkot is: *tzei mi-dirat keva ve'hikanes le'dirat arai*, leave your permanent home, and for seven days dwell in this temporary booth. Normally, the interpretation of the significance of this commandment points out the independence of man from his possessions. You need not have a fine home and expensive appointments in order to survive. Consider how for seven days you can get along without them. What you do need is G-d, the *tzila di'mehemanuta*, the shadow of faith. Your home is not indispensable to you. (Cf. Rashbam to Lev. 23:43, and S.R. Hirsch in *Horeb* vol. I, p. 124ff., Grunfeld trans.)

I prefer to interpret the meaning of Sukkot in the reverse direction, by emphasizing the converse: **You are not indispensable to your home, to your society!** When a man leaves

his *dirat keva*, his lavish home and complex society, and for seven days he moves out — whether completely, or at least partially, for meals — he discovers that they survive — even without his presence! By moving out from under a roof to under the *sekhakh*, he learns what the patient does in the hospital and the survivor in the house of mourning — except that he learns it through *simhah*, not anguish; that, in a great measure, the world can very well get along without him!

This is a sobering thought, for by destroying the myth of our indispensability, it makes us feel that we are not the center of the world, that we are essentially dependent beings. And it is also a liberating thought, for it assures us that we can now learn, throughout the year, to pay more attention to the things in life that are really important, and that we will not thereby be endangering the existence of the other, mundane affairs.

Perhaps, then, we ought to take a little bit of Sukkot with us through the rest of the year. Every day a waft of the Sukkah's atmosphere ought to inspire us to "let go" for a short while and divert our attention to ourselves, our minds, our hearts — our *neshamah*. The world can get along without us.

Bratzlaver Hasidim offer us a remarkable suggestion: every day ought to contain at least one "dead hour." All our waking hours are so filled with "life," with nervous tensions of all sort that afflict us in the course of our daily affairs in commerce, in business, in professions, in society. Our emotions are engaged with others, our feelings entangled with them, our sensitivities inflamed with real or imaginary slights to our pride, our minds overflowing with a myriad of details and plans,

worries and concerns on paying bills, satisfying employers or employees, pacifying clients or customers, meeting the competition, keeping up with the neighbors. These so-called "live" hours are so preoccupied with other people, that we utterly ignore our own selves. No wonder we have so little inner peace, inner tranquility. We are "alive" so tensely, so neurotically, so busily, that we head straight for the psychiatrist's couch and for spiritual oblivion. Hence, say the Bratzlaver Hasidim, keep one little hour set aside as your "dead hour." Make no appointments, answer no phone calls, read no newspapers, keep away from radio and television, see no people, write no memos to yourself. Be "dead to the world" — and alive to yourself. Banish all your usual problems from your mind. Think of where you are going in life — or, perhaps, where life is taking you; the difference is worth thinking about. Ponder your own conduct, and what it is doing to you and to your character and personality. Project into the future — that of yourself, your children, your community. Make a *heshbon ha-nefesh* with yourself that may help you redirect and reorient your day-to-day activities. And if you are not the contemplative kind — then pull your mind out of the sucking whirlpool of daily business and elevate yourself to a new and higher kind of existence by reading that which is enduring, reviewing the Sidra, finding inspiration to a higher-than-animal existence through art or music, studying a *blatt gemara* — dead to the world, and alive to yourself. One "dead hour" a day can make all of life worth living!

That ought to be one concrete, felicitous result of the message of Sukkot. For the Bratzlavers' "dead hour" is the essence of Sukkot: you

can get away from under your *dirat keva*, from your normal routine, and into the *sukkah* under G-d's great heaven, without permanent damage to all the intricate goings-on in that home or office or factory, the *dirat keva*. But when we say that Sukkot teaches us that man is not indispensable, does that mean that he is expendable, that there is no area of life where he is indeed indispensable?

No, there are areas where man is crucial, where there can be only dismal failure without him. If in his mundane affairs, his *dirat keva*, his presence is dispensable; then in the *sukkah*, symbol of the spiritual world, man is indispensable! A *sukkah* without a Jew to make *kiddush* in it is meaningless. There is nothing holy about it. Strange as it may sound, in matters of the spirit **G-d needs man!** *Ha-Kadosh barukh Hu mitzapeh li'tefillatan shel tzaddikim*, G-d deeply desires the prayers of the righteous. His purposes in the world cannot be fulfilled without men — without each individual man or woman called upon by Him to contribute to the building of *malkhut shamayim*, the Kingdom of Heaven, the G-d approved society and world. If any one of us fails in his or her spiritual mission then, as our Sages were wont to say, G-d's Name is incomplete. Here — each of us is truly indispensable.

The Talmud (*Sukkah* 53a) tells us an interesting story of the renowned Hillel at the *simhat bet ha-shoevah*, the joyous celebration at the drawing of the waters which took place in the Temple on Sukkot. When Hillel would reach the heights of happiness at this occasion, he would say: *im ani kan, ha-kol kan; v'im eini kan, mi kan* — "if I am here, everyone is here; and if I am not here, who then is here?" A strange remark, is it not? Hillel the

humble, the gentle, the meek — is this sentiment worthy of him: I am indispensable? The Jerusalem Talmud, which understood the quotation to refer to Hillel himself, therefore rightly asks: *ve'khi le'kilusav Hu tzarikh*, does G-d need Hillel's praise and celebration that he should regard himself as so important? For the same reason, Rashi is moved to interpret the remark as being a quotation by Hillel of G-d, of the *Shekhinah*. Hillel, speaking in G-d's name, says: "If I am here, that is sufficient, for if I am not here, who is?" i.e. — nothing else counts. Yet this too is strange, for Hillel was a Sage, a Rabbi, and not a Prophet, and hence not given to speaking of G-d in the first person.

Even stranger is a sentence attributed to Hillel which follows immediately upon the one mentioned (cf. Rabinowitz, *Dikdukei Soferim*): *im ata tavo el beti, ani avo el betekha; v'im ata lo tavo el beti, ani lo avo el betekha*; if You, O G-d, will come to my home, I will come to Yours (i.e. the Temple); but if You will not come to my house, I will not come to Yours. What an astonishing expression! Is Hillel striking a bargain with G-d, making conditions about reciprocal hospitality with Him?

I believe that Hillel was guilty neither of arrogance in saying *im ani kan ha-kol kan*, nor of religious commercialism in saying *im ata tavo el beti*. What he meant was simply to teach what we have been saying: that man is **not** indispensable to the mundane world and its affairs, but **is** indispensable to the world of the spirit, of Torah, of Temple, of *Ha-Kadosh barukh Hu*. For this is what the great Hillel said: *im ani kan, ha-kol kan*, if I am here, in the *Bet ha-Mikdash* in G-d's house; if I am here

at the festival of *simhat bet ha-shoevah*, drawing of the waters which Tradition has understood symbolically as the drawing of the *Ruah ha-Kodesh*, the holy spirit, from its divine source; when I am involved in the life of spirituality and sanctity; then if I am here all is well; but if I am not here, *im eini kan*, then *mi kan*, then I must feel that I am responsible for the fact that the holiness of the Temple is diminished, that the joy of the *simhah* and the whole spiritual enterprise is a failure — for here, in this House of G-d, I as a human am indispensable!

And then Hillel continues not in setting conditions in negotiations, but in stating an indisputable fact of spiritual life: *im ata tavo el beti*, when You come to my home, O G-d, when I understand that my home, my office, my factory, all my mundane affairs, all my successes and triumphs, all are *Your* doing, that is only because You are present does my home and career exist, that it is *You* Who has given me the intelligence and the substance, the health and the wealth, the confidence and the *mazal* to be what I am and have what I have, and that I am only ancillary and my presence and services can be dispensed with; when I realize that in *beti*, in my mundane life and the world You are indispensable and I am not; then it is equally true that *ani avo el betekha*, then I am important, nay indispensable, to the existence of Your house, the *Bet Ha-Mikdash*, the universe of the divine spirit. When a man has grown in spiritual maturity and understanding to appreciate his real place in the world, to acknowledge G-d as the cause of his success, then he is great enough spiritually to be crucial to the existence of G-d's house. When we know we need G-d, He knows that He needs us! However, *im ata lo tavo el*

beti, when I am so foolish that I give You no entree to my home, when I think I can get along without You and that it is I who is indispensable, that it is my wisdom and my shrewdness that have built my house and my career and my business, then *ani lo avo el betekha*, then I have no business in Your home, then You can get along very well without me. If man thinks he does not need G-d, then G-d knows He does not need man. The man who considers himself self-made and worships his maker, is ignored by G-d.

Here then is an invaluable lesson for us from Sukkot: into the *sukkah* for a week's time, enough to learn that the world can get along without you, but that G-d cannot.

Abolishing the myth of indispensability from our daily concerns will prevent us from entertaining exaggerated notions of self-importance, and will inspire us to plan those "dead hours" which can grace all of life with meaning, with serenity, with a touch of poetry. And affirming our indispensability to the spirit, to Torah, to the Synagogue, to Judaism, and to G-d's purposes, will give us a new insight into our true significance and our lofty place in the world.

Va-ani be-rav hasdekha avo betekha. Only when I realize that my whole life, my very self, my *ani*, my family and livelihood and joys and pleasures, all are the result of Your indispensable *hasadim*, Your kindness; only then *avo betekha*, do I have the right to enter Your House, Your Holy Temple, and only then may I be considered indispensable to its prevalence in the world.