

Succot 5774, 2013:

The Stars of Succot

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The laws pertaining to the construction of the succah are many and varied. Indeed, our Sages created an entire Talmudic tractate that analyzes every conceivable aspect of the succah's constitutive elements. Central to this discussion is the universally accepted *halacha* of the physical placement and environment of the succah: It must be outside, fully exposed to the elements, and ideally have an unblocked view of the sky. Thus, Rav Yosef Karo (1488-1575), the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, states in *Orech Chaim* 631:3: "The standard manner of placing the *schach* (top covering) upon the succah is to do so in such a way as to enable one to see the large stars through it..." Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan Hakohen *zatzal*, better known as the Chafetz Chaim (1838 - 1933), in his monumental work known as the *Mishnah Berurah*, states that the large stars in this statement refer to those that can be seen during the day prior to sunset. In addition, he notes that a number of latter day authorities ruled that even the nighttime stars need to be visible through the *schach*. The question, of course, is "why?" In other words, what subliminal and, possibly, sublime message were *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed memory) teaching us by mandating the visibility of the stars through the succah's roof-like covering?

On one level, perhaps, our Sages wanted us to be visibly in touch with Hashem's Creation via the stars that He fashioned, in order to sensitize us to the wonder and beauty

of His creation. *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) gave voice to this thought in his paean of praise to G-d's handiwork: "How magnificent are Your works Hashem, You made all of them in your supernal wisdom, the entire cosmos is filled with Your creations." (*Sefer Tehillim* 104:24) Thus, when we dwell in our succot, we are reminded at all times of G-d's glory, power, and majesty – simply by viewing the stars through the *schach*.

I believe, however, that *Chazal* wanted us to view the stars while sitting in our succot for an additional reason. Our Sages were acutely aware of the need to instill G-d-consciousness and awareness in each of us. Without a sense of G-d's direct presence and immanence in our lives, it is impossible to feel He is our *Yedid Nefesh* (the Beloved of our Soul), and our protector. After all, this is our request to Him in every Friday night *tefilah* (prayer): "And spread over us the succah of Your peace. Blessed are You Hashem, Who spreads the succah of peace upon us and upon all His people Israel and upon Jerusalem." Herein, G-d is the active agent who reaches out to us in an expression of His divine providence. This, I believe, is the feeling that our Sages wanted us to have when we see the stars in our succot.

In a very real sense, as well, *Chazal* wanted Succot to be a time of spiritual growth and actualization. This idea is physically manifested through the encircling walls of the succah below, and the cosmic symphony of the stars above. Succot, therefore, is a grand reiteration of our obligation to serve Hashem through joy from the depth of our souls. It is a reminder of the potential greatness that is inherent in the G-d - Man relationship. Along these lines, my rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), formulated the ideal manner of serving G-d:

The Torah commands us to serve G-d with joy (Ps. 100:2), with longing and yearning, out of enjoyment and happiness, unfettered pleasure and the soul's delight. When man does not see G-d and sense His presence at every turn; when he thinks of G-d only out of fear of punishment, with a cool intellect, without ecstasy, joy or enthusiasm; when his actions lack soul, inwardness, and vitality, then his religious life is flawed. If man is not always aware of G-d, without any interruption whatsoever - if he does not walk with G-d in all his ways and paths, if he does not sense G-d's touch on his shoulders and sweaty face in his hours of distress and loneliness, imparting a certain comfort and encouragement – then his service is incomplete. (*And From There You Shall Seek*, published in Hebrew, 1978, translated by Naomi Goldblum, 2008)

May it be G-d's will, and our heartfelt desire, that this Succot will be a time wherein we reconnect with Him as our true *Yedid Nefesh*. May it be a time when we will feel His divine presence encircling and protecting us. Moreover, may we experience the greatest and most profound joy and connection to Him when we see His stars through our succot.

V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

Chag Sameach!

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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