

The IKEA Sucah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Once upon a time we were a rural, agricultural people. Our founding forebears left the corrupt big city world of Nimrod, Babylon and Ur and migrated to the Land of Canaan (via Kurdistan). There, for practical reasons, they went back to a nomadic tent life. Abraham's nephew Lot couldn't handle the camping life. He needed his gold-plated faucets, so he retired to Sodom. A few generations later, the migration down to Egypt brought the Israelite nomads back into contact with a sedentary, technologically advanced civilization. Eventually the lure of the wild proved too strong and they went back to camping for a generation. Yet we Jews are much more urban than rural, despite the valiant but futile attempts of the early Zionists to make us a nation of kibbutzniks.

You might wonder where this going. I suggest we humans constantly go through transitions—physical, intellectual, and cultural. Often these cycles are contradictory. When we spend too much time in the countryside we yearn for the city. Too long living in the city and we dream of the open, innocent world of the countryside (go and see Straw Dogs if you want to be cured of that). “Cars chasing bicycles” soon turns into “hounds chasing foxes” or “men with guns blasting little birds” for fun rather than necessity.

We go from knowing how to make a chair to buying one to paying an interior designer to find one in an antique store to commissioning an aristocratic craftsman to make one specially for us at an astonishing cost. And then we progress to IKEA and buy a kit we can assemble (or get an unemployed student to do it for us) before finally to taking up carpentry as a hobby in retirement or old age.

IKEA itself has gone through its own transformation from the brainchild of a Swedish Nazi to the darling of the Left-Wing anti-Israel intellectuals who claim to be free thinking but really just long to follow their own particular herd (and the Israeli middle classes). Hugo Boss now finally admits its Nazi past and has become the favored outfitter of those yeshiva bochorim from comfortable families eager to impress a possible shidduch with their sense of materialism and fashion. More exclusive than Marks and Spencer (Brooks Brothers) but not as excessively ostentatious as Armani or Zegna. I have even noticed that very successful Charedi entrepreneurs love flashing a Hermes belt buckle through their fashionably open long black coats or flicking their wrists to show the latest metal chunk of a timepiece made by Swiss former-Hitler-sympathizers. What is it, I wonder, about ex-Nazi companies like Mercedes, BMW, and Volkswagen that they have in the space of sixty years gone from the enemies of civilization to the very definition of its materialist soul? What can better illustrate the inevitable cycle of human civilization? And of course the positive side of being excessively methodical, systematic, and single-minded at whatever it is one chooses to do?

It is precisely this transition and change I notice at Sucot time. Not just

the arrival of autumn in the northern hemisphere and the touch and smell of nature's plants. We used to have booths all over the place during the summer season to give our shepherds and watchmen shelter from the heat. We quickly changed the thatch and, bingo, we had our sucah ready for the festival. We moved into cities and had to erect our own huts on our roofs or balconies in makeshift fashion and often under duress. As we became more settled and wealthier we could get our local carpenter to come and do it for us. Then we graduated to purposely built home extensions. Yet we still yearned for something authentic and went back to constructing our own from local lumber yards.

This where the IKEA approach comes back, collapsible kits of aluminum frames, waterproofed fabric sides with special rainproof covers for the North European climates. But as our families grew bigger, with more unemployed teenage yeshiva bochurim on vacation with nothing better to do than roll up their shirt sleeves, we delegated the mitzvah to them and simply turned up on the evening to eat, drink, and be merry. The real spirit of do-it-yourself has returned.

The beauty of our tradition is its infinite flexibility and adaptability. No matter the era, the prevailing civilization, the current political situation, we adapt. If the Muslim Brotherhood cuts off the supplies of palm branches for lulavim and sucah roofs from Egypt, we find them from African and Asian sources instead. If Turkey blocks the material for sucah construction, China is always happy to offer what turns out to be a cheaper option.

Here we are, a modern people, celebrating something nearly three thousand years old. We who can adapt finance, technology, medicine, and all the aspects of modernity to survive, to make life livable, profitable, and fun, are still yearning for a primitive past, the call of the wild, of simplicity. In fact it is just a handy reality check. What values matter more than others? That's why I love it. Pleasure with a touch of philosophy.