

Succot 5775, 2014:

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The laws pertaining to the construction of the succah are many and varied. Our Sages created an entire Talmudic tractate that analyzed every conceivable aspect of the succah's constitutive elements, namely, the walls and the roof-like covering (*schach*). Central to these discussions are the uncontested notions 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* 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 more recent authorities ruled that even the nighttime stars must be visible through the *schach*. The question is "why?" In other words, what subliminal, and possibly sublime, messages were *Chazal* (our Sages of Blessed memory) trying to teach us by mandating the visibility of the stars through the succah's roof-like covering?

On one level, perhaps, our Sages wanted us to view the stars in order to sensitize us to the wonder and beauty of G-d's creation. *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) gave voice to this thought in his paean of praise to Hashem'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 there is another reason why *Chazal* wanted us to view the stars while sitting in our succot. In my view, our Sages were acutely aware of the need to instill G-d-consciousness and awareness in each and every one of us. Without a sense of G-d's direct presence and immanence in our lives, it can be difficult to feel He is our *Yedid Nefesh* (the Beloved of our Soul) and our direct protector. Therefore, we ask 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." In this prayer, we beseech G-d to reach out to us in an expression of His divine providence. This, I believe, is the precise feeling 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 actualization. This idea is physically manifested through the encircling walls of the succah below, coupled with the cosmic symphony of the stars above. In sum, Succot enables us to serve Hashem through joy, and from the depth of our souls. Just like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Succot embodies the greatness that is inherent in our relationship with G-d.

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 desire, that this Succot will be a time when we reconnect to the Almighty as our true *Yedid Nefesh*. May it be a time when we feel His mystical presence surrounding and protecting us. Moreover, may this year be the year we experience profound awe and joy when we see the stars of Succot. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Chag Sameach!

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