

Succot of Innocence and of Experience

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Humans often forget G-d and allow Him to slide out of consciousness. For some, the desires of this world are too powerful and G-d must be sidelined so that these pleasures can be pursued guilt-free. For others, the presence of G-d is either too invisible, too illogical, or too camouflaged by evil and suffering. Often though, pride and hubris feed human ego, create a sense of human invincibility and displace G-d within the human imagination. Success often breeds arrogance, and excess pride in human achievement deposes G-d. As Eric Hoffer, an American writer, commented "Where there is the necessary technical skill to move mountains there is no need for the faith that moves mountains".

Exiting the comfort of our homes and spending a week in a bare Succah, should restore our sense of human vulnerability. Despite all our success and triumphs, we remain susceptible to the natural world, its overwhelming power and its unpredictable forces. Ultimately, frail humans remain dependent upon Divine protection. Year-round we inhabit a perpetual but "invisible" Succah; for one week a year we craft an actual Succah to illustrate this dependence.

The original Succah-huts in the desert provided the first appreciation of human vulnerability. Two hundred years of back breaking persecution in Egypt had already showcased how vulnerable we are to the cruelty of ruthless aggressors. Having been liberated from Egyptian harassment, the Jews now faced a harsh and unforgiving desert, absent of water but lined with danger. Their man-made huts provided partial refuge but, ultimately, only Divine clouds provided full shelter, comfort and security. At the genesis of our peoplehood, as we marched through a blank desert, appreciation of human vulnerability was programmed into our national identity. This poor band of slaves had absolutely no reason to believe in themselves and in their abilities; their only hope was to look through the cracks in their wonky huts toward the supernatural clouds which enveloped them.

Living with a sense of vulnerability is vital for a religiously meaningful life. Obviously, this awareness underscores our dependency upon G-d. The crisis of prayer in the modern world is due, in part, to prayer being pitched upon human need and our petitioning G-d to brace our wobbly experience. When our experience feels too sturdy we are less drawn to prayer. "G-d supports the fallen (someich Hashem l'chol ha'noflim)— if we don't feel fallen we may not seek Divine support.

Beyond reinforcing dependence upon G-d, awareness of human vulnerability lends greater purpose and resolution to life. If we live forever and are forever steady, it is more difficult to sense mission or urgency. However, if we realize that our time on this planet is limited as well as rickety, we feel more compelled to maximize our limited and delicate resources constructively. This is part of Shlomo's message in Kohelet: if human's will fade to dust we best build before we begin to fade. Finally, sensing our own dependency allows us to be more sensitive the dependency of others The Maharal traces the moral degeneration of the residents of Sedom to their culture of affluence. As a self-sufficient society of abundance they had little need for acts of charity; each household was financially solvent and the community didn't require a gemach! Once the need for chesed vanished, they spiraled into a moral free-fall, transforming into an abusive and immoral society. Gracious people are humble, compassionate and generous as experience has taught them about how brittle life is. Juan Vazquez Gabriel a Columbian writer commented "Experience, or what we call experience, is not the inventory of our pains, but rather the learned sympathy towards the pain of others". Our week in a Succah allows us to relive this 'innocent vulnerability' of the desert and recall an era in which our frailty was obvious.

However, society has advanced beyond the Spartan conditions of the desert. We aren't innocent slaves battling an unforgiving desert. We have tamed our world and upholstered it with comfort, stability and predictability. Can we imagine ourselves living in a windswept desert? Sitting in a modern Succah, it may be difficult to recall those innocent desert shelters but may be easier to imagine future Messianic Succah-enclosures. The prophets portray a Messianic era in which the wicked suffer Divine revenge while the righteous are shielded in Succot from apocalyptic fury. At the end of human history – after the world has

evolved and progressed— G-d once again dismantles human ego and disassembles human achievement to remind us of our basic vulnerability. This Messianic experience shatters the vanity and self-confidence which centuries of human development has fostered. These Messianic succot don't protect innocent desert slaves but safeguard progressive and sophisticated societies reminding us about the frailty of human life. Modern Succot challenge us to recall the Succot of Innocence but also to consider the Succot of Historical Experience.

This year, our Succot more powerfully model those future apocalyptic huts. The steep price we have paid for the rapid development of the past three hundred years is the abdication of our sense of vulnerability. This year an apocalyptic virus has brought civilization to its knees and restored that loss sense of vulnerability. Sitting under the nighttime sky, enclosed in our Succah, we can once again sense how vulnerable the human condition remains.

This past Rosh Hashanah I looked out at the masked students davening in walled-in compartments in the Beit Midrash. It struck me that human beings are incredibly adaptive; facing an indomitable virus, we have pivoted, restructured our reality and preserved some degree of normalcy. As proud as I am of human flexibility I ask myself: Are we fully absorbing the current lessons about human vulnerability? As we hunt for vaccines, maintain social distancing, and celebrate the buoyant stock market have we properly heeded the larger lessons about how brittle humans are? Are we too "adaptive" to fully appreciate our core vulnerability and mentally "sit" in the Succah of G-d? The Egyptians also were adaptive and they also pivoted after the initial calamities. Facing a bloodied Nile, they dug fresh water sources so that life could continue. Facing a countryside of dead reptiles, they gathered the carcasses and utilized the skins; the price of 'frog skin futures' on the Egyptian market skyrocketed. Unwilling to face their own vulnerability, they couldn't free their victims. Ultimately, G-d had to impose more severe disasters, for which they had no recovery methods, so that, reminded of their vulnerability and undressed of their pride, they could release the Jewish slaves.

I thought of the Egyptians this past Rosh Hashana. Are our masks and compartments merely distracting us from the larger message of human vulnerability? Sukkot provides an important moment to pause from Corona adaptations and absorb the larger message of this pandemic. No longer innocent slaves who inherently understand human frailty, we are now advanced moderns living through an apocalyptic event sheltered only by Divine providence. Sitting in our modern Sukkot during this pandemic should restore this core aspect of human identity.