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MAN IS MORE THAN SEKHAKH

Moral instruction is available to us Jews not only in the Humash, not only in Agadah and Midrash, but, sometimes, in Halakhah. If we look closely and carefully enough, we will discover the grand themes of human destiny even in legal technicalities, profound human wisdom even in halakhic discourses. All it requires is imagination, a sense of allegory, some homiletic license, and a readiness to find beautiful insights in unlikely places.

With this in mind, I commend your attention to the halakhic requirements of the *sekhakh*, the boughs and branches we use to cover the *sukkah*. The Halakhah lays down three conditions for the *sekhakh* to be kosher, or valid. The first of these is, that it must be *zomeah min ha-arez*: it must grow from the earth. Thus, it must be an item such as branches or wood, but not metal or plastic. Second, it must be *talush*, cut off from the ground. Hence, one may not build a *sukkah* underneath the overhanging branches of a tree, attempting to use those branches and leaves as *sekhakh*, for they are connected to the tree

which is connected to the earth. Third, the *sekhakh* must be *aino ra'uy le-kabel tumah*: it must be such that it cannot contract ritual defilement. According to the Halakhah, only such objects can become *tamei* (impure) that are artifacts, that have specific functions, such as vessels or pots or pans or ladders. For that reason one may not use for *sukkah* such items as ladders, grass mats, or wooden doors or frames, even though they are made of material that grows from the earth and is severed from the earth because, as functional objects, they can contract impurity.

Now, the *sukkah* symbolizes transience, impermanence, the weak and the feeble. It is the sparse and provisional roof of the wanderer's hut in the great desert. The three laws of *sekhakh*, therefore, are associated with mortality and finitude, with that which cannot survive.

But man is more than *sekhakh*! Man seeks permanence and endurance. All of life is, in a sense, the effort to overcome death. So much of life is a disguised attempt to achieve

immortality, whether in healthy ways or in sick ways, whether in the form of great contributions to scholarship and philanthropy, or simple social climbing and publicity seeking. We want to continue, to survive, to conquer the temporary and the ephemeral. Hence, to accomplish this, we must strive for the very opposite of the three laws of *sekhakh*. If, indeed, man is more than *sekhakh*, he must go beyond *arez*, *talush*, *aino ra'uy le-kabel tumah*.

Unlike *sekhakh*, man must transcend *arez*, earth, the symbol of purely material existence. Now, I am not arguing for the medieval notion that humans are caught in the vise of an enormous conflict between Matter and Spirit, and that they must choose Spirit and reject Matter. (That theme really goes back beyond the Middle Ages to ancient days, and the ancient movement known as Gnosticism.) It is not an idea I would recommend to moderns or to anyone. Judaism by no means considers this material world as all bad. But neither should we submit to the equally mistaken and even more disastrous idea that has seized us in modern days, that there is nothing

more to life and existence than this material world. This is a stifling and stultifying idea. It is based upon an immature skepticism that distorts the meaning of science when it insists in its name that only that is real which can be proved experimentally. We have been brainwashed with the theory that man is nothing more than an aggregate of molecules. For our contemporary materialism has indoctrinated us with a fallacious set of equations: that man equals animal, and animal equals machine, and machine equals chemicals, the kind that are found in the earth. Man, we are told to conclude, is exclusively a *zomeah min ha-arez*, nothing more than a product of the earth, with no additional dimensions to him.

However, if we are going to submit to this kind of scientific reductionism, we must go the whole way and ask: and what are chemicals made from?, and so on. And the answer would be: chemicals are atoms, and atoms are a form of congealed energy, and energy is, after all, simply an abstraction, a set of mathematical formulae. So, in a way, we have this terrifying pseudo-scientific conclusion: man is just a set of abstractions. Or, if you will: man is nothing! Not even *sekhakh*!

A brief sermon is not a place to subject materialistic concepts to critical analyses. But it is important to note that the philosophy of man as *zomeah min ha-arez* is on the wane today. In Russia, the authorities are alarmed at the reemergence of signs of religious interest after six decades of state materialism and atheism. In the United States, where materialism is always officially disavowed, but where it is effectively the underpinning of "the American way of life," the younger generation is revolting against

the endless money — mania and possessions — obsessions of their elders and their cult of affluence. In Israel, the children of Kibbutzniks who exchange their Judaism for an idealistic Marxian materialism, are now rejecting materialism and searching for something deeper and higher; they are going beyond *arez* and looking for that which points to *shamayim*, to heaven. And social thinkers and philosophers of the first rank in the Western world, have developed a new interest in a respect for transcendence, for that which lies beyond immediate sense experience, beyond this world alone.

The second requirement of *sekhakh* is that it be *talush*, severed from the ground, cut off from its origin. By the same token, if man is more than *sekhakh*, then his redeeming quality must be that he remain *mehubar*, rooted and fixed in a framework of value and meaning, in a ground of *Weltanschauung*. For man to be human, he must recognize himself as a link in an ongoing chain, he must see himself as part of the continuum of human history. He must remember the legend on certain coupons and tickets: "No good if detached!"

Change there must be — but change *in* something, *relative* to something, *out* of something. One of the failures of the counter-culture, the "now generation," is its rootlessness. It is not based on and rooted in and attached to a past or a tradition. The counter-culture considers this a virtue, it holds itself free and liberated and emancipated because of its lack of connection to the past. But in truth it is as free as a piece of straw floating in the air; or, as David said of the *rasha* (evil man) in his first Psalm, *ke-moz asher tidfenu ha-ruah*, "like

chaff driven by the wind." Its rejection of the whole of the human past and inherited culture leaves it without any cultural equilibrium, without any psychological or spiritual rootage, and therefore incapable of making a creative contribution to human development. It is merely adrift. And instability is a symptom, not an ideal.

I remember a story (that is probably apocryphal, but nonetheless contains a great deal of truth) that was told shortly after the first session of the United Nations. According to this story, the delegation from Yemen was housed in a hotel, and after they left at the end of the session, the manager of the hotel discovered that all the faucets were missing. Upon investigation he discovered that these men of the desert were fascinated by these contraptions called faucets which, when turned on, magically allow water to emerge in full force. They therefore decided to take the faucets home with them to the desert, so that they can turn them on and thereby allow water to flow freely in the very desert.

What I am trying to say is that man, to be human, must be *mehubar* to a reservoir of culture and tradition and history, lest his currents of life run dry.

This is, after all, the sum and substance of what we mean by Jewish education. Jewish education contains such elements as learning Hebrew or learning Humash or learning the Talmud, and these are very important, but they are not the most significant object of Jewish education. Our central purpose is to give growing young Jews and Jewesses the feeling of a rootage in a great Jewish past, an awareness of being *mehubar* — connected to and growing out of — the greatness of Jewish history, so that even if they stray from the path they

will know what it is they are leaving, and they will recognize that to which they ought to return.

Finally, the third qualification for *sekhakh* is that it be *aino ra'uy le-kabel tumah* not capable of contracting impurity. Hence, by the criterion we have established, a man should be *ra'uy le-kabel tumah* capable of contracting impurity. I take this to mean that man must be ready to risk and dare in order to achieve and accomplish.

The Kabbalists have taught us that only that can achieve *kedushah* (sanctity) which can contract *tumah* (impurity). So, man himself is the main source of sanctification in the world; but when he loses his soul and returns it to his Creator, his body is a corpse which is considered halakhically *avi avot ha-tumah*, the most potent source of — defilement.

There is a powerful and dangerous idea on the loose here: that only by risking *tumah* can you achieve *kedushah*; that only by daring to lose can you win; that only by taking chances with failure can you succeed. The gambler's instinct can, of course, be taken to an extreme and turn into a disease. But without some element of hazard and risk, we are paralyzed and inert and can never make any progress.

The State of Israel would not be here today if those men meeting in Tel Aviv in 1948 at the session of the Vaad Leumi did not hazard monumental failure in declaring independence — as a fledgeling group without any experience in statecraft and any of the appurtenances of statehood. It was only because they were *ra'uy le-kabel tumah*, willing to embrace the possibilities of catastrophic failure, that Israel was created and became a *kiddush Hashem be-rabim*, a public and

historic sanctification of God's Name. A leader — of any kind of group — must venture beyond the limits of caution and occasionally dare to speak out and declare his vision of the truth, even if he runs the risk of losing some of his followers. The alternative is to be a consensus leader, who merely does what the people want; but such a person is not a leader, merely an administrator. All progress, all change, involves the possibility of failure. But without it we are as good as dead. To be truly human, we must act responsibly — with equal emphasis on both: *act*, and *responsibly*. Young people are usually more active, frequently without a sense of responsibility. Middle aged and older people are most often responsible, but usually fail to act when they should. The wise person is both — active and responsible. And if man is more than *sekhakh*, he must be *ra'uy le-kabel tumah*, be ready to embrace defeat in order to try for victory, for triumph, for conquest.

So, there are times when we should strike out boldly. Think about it: the lesson of *sukkot* that man must be more than *sekhakh*, does not say that you should do things merely for the sake of novelty or to chase away boredom. But there are times when we want to do something which we think is right and proper, and we have assessed the possibilities of success and the possibilities of failure, the desirability of the former and the consequences of the latter, and logically we know we ought to take a chance. But we are frightened, we are apprehensive, we are too comfortable, we prefer our inertia. At such a time, *Sukkot* calls out to us and says: risk *tumah*, go ahead and innovate, experiment, make the move, go on aliyah, emigrate, change your

job, speak out, change your mind, do that which is new — and do not be afraid of failure, of risk, of danger, of criticism or derision! Take a chance!

The great achievement of man is to be *tahor* (pure) while he is *ra'uy le-kabel tumah* (capable of becoming impure).

These, then, are the three qualities that are requisite for man in order for him to be more than *sekhakh*, but to endure meaningfully. First, he must acknowledge more than material existence, more than *arez*, but be open to the transcendental and the spiritual. Second, he must be rooted in a great past and see himself as a link in the chain of history and culture and tradition. Third, he must be willing to be *ra'uy le-kabel tumah* that is, to venture and hazard and risk and dare.

That is how man can become more than *sekhakh*, more than the weak and feeble and temporary *sekhakh*. This is so according to the Rabbi of the Talmud who considered our *Sukkah* to be the physical counterpart of the huts that were used by our ancestors in the desert. But man becomes more *like* the *sukkah* according the opinion of another rabbi of the Talmud, who maintains that our *sukkot* are symbols not of the physical huts used in the desert, but of the *ananei ha-kavod*, the divine clouds of glory which protectively covered our ancestors during their entire peregrinations in the great desert.

In this sense, man becomes more *like* the *sukkah* and its *sekhakh*: by raising his head above the ground of materialism, by locating himself in a great past, by striving for greatness while willing to risk failure, he becomes worthy of being enveloped and covered by *ananei ha-kavod*, the clouds of glory.