

Sermon Sukkot (1st Night) 5781

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameakh!!

As I'm sure you all know, Sukkot is the third of the three Pilgrimage holidays in our tradition. Why is it the third and not the first, given that it occurs right after Rosh Hashana? Because, though Rosh Hashana is the New Year and coincides with what our tradition believes to be the time of the Creation of the Universe, nevertheless, the month of Tishrei is the 7th month of the year. The Jewish calendar begins with Nissan, the month in which Passover begins at the full moon which is always the middle of the month.

When I was living in Jerusalem in the 1970s and would leave the city to travel somewhere else in the country, the trip back to Jerusalem was always very beautiful and exciting. It didn't matter if I was returning from within the Green Line i.e. the borders of the state as it was before the Six Day War or coming back via the West Bank area which sometimes was a faster drive. Either way you're always ascending the mountains to Jerusalem because Jerusalem is almost 3,000 feet above Sea Level. I invariably would have the thought about what it must have been like to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem and ascend that mountain.

It was a similar feeling walking to the Kotel, to the Western Wall. Either way you go either through the Arab market or around the edge of the Old City (Ir Ha'Atika, the Ancient City, as it's called in Hebrew), there comes a point where the Kotel comes into view. No matter how many times I see it, it always is startling in a way, because of how ancient it is, the presence of those huge stones one on top of the other making up the wall itself.

There was a hotel called the Holy Land Hotel in a neighborhood, Bayit Vagan, which was the next neighborhood after the one I lived in, Beit Hakerem, on the way toward Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Outdoors on the grounds of this hotel there was a pretty large-scale model of the ancient city of Jerusalem in second Temple days with a model of the Beit HaMikdash, the ancient Temple.

One of the amazing things about Israel was how you would feel so connected to the stories in the Bible because you could see the very places in which the things we read about occurred. I'm sure I've told you this before, but the most surprising event of that nature occurred for me when driving back roads from Jerusalem to Ashkelon on the Mediterranean (not that far

from Gaza), there was a certain point where we came upon this large green plain with a road sign, quoting a Biblical passage, and pointing out that this plain was where David slew Goliath.

Returning to Sukkot. There is a concept in Judaism called Avodah B'Gashmiyut, which essentially refers to embodying our spirituality, that is worshiping G!d, through physical rituals. We give ourselves physical memories of our spiritual connections to that which transcends us. On Pesach we eat special foods. On Sukkot we eat in a Sukkah, shake the Lulav and Etrog. Sitting in a Sukkah – the act itself is both a connection with the last harvest in the land of Israel, so it keeps our connection to our ancient Homeland even when we are living outside of it, and it also is a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt because the Torah tells us that our ancestors lived in Sukkot (the plural of Sukkah) during the forty years of the Exodus. Plus the Sukkah is a reminder of the fragility of life and our vulnerability. There is a tradition when you sit in the Sukkah and eat a meal there to invite the Ushpizin, an Aramaic word that means “guests” – referring to great personages from the Torah: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moshe, Aaron, Yosef, and King David. There is an equivalent seven of women: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Avigail, Hulda, and Esther or Rachel at the same place as King David because they are both symbolic of the Shekhina, G!d's Presence.

Speaking of G!d's Presence – I know I'm getting into some esoteric stuff here, but here's a little something for those of you who might be Gematria buffs. Gematria, of course, is the numerical equivalents of the Hebrew letters of the alphabet. Every letter has a numerical equivalent and therefore every word has a numerical equivalent. There are certain Gematriot (the plural of Gematria) that are particularly familiar – probably the best known is 18, which is Khet, Hey, the two letters which special a word for “Life” Khai. People often donate to charities giving Khai or twice Khai (36), i.e. denominations of Khai. The two letters in the middle of the word Sukkah have a special numerical significance. Sukkah is spelled: Samekh, Vav, Kaf, Hey. The two letters in the middle, Vav and Kaf, have the numerical equivalent of G!d's Name, the Tetragrammaton (or the Shem HaM'forash – as it's called in Hebrew – literally, the Explicit Name). That number is 26. Kav Vav is 26 and Yud, and Hey, Vav, and Hey – The Shem HaM'forash – is 26). The Sukkah tries to draw in the spiritual energy of Divinity into our midst by our dwelling in it just as we want the Shekhina, G!d's Presence to dwell among us.

There's a phrase used in the Siddur, the prayer book, that says: Tifros Aleinu Sukkat Shlomekha asking G!d to “Spread over us the Sukkah of your Peace.” The Sukkah is a shelter,

but one that at the same time reminds us of the fragility of life. But at the same time we are encouraged to rejoice in our festivals and only be happy: V'samakhta B'khagekha V'hayita akh Sameakh". With that I will wish you all Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameakh!!