

Sucot and the World

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every Jewish festival has several different levels of significance. There are always personal, national, agricultural and universal themes.

Rituals, laws and customs exist to reinforce the fact that ideas are all very well but we need actions to bring about change within ourselves and the world at large. As individuals we are responsible for how we react to our environment and to other human beings. We are organisms that think and feel. That laugh and cry. That suffer and flourish. But we are not alone.

We live in families. That requires thinking about and responding to the needs and demands of others. Family units are important elements in human societies. The *mishpacha* is the core unit that provides love, support, protection, nurturing and training for life beyond. Not all families work or succeed. Some of us have to cope with single parents or without families. Or with unconventional families. Some families are dysfunctional. But in general, they work. Ideological attempts such as early collective communities and kibbutzim to dispense with the usual structures of the family failed. A return to the traditions we were used to, happened simply because of popular demand.

We also live in larger social communities – religious, professional or ideological. From early times, we have experimented with different types of communities. Let's call them tribes. Sometimes, these tribes exist within larger national or religious frameworks. Which might work when we are dealing with limited numbers. But as soon as the numbers grow, there is a tendency to fragment. Tribes can become deadly rivals. Religions fragment into denominations and sects. Societies break up into clubs and parties. Sometimes they get on. More often they compete, discriminate and conflict. Nations develop and grow with different languages and cultures. Some are so variegated, multi-cultural and multi-religious that they become dysfunctional. But clearly, nations have advantages as well as disadvantages.

In contrast internationalism and globalism seek to unite everyone and banish differences. Sometimes, this is commercial. Sometimes, ideological – as in Marxism or extreme socialism. Which then, in righteous indignation, impose their views – which also leads to conflict. Ideologies have tendencies toward dictatorships.

Some states and nations have proved more successful than others. Yet, as we look around us today, we see fragmentation, conflict, antagonism and friction. And major issues of our planet – climate, extinction and exploitation – posit huge challenges to mankind. Which is why it is so important to think about our own positions within societies. Do we care? What should we do? What can we do? Where are our loyalties?

As John Donne wrote “No man is an island.” No social, national or international group can survive in isolation. It must make sense to try to work together. In practice it seems all but impossible. We can't live in peace in one small part of the Middle East – let alone everywhere else. Even amongst ourselves, who we believe are the responsible ones, there is a disconnect between what we know is happening and care about and what we are willing to do about it. It is good to campaign for action to prevent global warming. But are we prepared to give up using jets, cars and eating meat? They all contribute to the problem.

People are selfish. But we can be expected to try to do something about it. We can examine our way of living and our priorities. And, for us, religion is one of the important lifestyle decisions we should be making. As are our loyalties and priorities.

We all sing songs of our lives. To borrow from Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook and Bruce Chatwin: The song of our souls, the song of our families, the song of our faith, the song of our people and the song of the world. Very few can sing them all. But we can decide which we will choose.

That is precisely what the festival of Sucot requires of us to think about.

We dwell, or eat, in temporary dwellings (Sucot). Historically, it is to remind us of what it was like living in temporary structures in the desert. On a personal level, it is a break from the norm and our comfort level, to appreciate the impermanence of life and how much we take our living conditions for granted.

We take a series of plants (the lulav, etrog, myrtle and willow leaves) and touch, smell and wave them to bring us into immediate contact with nature. To appreciate it and to cultivate it, to nurture it. In doing this we are reminded of our responsibility to provide healthy food for ourselves and others.

We also celebrate the Temple rites for rain and recognize how essential water is for human life.

Shouldn't we then think about how often we take actions that are counter-productive and dangerous and which harm our water and food. We destroy jungles. We spread toxins. We mix in unhealthy additives. We pollute the earth and seas. We dam rivers for energy that provide water supplies downstream. Our selfish actions destroy countless species on land and in the sea and air. We rarely think of, or even realize, how much damage we do.

Despite the paralysis that affects governments and corrupt politics, there are so many ways in which we, as individuals, can do something about these situations. Some are more effective than others. We have a responsibility to decide how and to what extent. To decide on our priorities. Whether to be generous or mean, to humans, animals and life on earth. To decide how much we give to family, community and the outside world.

And that is why religious occasions are so important. To remind us of our priorities. That is what a festival like Sucot demands of us. It is why we devote a week to experiencing different things. To remind us of the possibilities and responsibilities. That is the function of religion. To make our lifestyles more meaningful and creative.

But there is another issue. The complex, inscrutable and unknowable idea of God that underpins our tradition. The idea that there is an authority and power that overrides our own selfish concerns and lays down priorities.

The festival of Sucot is unique in the Bible. Not just for its importance to us a nation. Or its emphasis on agriculture – which Pesah and Shavuot (the other festivals) share. But because the Torah emphasizes the importance of joy on festive occasions and in general but doubly so on Sucot.

Perhaps this is because it comes right after days of penance and serious personal introspection. Perhaps it is because when we are happy, we are more inclined to appreciate life and make the most of it. Don't be sad. Be Happy. Do good.