

# Sucot and the World

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. We are individual organisms that think and feel. But we are not alone.

The family, the *Mishpacha*, is crucial and often emphasized in the Torah. It provides love, support, protection, nurturing, and training for life. Not all families work or succeed. Some of us have to cope with single parents or without families and many are dysfunctional and suffocating. As an idea, in general, it works. Ideological attempts such as early collective communities, kibbutzim, tried to dispense with the usual structures of the family but failed. A return to previous structures happened simply because of popular demand.

Beyond the family are tribes. Larger social communities, be they racial, religious, or ideological. They work when we are dealing with limited numbers. But as soon as the numbers grow, there is always a tendency to fragment. Tribes can become deadly rivals. Religions fragment into denominations and sects. Societies break up into clubs and parties and worse, political parties. More often than not they compete.

Some states and nations have proved more successful than others. Yet, everywhere, we see fragmentation, antagonism, and friction. Identity politics, ideological rivalries, all hamper and undermine civil society and I see no end to it. But there are larger, more all-embracing challenges such as the state of our planet, climate, extinction, and exploitation.

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. Yet we can't even live in peace in one small corner of the Middle East, let alone elsewhere. Amongst those who seem to care, there is a disconnect between what they say they believe and care about and what they are prepared to give up to help alleviate the problems. Hardly anyone in the rich world seems willing to give up any of their carbon loaded pleasures.

People are mostly selfish. All religions have been trying to do something about this but have signally failed. We are good at talking, but not so good at doing. Nevertheless, religion is one of the important lifestyle decisions we can choose. Yom Kipur that is now over until next year was specifically to examine our moral and social issues. Except that now it is over for another year, life has returned to normal.

That is precisely why the festival of Sucot follows on almost immediately, as a counterbalance. To try to achieve change through pleasure, not pain. We dwell or eat, in temporary dwellings. It's fun. Enjoyable. Historically, it reminds us of an historical past, living in temporary structures in the desert. Spiritually it emphasizes Divine protection. On a personal level, it is a break from the norms and our comfort levels, to

appreciate the impermanence of life and be aware of how much we take for granted.

We hold plants (the lulav, etrog, myrtle, and willow leaves) and touch, smell, and wave them to bring us into immediate contact with nature. They remind us of the importance of water. We also celebrate the Temple rites for rain and recognize how essential water is for human life and that we should take responsibility for these resources.

Shouldn't we then also think about how often we take actions that are counter-productive, dangerous? We destroy jungles, spread toxins, 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. Regardless of what damage others may do.

That is one of the tasks of religion ( even if so many religious people seem to ignore it). To remind us of our duties to the universe. That is what a festival like Sucot demands of us. It is why we devote a week to thinking about nature and rain.

The Sucot is also a symbol of peace. We say every day in our prayers *Ufross Sucat Shalom*, "please spread the tent of peace over all of us." To remind us that we are part of a larger universe. The seventy bulls sacrificed in the Temple over Sucot, were according to the Talmud, to represent the seventy nations of the world (all humanity as represented by the number of peoples mentioned in the Bible who came after the flood). This ceremony, now defunct, was asserting our sense of universality and concern for everyone on earth.

The festival of Sucot is important not just for us as a nation. Or for its emphasis on agriculture, which other festivals share. But because the Torah emphasizes joy on Sucot more than for any other festival. It comes right after days of penance, serious personal introspection, and self-examination to show that when we are happy and enjoying life, we may be more inclined to appreciate make the most of it. Don't be sad. Yom Kipur won't be back for another year. But in the meantime, enjoy life as much as you can. Be Happy. Do good.