

## From Golus to Growth: The Sukkah as a Sanctuary for the Soul

When sitting in the sukkah, my zayde, Rav Shmuel Shmidman zt”l, would often quote the passuk from *L’Dovid Hashem Ori*, which states כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסֻכָּה בְּיוֹם רָעָה, “For He will hide me in His sukkah on the day of evil.” He would then ask, what is the passuk referring to? What day is called “*yom ra’ah*,” the day of evil, and what does it mean that Hashem hides us in the sukkah? How does that provide the appropriate shelter on the *yom ra’ah*?

My grandfather suggested an approach based on the story in the Gemara in *Taanis* 24b, telling of Rava’s father suggesting that he leave his bed to escape from the *malachei chavalah*, the angels of infliction, who were upset that he “bothered” Hashem by requesting rain in a time of drought. Similarly, Hashem hides us in the sukkah to prevent a *yom ra’ah*, a day of destruction from the angels upset that we have been “bothering” Hashem by beseeching Him for forgiveness and bracha over the course of the Yamim Noraim.

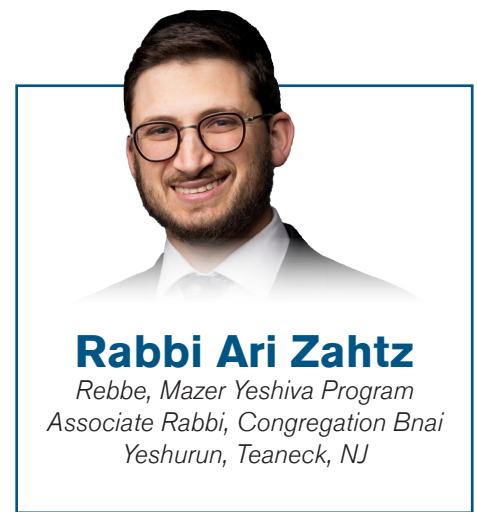
Perhaps we can suggest an additional approach based on the *Yalkut Shimoni* (Vayikra 23:653). The *Yalkut* explains that on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem sits in judgment over all living beings, and on Yom Kippur, He seals that judgment. Sometimes, the judgment against Bnei Yisrael is that they must be sent into

exile. However, Hashem, in His infinite mercy, provides a remedy: the mitzvah of sukkah. He commands us to leave our homes and dwell in temporary shelters, and this act is likened to being exiled to Bavel. But how can leaving our homes for the sukkah be compared to the Jews being sent into exile?

At first glance, the comparison seems tenuous. Yes, we step outside, but obviously, exile is far more severe than moving into a sukkah for a week. To understand this connection, we must explore the broader concept of *golus*, exile, within Jewish tradition.

*Golus* is not just a national experience; it has also been a personal spiritual practice throughout the ages. There are numerous stories of great pious Jews who voluntarily placed themselves into a state of exile, wandering anonymously from city to city, concealing their identities. One of the most famous is the Vilna Gaon, who exiled himself and traveled as a poor man for several years. What motivated such behavior? What was the purpose of self-imposed exile?

Similarly, there is a fascinating story about Rashi, one of our greatest Torah commentators, and his personal *golus*. It is said that Rashi once exiled himself, and during his travels, he arrived in Toledo, where he sought to meet the esteemed Rabbi Yehuda Halevi. Unfortunately, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was not home, and after Rashi left, the servants discovered a damaged garment. They wrongly accused Rashi



of the damage and forced him to pay five gold coins. Before leaving, Rashi wrote his name, Shlomo (שלמה), five times on the door. When Rabbi Yehuda Halevi returned, he was intrigued by the mysterious inscription and ordered his servants to find the stranger. They brought Rashi back, and after discussing Torah thoughts, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi realized he was speaking to a true *gadol b’Torah*. When asked about the inscription, Rashi punctuated the words to read, “*she’lama Shlomo salma shleima shilma?*” — “Why did Shlomo pay for a whole garment?”

This story not only highlights Rashi’s genius, but it also leaves us with the same fundamental question: Why did great scholars like Rashi and the Vilna Gaon voluntarily choose to experience *golus*? And how does this connect to the experience of dwelling in the sukkah?

As with all divine decrees, the purpose of exile is not purely punitive. The goal is to improve us, to serve as a *kaparah*. *Golus*, whether imposed by Hashem or self-imposed, refines us in two key ways: it reveals that we are not yet worthy to live in the Land of Israel, and it pushes us to grow spiritually. Being in a foreign land, away from our homeland, forces us to confront our weaknesses and improve ourselves.

In this light, self-imposed *golus* can



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serve a similar purpose. The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuva* (2:4) that going into *golus*, even voluntarily, atones for sins. But why is this the case? How does exile lead to atonement? The answer lies in the humility that exile engenders. When we leave behind our possessions, our status, and our comfort, we are no longer relying on our reputation or material wealth. Instead, we must rely on the kindness of others, and this experience fosters humility.

However, I believe there is a deeper aspect to this as well. If we truly desire spiritual growth, as these tzaddikim did, the way to achieve it is by stepping out of our comfort zone. Abandoning what is familiar, leaving behind the comforts of home, forces us to look inward and engage in honest self-reflection. This is difficult to achieve when we are surrounded by the routines and habits of daily life. However, when we break away from these routines — whether by going on vacation or entering a self-imposed exile — we have the opportunity to think deeply about who we really are.

This is the essence of the *kaparah* found in self-imposed *golus*: it teaches

humility by stripping away the external distractions, allowing us to connect with our true selves. This, in turn, was a key element in the spiritual development of these great scholars.

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Perhaps this is also the deeper meaning of the *golus* of the sukkah. It is not merely a symbolic gesture that mimics the exile of Bnei Yisrael; it is a genuine opportunity to reflect on the root cause of the *gezeirah*. We have just emerged from the intense period of *teshuva* culminating with Yom Kippur. Sukkos immediately follows, providing us with the gift of time — time free from *melacha*, time that can be spent in reflection.

But sitting in our comfortable homes makes it hard to focus. We are accustomed to our surroundings, so

Hashem commands us to move out into the “exile” of the sukkah. This new, unfamiliar space may be just outside our homes, but it is distinct enough to break our routines. In the sukkah, we have the chance to think deeply about the changes we committed to on Yom Kippur. We can reflect on the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon us and contemplate what is truly important in our lives.

In our fast-paced world, deep reflection has become a lost art. Sukkos gives us the precious opportunity to pause and reflect, free from the usual distractions. And it is through this process of reflection that the decree of *golus* can be undone. If the purpose of *golus* is to repair our relationship with Hashem so that we can return to Him, then the *golus* of the sukkah can accomplish the same goal. It allows us to reset, refocus, and emerge spiritually stronger.

In this way, the sukkah becomes more than just a temporary dwelling. It is a space for spiritual rejuvenation, a place where we can reconnect with our true selves and with Hashem. It is a reminder that, even in exile, there is always a path back to the Divine.



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