

Impermanence

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In discussing the festival of Sucot, the Talmud gives all the various possible explanations for the origin and purpose of a Sucot. Its final idea is that of impermanence. "Leave your permanent home, and live in a temporary home." In many ways, impermanence is in our genes. Our wandering forebears. Our movable Tabernacle. Exile. Return. Impermanence really resonates with me.

We humans are indeed transient. We live our lives in constant tension between permanence and impermanence. We can be snuffed out in a flash. We are specks on the timeline of life. We are driven by a desire for life and the struggle to avoid death. There are wars, persecution, political change, and upheaval. Illness, plagues, natural disasters. Life is a struggle. We struggle to work, to live, to love. As a result, many of us feel insecure. Depressed. Stressed.

We need certainties. To know where we stand. Where we live and where we work. What country we are citizens of. What party. What religion. What sect within a religion. We yearn for permanence. Resolution. To know how the world works and the reason for everything. We need to feel we belong. We need to feel comfortable, secure, loved, wanted, admired, respected. We pay fortunes to psychiatrists, therapists, gurus, coaches, and rabbis to give us the easy answers. And we take drugs, alcohol, and pills. Anything to help us cope and ease the pain. But there are very few certainties in life "except death and taxes" as Benjamin Franklin is supposed to have said.

Once we knew what our positions were in hierarchies, in states, classes, in religions, in nations. We lived in a world where these defined most of us. A few people in each generation were able to move up and rise. Most stayed put. In a world of constant conquest and change, we have always been at the mercy of forces beyond our control. But now, we seem to want to control everything, everyone, every space, every argument. We want to have everything. Money, power, freedom to do as we please. Not to be challenged or offended.

We have indeed advanced dramatically. Combating poverty and disease. The latest figure just published in the Wall Street Journal is that extreme poverty is now own to 10% (but thats still too much). Expanding our knowledge scientifically, technically, medically. Each one of these areas brings benefits. But also side effects, problems, uncertainty, and moral challenges. We are like rats on treadmills, running to stand still, moving but remaining the same organisms with exactly the same moral and personal challenges we have faced for millions of years.

In Western countries we have so much more than we used to. But that does not seem to bring much happiness or contentment. Look how angry and hypersensitive so many college students and activists have become, despite all the social welfare, safety nets, and preferences that never existed 70 years ago. Look how fractious identity politics has become. How aggressive the pressure groups. We have become neurotic when things don't happen just

the way we want them to or people disagree with us. Yet, for all that, I'd rather live in a world of uncertainty and choice than have dictators or ideological fanatics tell me what to do.

No system is perfect or permanent. Each has aspects that are positive. The one common feature of our present world is *Capitalism* (my invented word)—the need for capital expansion and growth to fund the basic social needs of the poorest and the weakest. But that in itself is a variable. China has a command economy. It can do things better and faster, precisely because it can trample on individual wishes. America, on the other hand, values individual liberties and freedoms. But such liberties cause conflict, fragmentation, delays, and compromises. Both suffer from corruption.

To adapt Orwell, all states cause harm. Some states cause much more harm than others. Despite Fukuyama's unfortunate title, *The End of History*, there is no end. It cannot end, because humans are constantly changing. There is no final, no perfect state. Only constant fluidity and cycles. Rises and falls. Situations that seem desperate one moment become successful and peaceful the next. War turns to peace and peace to war. My liberalism is predicated on hearing other views, examining other ideas, listening respectfully to other views. Grappling towards a resolution that respects individuals and societies, that encourage dynamism and self-reliance, yet treats its weakest with concern. But it is the liberalism of Isaiah Berlin that despises dogma and political correctness. I tell my friends—whether in Israel, America, or Europe—to remain ever alert, to be proactive and reactive, and, indeed, do good deeds. But not to despair when things don't go your way. There is no constant permanence!

I embrace impermanence because that has been my life. I know many who have had it far worse, far more tragic and unstable than I. But I have never had a permanent home, a permanent country, a permanent job. I have always been wandering in the desert and finding my shade where I can. I have always been aware of people who hate me for who I am and what I am. Even personal life has had its impermanence, its ups and downs, good moments and bad ones. I do not expect perfection, or resolution. Whether at home or in the outside world. I only know I have to try cope. I am fortunate to be a very happy fellow.

This impermanence, instability of systems, I suggest, is why the Torah gives us no ideal political or even social system, or a perfect example of how to run societies. Because there is no perfect solution. Different circumstances call for different responses. We cannot control the world or societies. All we can do is our best. Torah constantly reminds us of the need to behave, to think, to bring spiritual ideas to mind, to enrich our lives. While at the same time reminding us that we have the freedom and choice to make crucial decisions. Even if, as Moses predicted, many of us will get it wrong and disappear from our people to merge with others.

Sucot is the festival of impermanence. Then, throughout history, and now. How many will come and sit with us? How many will simply not be there? Sucot reminds us that impermanence can be good, to be embraced. Perhaps not all the time. No one wants an impermanent marriage or impermanent children. But impermanence can be good and necessary too, if it helps us appreciate what we

have and determine to preserve it.

In Manhattan having a Sucah in one's home or apartment block is almost impossible (though some succeed). Meanwhile, there is nowhere easier to have a Sucah, more available, more convenient and widespread than in Israel. That, too, is part of our impermanence. That we always have at the backs of our minds on our festivals that we ought to think of where we came from and might want to go back to. Pilgrim festivals, three times a year.

"The world runs according to its own rules," says the Talmud. We humans need our rules too. But if rules for human behavior have remained more or less constant, societies have always been unpredictable. Pendulums swing, and as Harold Wilson said, "A week in politics is a very long time." People and states rise and fall. But the Sucah has survived them all.