

Get Your Head in the Clouds

The Timeless Message of the Sukkah

When accused of having our “head in the clouds,” we usually respond defensively. We naturally expect of each other and of ourselves to be attentive, aware and focused on our immediate surroundings at all times. Whether preoccupied with a particular task, engaged in a conversation or immersed in deep introspection, we are more productive and effective when we are mentally and emotionally present.

Yet according to Rebbi Eliezer, having our “head in the clouds” is precisely the mindset that we are to maintain while seeking to achieve optimal fulfillment of the mitzvah of *yeshivas sukkah*. The Torah, while instructing us to sit in a sukkah for seven days, uncharacteristically embellishes this directive by way of an explicit revelation of the underlying reason for this mitzvah. In Vayikra chapter 23, the Torah states:

בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת. לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

You shall dwell in temporary shelters for seven days. All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters. So your descendants will know that I had the children of Israel live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am Hashem your G-d.

On the surface, the Torah’s precise intent in this context does not seem even slightly ambiguous, nor is there



Rabbi Larry Rothwachs

Director of Professional Rabbinics, RIETS
Rabbi, Congregation Beth Aaron, Teaneck, NJ

any apparent need for commentary. Quite to the contrary, the Torah’s message seems abundantly clear: we sit in a sukkah in order that we should come to remember the sukkah. Quite simple. Surprisingly however, the rabbis of the Mishna debate the true meaning and consequence of this pasuk. The Talmud in *Maseches Sukkah* 11a, records the following braisa:

תָּנִיא כִּי בַסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲנִי כְבוֹד הוּא, דְּבַרֵּי רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אוֹמֵר סוּכּוֹת מִמַּשׁ עָשׂוּ לָהֶם.

It was taught in a braisa, “that I had the children of Israel live in temporary shelters,” these were the clouds of glory, so are the words of Rebbi Eliezer. Rebbi Akiva says, literal huts were made for them.

Rebbi Akiva is of the opinion that the Torah means exactly what it says: we sit in the sukkah to commemorate the huts that protected us from the sweltering heat and the harmful elements as we wandered aimlessly through the desert. Yet remarkably, Rebbi Eliezer offers a dramatically different perspective. Sitting in the sukkah represents something far more profound, even transcendent. According to his opinion, sitting in the sukkah serves to commemorate

the special protection that we received from the *Ananei Hakavod*, the Clouds of Glory, whose hovering presence provided unceasing divine protection throughout our sojourns in the desert.

This debate is neither abstract nor inconsequential, rather it is one that bears significant practical implications. Rebbi Eliezer and Rebbi Akiva are presenting us with two divergent views regarding the prescribed mindset and focus that one should strive to achieve while sitting in the sukkah.

The *Tur*, in his introduction to the laws of sukkah, adopts a definite position in this debate. In *Tur, Orach Chaim siman* 625, he writes:

וְהוֹסוּכּוֹת שֶׁאוֹמֵר הַכְּתוּב שֶׁהוֹשִׁיבֵנו בָּהֶם, הֵם עֲנֵי כְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁהִקִּיפָן בָּהֶם לְבַל יִכָּה בָּהֶם שֶׁרַב וְשֶׁמֶשׁ. וְדוּגְמָא לְזוּה צִיוּנוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת סוּכּוֹת, כְּדִי שֶׁנִּזְכָּר נִפְלְאוֹתָיו וְנִזְכָּרָתוֹ.

The sukkos regarding which the verse teaches they were given to dwell in, is a reference to the Clouds of Glory that surrounded them, protecting them from the heat and the sun. We are instructed to make sukkos as a reenactment of this experience, in order to remind us of His miracles and wonders.

That the *Tur* should even remark on such an issue, let alone assume

a particular position, is notably uncharacteristic. The *Tur* does not ordinarily offer opinion or insight regarding the reasons for mitzvot. Rather the *Tur* devotes his work to present a comprehensive overview of halacha; the “do’s and don’ts,” not the “whys.” Yet when introducing the mitzvah of sukkah, the *Tur* clearly departs from that protocol, examining the very reason for the mitzvah of *yeshivas sukkah*. The *Bach*, ad loc., who raises this concern, explains that the *Tur* assumes this mitzvah to be one of several exceptions to the aforementioned rule. The *Tur* specifically addresses the reason for this mitzvah because when it comes to this particular mitzvah, the prescribed mindset and recommended *kavanah* is an indispensable component of its complete fulfillment. The *Tur* intuitively understands this, argues the *Bach*, because the Torah itself, again uncharacteristically, goes “out of its way” to say “*l’ma’an yeidu dorosaychem*” — “in order that future generations should know.” It is on this basis that the *Tur* deviates from his customary style and reminds us how essential it is for one to achieve this focus and *kavana* while fulfilling the mitzvah.

While reflecting upon these two opinions of the tannaim, a striking question comes to the surface. According to Rebbi Akiva, it is quite understandable how sitting in a sukkah can effectively remind one of the experience of sitting in a sukkah. We need not be imaginative, nor creative in any way. Simply being in the moment and connecting with our surroundings should be more than sufficient to enable us to generate the requisite awareness for fulfilling the mitzvah. According to Rebbi Eliezer, on the other hand, it is quite perplexing to understand how sitting

in a sukkah is similar or reminiscent of the experience of being shielded by a protective cloud. The structure of a sukkah bears no apparent resemblance to a cloud and provides no natural outlet for such a mindset.

Rav Nissim Alpert z”l, *Limmudei Nisan*, Vayikra 23:42, concedes that there is, in fact, nothing that we can possibly construct on this earth that can adequately simulate the experience of being protected by a cloud. Clouds are practically invisible, forever elusive and, if anything, generate feelings of instability, exposure and vulnerability. Neither brick and mortar, nor fiberglass, canvas or wood, can serve to create a space that resembles the delicate features of a cloud. Perhaps, argues Rav Alpert, that is precisely the point. The notion that we were protected by the *Ananei Hakavod* in the desert is, at its core, synonymous with the concept of *hashgacha pratis* (divine intervention). In order to successfully connect with the memory of protection and shelter provided by Clouds of Glory, we must necessarily envision transcendence, rather than succumb to illusions of earthly spaces of shelter. On Sukkot we are called upon to remember that our every need, without exception, is provided for by the One above.

If this is indeed the case, then why are we instructed to leave our homes? Could we not (simply) engage in focused meditation and deep introspection, enabling us to achieve an inspired awareness of divine protection, all from the familiar comforts of our own homes? Explains Rav Alpert z”l, herein lies the dilemma. Ironically, it is precisely from within the familiar confines of our permanent structures where our

vision suddenly becomes clouded. Because our natural shelters and our homes create a façade of genuine safety and protection, our ability to perceive *hashgacha pratis* often becomes considerably obstructed. When surrounded by four walls and a roof, it is much easier to lose sight of our true and complete dependency upon G-d, and to instead succumb to the self-generated myths of independence and dominance.

Therefore, the Torah instructs us to temporarily extricate ourselves from our permanent structures, to break away from our comfortable and familiar settings, and take a seat directly beneath the stars. Rather than obstruct our view, the *schach* widens our perspective and sharpens our focus. The immediate instinctual feelings of exposure and defenselessness are soon replaced with feelings of security and protection. It is precisely within the temporary and frail structure of the sukkah that one can begin to achieve a true and genuine sense of divine shelter and safety.

It would seem that the message of the sukkah has never been more relevant than it is today; indeed, its message speaks directly to an early 21st-century generation bombarded with unprecedented challenges and temptations. Technology has enabled us to create virtual walls and structures, providing us with a continuous sense of safety and protection. Whether it is the security provided to us by digital firewalls or our grossly exaggerated confidence in unlimited access to knowledge and information, we are living in a time where many of us have ever-inflating illusions of omnipotence and immortality. Anyone with a

smartphone in his hand wields access, potential and power, all of which could only have been imagined a generation ago — if even that! One would naturally expect that such extraordinary scientific advancements would yield measurable improvements in the emotional stability and mental health of our generation. Having the world at our fingertips should be more than enough to bring calm and reassurance to those who would otherwise be anxious, and restore faith and stability to society's most emotionally compromised and spiritually vulnerable. Remarkably however, studies have shown the opposite to be true.¹ Recent advancements in technology seem to be triggering an unprecedented surge in anxiety and depression.² At first glance, such developments seem counterintuitive. Shouldn't our generation, blessed with unlimited access and control, feel greater safety and security than previous generations? Should we not be observing a marked decrease in anxiety and social withdrawal?

Once again, the mitzvos of the Torah, which are both immutable and eternally relevant, provide us with the necessary insight we would otherwise be lacking. Permanent structures, while providing us with protection from the elements, do not ultimately satisfy our innate need for feelings of purpose and transcendence. Access to information and the capacity to digitally monitor and control one's home and finances, while convenient

in many respects, are grossly inadequate substitutes for genuine feelings of *emunah* and *bitachon* (faith and reliance on G-d). Being connected to a worldwide network, while affording us the opportunity to instantaneously communicate with millions of people at the click of a button, often creates feelings of existential loneliness, rather than genuine comradery and connection. The Torah provides us with a solution, which is both simple and profound:

אמרה תורה כל שבעת הימים צא מדירת קבע
ושב בדירת עראי.

The Torah says that for seven days one should leave his permanent dwelling and live in a temporary dwelling.

Sukkah 2b

We must designate times in our life, during which we extricate ourselves, albeit temporarily, from the façades of safety and security, and seek shelter in the warm protective cover of the Clouds of Glory. These clouds can be accessed when, and only when, we walk away from our desktops, turn off our smartphones and disconnect from our familiar “reality,” which is truly virtual (at best). The imperative to seek shelter in the *Ananei Hakavod* is more essential today than ever before. The more technologically advanced our world becomes, the more urgent and indispensable the need for spiritual cultivation and emotional reinforcement. These engagements cannot be initiated by downloading and accessing a particular app. These processes are not the products of

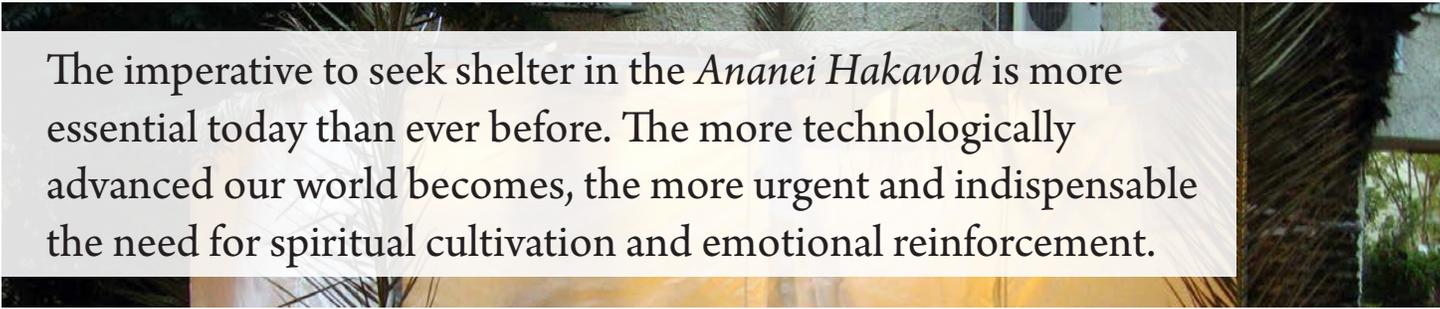
a carefully scripted digital code, nor facilitated through an online service. They occur in the very spaces and places where they have been successfully conducted for centuries. We become more spiritually attuned in houses of worship and study. We become more emotionally adapted and fortified through meaningful connections with friends and family. We become more spiritually stable and secure by strengthening our connection to G-d, through prayer and study. We offset feelings of worthlessness and helplessness by recognizing the constant *hashgacha pratis* that we have in our lives. We can mitigate and even overcome invading thoughts of worry and doubt by pulling ourselves away from our digital devices and strengthening our connection to our Father in heaven.

Herein lies the timeless message of the sukkah. Ultimately, the sukkah offers each and every one of us an opportunity for spiritual rejuvenation and growth. May we be inspired to truly escape our permanent dwellings and seek shelter in the secure and sustaining walls of the sukkah, thereby deepening and strengthening our connection to *Avinu shebashamayim*.

Endnotes

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/style/anxiety-is-the-new-depression-xanax.html>

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>



The imperative to seek shelter in the *Ananei Hakavod* is more essential today than ever before. The more technologically advanced our world becomes, the more urgent and indispensable the need for spiritual cultivation and emotional reinforcement.