Sukkot & The Environment

Temple Beth El
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SUKKOT

To understand Sukkot, we must speak of rain. For dwellers in city and suburb, rain often seems to be an interruption, something which keeps us inside - something which demands special protection. For residents of a temperate climate, rain also seems random; an occurrence which can as easily disrupt a summer's baseball game as melt the ice on the rink where hockey is played. To understand Sukkot, we must think of rain differently. For farmers, rain means life. It nurtures and sustains the growth of food. The amount of rain is also critical. There can be too much of it as well as too little. If one lives in the land of Israel, rain is a somewhat predictable event. During the winter season, it may rain; during the rest of the year, it will not. Sukkot comes at the edge of winter, just before the rainy season begins. For that reason, it was once the most important single event in the Jewish year.

In its primal form, Sukkot was the holiday on which the Jewish people asked for rain. It was done with great joy and impressive pageantry. In Temple times, the week-long celebration of Sukkot was one of the year's two major pilgrimage events (the other being Passover). Jews came from all over the world to bring their tithes to the Temple, and to join in the celebrations. There were many special events. Every morning, after the burning of the regular sacrifices, there was a water-pouring ceremony. An imposing procession brought water carried in golden vessels up to the Temple mount where it was poured, along with wine, on the altar. These were major libations! Silver horns were blown, flutes were played, and a good time was had by all. The day was then filled with all kinds of special sacrifices - the impressive presentation of the gift-offerings brought by pilgrims from all over the known world. After dark came the fire ceremonies. Torches were juggled, giant Menorot were set ablaze, and even the priests' old garments were burned in bonfires. Sukkot scored a ten in spectacle.

Agricultural connections pervaded the Judaism practiced in Temple times. Simple farm people wanted their religion to produce simple but effective results. Special gift-offerings, water-pouring rituals, and probably even the waving of the Etrog and the Lulav were originally cause-and-effect rituals to insure the coming of the winter rains. In our day and age, the rain-making aspect of Sukkot rituals has been reduced. It consists only of the addition of one simple phrase to the regular daily service. Starting on Shemini Atzeret, the last day of this week-long celebration, the words, "Who brings the wind and causes the rain to fall," are added to the second blessing of the Amidah, the long, standing,m silent prayer. Subtly, by praising God for having previously given us rain, we hope to influence the continuation of that act.

For those of us who live in the wall-to-wall climate control of cities and suburbs, the Sukkot farming connection reawakens

understandings which are too easily taken for granted. It forces us to reconnect with food chains and ecosystems, to reaffirm our awareness that despite our normal existence in carefully controlled environments, we are all passengers on "Spaceship Earth." The rhythms and patterns of the natural order, and the quality of its equilibrium, will affect our lives. This is the first of Sukkot's important teachings.

The First Lesson: When we spend time in the Sukkah, we get a unique chance to experience the natural world. We are subject to wind and rain, hot and cold, sunlight and moonlight; birds and bugs directly interact with us - and that which we are trying to eat. We are reminded of our dependence on nature, and our need to protect it. Most full-fledged Jewish holidays are really two different celebrations which have been bonded into one event. Sukkot is no exception. As in most other cases, a historical commemoration is blended with an agricultural festival.

Sukkot is a two-fold celebration. In addition to anticipating the rainy season, Sukkot also serves as a reenactment of the exodus from Egypt. The Torah explains it this way:

> "You shall live in Sukkot (booths) for seven days...so that future generations will know that I made the people of Israel live in Sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." (Leviticus 23.42-43)

Like Passover, it is a holiday designed to give later generations a first-hand (through simulated) experience of what it was like when the Jewish people found their destiny. The outdoor living experience is a kind of Jewish "Outward Bound." It is a rite of initiation into the collective experience which shaped the Jewish people. This is the second insight taught by Sukkot.

The Second Lesson: When we spend time in the Sukkah, we join in the experiences which turned a group of runaway slaves into a holy people. Being a Jew is owning Jewish history, and accepting a portion of the responsibility for our historic mission - the transformation of the world from a place of human slavery and suffering into a place of peace and prosperity. Sukkot creates a moment of living history.

The week-long celebration of Sukkot weaves together these two themes - the coming of the rainy season and the escape from Egypt. It is a merger of recognizing our dependence on God's involvement in the natural order with reliving the story of our national liberation. One series of celebratory acts has the potential to trigger a number of insights.

Taken From "Building Jewish Life"
by Torah Aura Productions.

Seeing

Text Study: Opening Your Eyes: From Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Miracles*, pp. 3-6

Reading

When the people of Israel crossed through the Red Sea, they witnessed a great miracle. Some say it was the greatest miracle that ever happened. On that day they saw a sight more awesome than all the visions of the prophets combined. The sea split and the waters stood like great walls, while Israel escaped to freedom on the distant shore. Awesome. But not for everyone.

Two people, Reuven and Shimon, hurried along among the crowd crossing through the sea. They never once looked up. They noticed only that the ground under their feet was still a little muddy like a beach at low tide.

"Yucch!" said Reuven, "there's mud all over this place!"

"Blecch!" said Shimon, "I have muck all over my feet!"

"This is terrible," answered Reuven, "When we were slaves in Egypt, we had to make our bricks out of mud, just like this!"

"Yeah," said Shimon. "There's no difference between being a slave in Egypt and being free here."

And so it went, Reuven and Shimon whining and complaining all the way to freedom. For them there was no miracle. Only mud. Their eyes were closed. They might as well have been asleep. (Exodus Rabbah 24:1)

People see only what they understand, not necessarily what lies in front of them. For example, if you saw a television set, you would know what it was and how to operate it. But imagine someone who had never seen a television. To such a person it would be just a strange and useless box. Imagine being in a video store, filled with movies and stories and music, and not even knowing it. How sad when something is right before your eyes, but you are asleep to it. It is like that with our world too.

Something like this once happened to Jacob, our father. He dreamed of a ladder joining heaven and earth. Upon it angels were climbing up and down. Then God appeared and talked to Jacob. When he awoke the next morning, Jacob said to himself, "Wow! God was in this very place all along, and I didn't even know it!" (Genesis 28:16)

Rabbi Shelomo Yitzchaki, who lived in France eight hundred years ago and whom we call Rashi (after the initials of his name), explained what Jacob meant: "If I had known that God would be here, then I wouldn't have gone to sleep!"

To be a Jew means to wake up and to keep your eyes open to the many beautiful, mysterious, and holy things that happen all around us every day. Many of them are like little miracles: when we wake up and see the morning light, when we taste food and grow strong, when we learn from others and grow wise, when we hug the people we love and feel warm, when we help those around us and feel good. All these and more are there for us every day, but we must open our eyes to see them; otherwise we will be like Reuven and Shimon, able to see only mud.

Suppose, right now, your eyes are closed. How do you wake up?

Supplementary Readings

3. "God Everywhere"
Wheresoe'er I turn mine eyes
Around the earth or toward the skies
I see Thee in the starry field,
I see Thee in the harvest's yield,
In every breath, in every sound,
An echo of Thy name is found.
The blade of grass, the simple flower,
bear witness to Thy matchless pow'r.
My every thought, Eternal God of heaven,
Ascends to Thee, to whom all praise be given.
—Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, D.E. de L. translator, from *An Anthology of Medieval Hebrew Literature.*

4. Abraham was amazed by the vastness and the orderliness of the universe. Studying the sky, he thought at first that the sun must be the power that regulated it and directed everything. But evening came, and looking up at the sky, he saw that the sun had disappeared. Then he thought that perhaps it was the moon that was the directing force upon the world. But the very next morning, he observed that the moon was no more and that the sun had again taken its place. Thus contemplating the cosmos, he came to the conclusion that there must be a power higher and above all those powers visible to the eyes of human beings. Who rules and orders the universe.
—Adapted from Genesis Rabbah 39:1 and Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, ch.7.

5. Variety is the security of agriculture, as of biology. Unlike the "scientific" agriculturalists who give priority to "efficiency", the Andean farmers' first principle is variety. It is the ancient wisdom of putting the eggs into several baskets; in a season or a field in which one variety perishes, another, or several others, may thrive....One field, about the size of an ordinary living room, contained forty-six different potato varieties.
—Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land,* p.8. Copyright © 1981 by Wendell Berry.

Bringing It Home ▲

In this lesson we have learned there is divine value in all of life and in the great diversity of life. We have learned this from both a Jewish and an ecological perspective.

Have a volunteer read the following interpretation of the line from Psalm 92:13, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree." The *kavannah* for this week is to imagine how in our human communities we can live more harmoniously with nature.

As no part of the date palm is wasted—
its dates being eaten,
its new branches used for ritual blessing
its fronds for covering a *sukkah* (ritual hut),
its fibers for ropes,
its leaves for sieves,
its trunks for rafters—
so there are none worthless among Israel;
some are versed in Bible;
others know some *Mishnah*;
some are masters of *Aggadah*; others do good deeds;
still others promote social justice.
—Numbers Rabbah 3:1

To end the unit, teach the blessing over the diverse forms of creation:

ברוך אתה ד' אלקינו מלך העולם משנה הבריות.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech Ha-olam, m'shaneh ha-breeyot.

Praise to You *Adonai*, our God and Universal Ruler, Who makes all varieties of creatures.

For Further Reading

Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country*

Bal Tashchit

What Do You Know About Waste?

Participant Worksheet

What D'you Know Quiz

1. What percentage of paper used yearly in the United States is used just for packaging?

a. 8% b. 23% c. 50%

2. If you are an average adult who weighs 150 pounds, how much garbage will you generate in your lifetime?

a. 1 ton (2,000 lbs.) b. 10 tons (20,000 lbs.) c. 45 tons (90,000 lbs.)

3. If all the aluminum thrown away in the U.S. were recycled, how long would it take to gather enough aluminum to rebuild all the commercial airliners in the U.S.?

a. 10 years. b. 2 years c. 3 months

4. How much of your garbage is packaging that you throw out immediately?

a.10% b. 18% c. 33%

5. The paper equivalent of how many trees is used each week to supply U.S. citizens with the Sunday newspaper?

a. 10,000 trees b. 50,000 trees c. 500,000 trees

6. What is the percentage of newspapers that are thrown away and not recycled?

a. 25% b. 48% c. 71%

7. Which of the following breaks down first in a landfill?

a. paper cup b. plastic cup c. aluminum can d. none of the above

8. Which country uses half as many resources as we do in the U.S. to produce a single manufactured item?

a. Japan b. Germany c. Sweden d. all of the above

Blessings and Praise

Text Study: The *Brachot*: *Mishnah Brachot 9:2*

Reading

A. Upon seeing shooting stars, earthquakes, lightning, thunder, and storms, one says:

ברוך אתה ד' אלקינו מלך העולם שכחו וגבורתו מלא עולם.

Baruch ... she'kocho oog'voortoh maleh olam.
Praise to You... Whose strength and power fill the entire world.

B. Upon seeing mountains, valleys, oceans, rivers, and wilderness, one says:

ברוך אתה ד' אלקינו מלך העולם עשה בראשית.

Baruch... oseh breisheet.
Praise to You... making Creation work.

C. Rabbi Yehudah taught: One who sees the Great Sea (the Mediterranean) very rarely says:

ברוך אתה ד' אלקינו מלך העולם שעשה את הים הגדול.

Baruch... she'asah et ha-yam ha-gadol.
Praise to You...Who made the Great Sea.

D. Over rain and over good news, one says:

ברוך אתה ד' אלקינו מלך העולם הטוב והמטיב.

Baruch... ha-tov v'ha-mateev.
Praise to You... Who is Good and does Goodness.

Blessings and Praise

Text Study: The *Brachot*: *Mishnah Brachot 9:2*

Participant Worksheet

1. What do the items in section A have in common? What do the items in section B have in common? How do the items in section A differ from those in section B?

2. Are the blessings in sections A and B appropriate for the items over which they are said? What do the blessings make us think about in each case? Why do you think the Rabbis chose these blessings for these items?

3. What items could you add to the lists in sections A and B?

4. Even though we already have a blessing for oceans, in section C, Rabbi Judah assigns the Great Sea its own *brachah*. Why do you think he does this? Are there any events or parts of nature that you believe deserve their own special blessing? Why?

5. Why do you think the blessing for rain is the same as the one for good news, and not the one for storms and thunder? This blessing would make a great deal of sense in a time of drought; should we still recite it in a time of flood?

6. Why do you think the *Mishnah* instructs someone who sees these things every day not to recite the blessing each time?

7. If we observed this tradition and recited blessings on a regular basis, how might it change the way we looked at the world around us?

8. Based on these blessings, the Rabbis seem to feel that when we look closely enough, every part of nature tells us something about God (examples: God's power, God's creative force). How might looking at nature in this way change the way we treat the natural world?

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Judaism And The Environment 101

Food for Thought
Resources on Judaism and the Environment

**"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
But if I am only for myself, then what am I?
And if not now, when?"**

- Rabbi Hillel, Mishneh Avot, first century CE

Like all peoples and faith communities, the Jewish people has had an evolving relationship with the physical world. Because we have traveled through time and place for more than thirty centuries, ours is a rich and diverse tradition.

Right now we're at any interesting moment in history. There is, on the one hand, a growing awareness of the need to manage our planet's resources more carefully, and an intuition that as well as acting as individuals and as citizens, we also have the resources of Judaism and the Jewish people to draw upon. On the other hand, our postmodern perspective is a different one than a biblical one, and in its contemporary form, the conversation between Judaism and environmentalism is young - all sorts of issues, open questions and problems abound.

Consider first:

- The beginnings of a Jewish environmental ethic emerge out of Bereishit, - Genesis - through the two creation stories, which set up models of our relationship as human beings with the rest of creation, and which obligate us to tend and to protect the world.
- Our agricultural roots, celebrated on holidays and in sacred texts, are intended to connect us to the land.
- The cycles of the Jewish year are grounded in the natural world and our connection to it
- Shabbat - stopping and resting on the Sabbath - teaches that there are higher values than production and consumption. Resting on Shabbat - one day in seven - lies at the heart of a healthy relationship with oneself, one's friends and one's family.
- The biblical concept of shmitta - having the land rest on its seventh year - provides an equivalent model of rest for the land itself.
- The biblical concept of peah - leaving the corner of the field unharvested for the poor to pick themselves - connects ecological issues with the need for people to live free of hunger, and with their basic needs met.
- Protecting G!d's creation is a theme throughout subsequent Jewish philosophy, literature, liturgy and law. Scholars and rabbis from Maimonides to Reb Nachman of Bratzlav and from Rav Kook to Abraham Joshua Heschel have taught and written about this relationship.
- Our liturgy is rich in natural imagery, from blessings that give us a framework for awareness and appreciation for the wonders and sanctity of creation to the image of the Torah itself as a

Sukkot & The Environment: Texts for Study

1. "You shall celebrate the festival of ingathering, at the end of the year, when you gather in your labors of the field." ***Exodus 23:16***

2. "You shall take the fruit of the goodly tree, palm branch, foliage of the leafy tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before your God for seven days." ***Leviticus 23:40***

3. "You shall live in sukkahs seven days; all citizens of Yisrael shall live in huts; in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God." ***Leviticus 23:42,43***

4. "Hang tapestries, nuts, almond, peaches, pomegranates, branches of grapes, vines, fine meal, wreaths of ears of corn" (on your Sukkah) ***Talmud Betzah 30b***

5. "Whoever is exempt from eating in the sukkah and does not go out from the sukkah, does not receive a reward for this mitzvah." ***Shulhan Arukh***

6. One tradition identifies the etrog, not the apple, as the fruit eaten by Eve and Adam in the garden of Eden. Only the etrog tree has wood and fruit that are good to taste. ***(Gen 3:6)***

7. "One generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever... What has been is that which will be, what has been done is that which will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun." ***Ecclesiastes 1:4,9***

8. "Spread over us Your tabernacle of peace." ***Siddur***

9. Isaiah's vision "You shall indeed go out in joy and be led forth in peace. Before you mountains and hills shall should aloud; and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the briar, a cypress shall arise; instead of a thorny nettle, a myrtle shall arise. These shall stand as a testimony to the Eternal, as an everlasting sign that shall not perish." ***Isaiah 55:12-13***

SHAKE AND REUSE: LULAV & ETROG

by Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster · October 16th, 2008

As a teacher of Judaism, I am often at a loss to explain one of the most beautiful and yet most pagan Jewish rituals: the celebration of Sukkot with the four species (arba minim) of the lulav and etrog.

Sukkot is both a harvest festival and a creation festival, and these two aspects come together in the moment of the procession around the synagogue with the bounty of the earth. It's a joyous moment befitting of Sukkot's title of *z'man simchateinu,* the time of our happiness.

We read in Vayrika (Leviticus) 23:40: "A*nd you shall take for yourselves on the first day [of Sukkot], the fruit of the beautiful tree, tightly bound branches of date palms, the branch of the braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days."* This has come to be understood as the four species used in the lulav: the fruit of the beautiful tree is a citron or etrog (a type of citrus fruit), together with palm leaves, three myrtle springs (the braided tree or hadass), and two willow branches (arvei nachal). During both the hallel service and the hoshanot processions, we wave the arba minim in celebration of God's goodness.

But it does look a little strange. Growing up in a suburb with very few Jews, I always wondered what the neighbours thought we were doing schlepping tree branches and citrus fruit across town.

Tips to reuse your lulav and etrog below...

The midrash (in Vayikra Rabbah 30: 8-14) ascribes all kinds of symbolic meaning to the arba minim. Perhaps the most well known is the one in which the various attributes of the species (such as whether they have taste or smell) correspond to different attributes of Jews (whether they study torah or perform good deeds). Other meanings include different aspects of God, parts of the body, the patriarchs, and interestingly, the matriarchs. The etrog (pri etz hadar) is Sarah, who God honored (hidrah) with old age. The lulav, with both its fruit and its prickles symbolizes Rebecca, who had both a righteous son and a wicked one. The myrtle, crowded with leaves, is Leah, crowded with many children, and the willow is Rachel: just as the willow wilts before the other three species, so Rachel died before her sister.

Another important aspect of the lulav and etrog is *hiddur mitzvah*, the concept of making the mitzvah beautiful, and many Jews seek out a lulav/etrog set that is fragrant, fresh, and strong. For me, **the beauty is often bittersweet, since my time with the lulav and etrog is so fleeting**. Unlike other Jewish ritual objects (like candlesticks or a shofar), the four species are living objects. I have to enjoy them before they wilt away.

But that doesn't mean you need to throw them out when Sukkot is over. This year, I was inspired by my colleague Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner (founder of the Foundation For Family Education, Inc, a source of interactive Judaic programming, as well as www.jewishfreeware.org), who shared the following list of ways to "recycle" the four species. With his list in mind, I can continue to bring the happiness of sukkot, and the diverse symbolism of the four species, into all corners of my Jewish life for the rest of the year.

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Rabbi Lerner wrote:

"I save the etrog and use the peel and/or zest to make a vodka or tequila liqueur used on Hanukkah as a historical connection between Sukkot and Hanukkah, either in recipes or as a beverage. With a "kosher l'pesah" potato vodka, I use etrog zest and peel to make a liqueur for the Seder. When the children were young, we saved their etrogim in a vase with their name and the year written on it in Hebrew.

Some people like to insert cloves and cinnamon bark into the etrog and use it as a solid "besammim" (spices) for Havdalah. Others use the etrog as it dries to keep drawers of clothing smelling fresh.

I use the lulav itself to brush hametz during bedikat hametz (checking for hametz before Passover) and then burn both together.

Another use is a decoration for the sukkah in following years, writing in Hebrew the name of the user(s) and the year of use.

I use the myrtle leaves included with other spices for besamim for Havdalah. The stems I cut into lengths and then cut a pen point as on a feather quill for writing small Jewish ritual texts such as mezuzot or tefillen. (I should add that I teach how it is done in theory, but I am not a sofer.)

I root the willows because they are not the "weeping willow" with drooping serrated leaves but a special species known as the "River Willow" or "arvei nahal" with a reddish-brown twig and long, smooth and narrow leaves. After they sprout roots in vases with water, I transplant them into containers with soil. Thereafter I distribute them as a Jewish "Johnny willow tree" to as many who would plant them. They can be raised into trees or large bushes as I once did in a congregation from which I had students cut fresh aravot for the lulav each day and then ultimately to tie hoshanot, for Hoshana Rabbah.

I use the box from the etrog for a tzedakah box, although as one person told me "you can always use another box." They are wonderful for storing Jewish collectibles, and if fragile, they also have today a foam rubber lining.

I used the flax in which the etrog once used to be wrapped to twist into wicks as is described in the Mishnah, and I show how well they work in Hanukkah workshops using my collection of clay oil lamps from the Bronze through Byzantine Israel. Now, because flax is rarely used, I have turned to use the foam rubber in the etrog box from which to cut and create decorations for our Sukkah.

The plastic bag for the lulav becomes a wonderful quiver for my arrows for use in my Lag BaOmer programs of archery and arrowheads, and even a Bible lesson on David's use of artillery."