

RE'EH

REACHING FOR THE STARS

The end of *parashas Re'eh* mentions the three pilgrimage festivals: Pesach, Shavuos and Sukkos. They are not described in the same detail as in *parashas Emor*; instead, the conclusion of *parashas Re'eh* summarizes the observance of the *shalosh regalim* in terms of their correspondence to the agricultural cycle and their relevance to specific *korbanos* (offerings) in the *Beis HaMikdash*. For example, Pesach is observed in *chodesh ha'aviv* – springtime planting season.¹ Next is the seven-week count to the holiday of Shavuos, which is also described in farming terminology: “From when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks.”²

The holiday of Sukkos is depicted in our *parasha* as a harvest festival: חג הסוכות תעשה לך שבעת ימים באספך מגרונך ומיקבך (you shall make the festival of Sukkos for a seven-day period, when you

¹ *Devarim* 16:1.

² *Devarim* 16:9.

gather in from your threshing floor and from your wine press).³ The Torah places emphasis on the joy of this holiday, as it corresponds to gathering in the produce of the fields: **כִּי יִבְרַכְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ** (because Hashem has blessed you in all your crops and in all your handiwork and you will be completely joyous).⁴ The Sukkos celebration was the yearly opportunity to recognize that despite physical efforts and toil, it was still Hashem who “blessed you in all your crops” and provided for your physical needs.

Interestingly, the central *mitzvah* of the holiday – living in a *sukkah* – is not mentioned explicitly in this passage. Rashi, however, finds an inference to the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* through a close reading of the *pesukim*. The phrase mentioned above: **בְּאֶסְפָּךְ מִגֵּרְנֶךָ** – underscores that Sukkos was celebrated in the season of the **אֶסִיפָה** – the ingathering of crops. Rashi, however, offers an additional interpretation by translating **בְּאֶסְפָּךְ מִגֵּרְנֶךָ** as “with the ‘gatherings’ from your threshing floor and from your wine press.” Rashi continues that “this teaches us that we cover the *sukkah* with waste of the threshing floor and the wine press,” alluding to the *halachah* that *schach* (*sukkah* roof/covering) must be something that originally grew from the ground and, therefore, is not susceptible to *tum'ah* (spiritual impurity).⁵

There are many detailed laws regarding the *mitzvah* of *sukkah*, several of which focus specifically on parameters for *schach*. The *mishnah* states, **הַמְעוּבָה כְּמִין בַּיִת אִף עַל פִּי שְׂאִין הַכּוֹכָבִים נִרְאִין מִתּוֹכָהּ כְּשֶׁרָה** (A *sukkah* that [its *schach*] is dense like [the roof of] a house, even though the stars are not visible through it, it is valid).⁶ The *gemara*

³ *Devarim* 16:13.

⁴ *Devarim* 16:15.

⁵ See Rashi on 16:13 and *Sukkah* 12a, *Rosh Hashanah* 13a.

⁶ *Mishnah Sukkah* 2:2.

presents the debate between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel on this point. אין כוכבי חמה נראים מתוכה בית שמאי פוסלין ובית הלל מכשירין ([when the] stars of the sun are not visible from inside [the *sukkah*]), Beis Shammai disqualifies and Beis Hillel permits).⁷ Rabbi Chaim Ezra Cohen explains that by specifying כוכבי חמה, our Sages make a distinction between two kinds of stars – *kochevei laylah* (stars of the night) and *kochevei chamah* (stars of the sun). If *kochevei laylah* are not visible through the *schach*, the *sukkah* is still valid. But if *kochevei chamah* are not visible through the *schach*, Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel disagree regarding the *sukkah*'s status.⁸

It is a common practice to construct one's *sukkah* in such a way that one can view the stars through the *schach*. While technically speaking, an opaque covering of *schach* constructed with the proper material is kosher, nevertheless, most rabbinic authorities assert that such a situation is only acceptable *bedi'aved* (is not ideal). If we always aim to construct the ideal *schach* (through which one may see the stars), then what can we learn from this *halachic* discussion in the *gemara*? What is the deeper meaning behind this idea of observing the stars through the *schach*? What do *kochevei laylah* (stars of the night) and *kochevei chamah* (stars of the sun) represent on a symbolic level? Most importantly, what lessons do we glean from this passage? The holiday of Sukkos immediately follows the Ten Days of Repentance; in what way is the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* an appropriate follow-up to the Days of Awe?

Stellar Potential

According to many commentators, we find a much deeper message behind this seemingly simple legal debate over whether

⁷ *Sukkah* 22b.

⁸ *Talei Chaim*, pp. 247-251.

one must construct his *schach* so that stars are visible. In order to uncover this message, we need to analyze the symbolism more closely. Rabbi Avraham Schorr explains that the term כוכב (star) may be interpreted as a compound of parts: כ"ו and כ"ב.⁹ The numerical value of כ"ו is 26, which is equivalent to one of Hashem's names, and the numerical value of כ"ב is 22, the number of letters in the *alef-beis* with which the Torah was written. Therefore, a star represents the holiness of Hashem and knowledge of Torah.

Rabbi Schorr explains further that the word כוכב has a third aspect to it. *Bnei Yisrael* are referred to as the עם סגולה (the treasured nation).¹⁰ The word סגולה shares the same root as the סגול, the vowel composed of a trio of dots. The Jewish nation is the עם סגולה, the third partner that completes the סגול: Hashem, Torah and the Jewish people.¹¹ With this concept, we may suggest a more profound understanding of the key phrase in our *mishnah*: נראים מתוכה (visible through it).¹² The plain reading of the text means one's ability to view מתוכה – **from inside the *sukkah***. The deeper meaning, however, is that one must be able to see the stars מתוכה – **within himself**.

The obvious identifying quality of stars is their capacity to produce light; from a Jewish perspective, the physical property of light represents holiness. If so, then the *mishnah* may be alluding to the idea that a Jew must recognize his own inner light and innate holiness. He is eternally connected to Hashem and His Torah. The *Zohar* refers to the *sukkah* as the “shade of faith”.¹³ The ability to

⁹ *HaLeKach VeHaLibuv* 5761, p. 12.

¹⁰ See *Shemos* 19:5.

¹¹ See below, *parashas Ha'azinu*, p. 234 (and note 50).

¹² *Mishnah Sukkah* 2:2.

¹³ *Zohar, Vayikra* 103, as referenced by Rabbi Pinchos Roberts, *Through the Prism of Torah*, pp. 198.

“see the stars” is our *emunah* that we are bound to our Creator and His Torah.

To the naked eye, a star appears to be a tiny speck of light. In reality, however, a star is a vast fiery mass; it only appears small because of its great distance from the Earth. Similarly, each Jew was created in Hashem’s image and shines with great holiness.¹⁴ Despite this reality, people often underestimate the greatness of others. Rabbi Schorr explains that this misconception is especially risky when we consider teachers of young children. These teachers may appear “small” or insignificant because they have the simple job of teaching their students basics like *alef beis*. In reality, though, the Jewish future is in their hands. As the verse in Daniel states: **ועד מצדיקי הרבים ככוכבים לעולם ועד** (and those who teach righteousness to the masses [will shine] like stars forever and ever).¹⁵ Our Sages elaborate that the term **מצדיקי הרבים** applies to the teachers of young children, since they are the ones who perpetuate righteousness throughout the generations.¹⁶

We not only tend to underestimate the greatness of others, we also underestimate the greatness within ourselves. The requirement of **מתוכה נראים הכוכבים** underscores the imperative of each person to recognize his own light – his spiritual potential and the innate purity of his soul. This positive self-awareness is not equated with haughtiness, which is repulsive to God. On the contrary, since our inherent greatness is a result of our Divine connection, acknowledging that worth validates Hashem’s glory. Therefore, when one underestimates himself and sees himself as very small, in truth he is belittling Hashem, in whose image he was created. This is why it is so dangerous to berate oneself: when

¹⁴ See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Bamidbar*.

¹⁵ *Daniel* 12:3.

¹⁶ *Bava Basra* 8b.

someone misjudges his own value and fundamental spirituality, he casts a dark shadow over his world.

The deepest darkness is created by what Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus calls “thoughts of smallness”.¹⁷ Few feelings are as destructive as feelings of ineptness and worthlessness. We must remember our own inherent light and our Source: נר ה' נשמת אדם – a person’s soul is the light of Hashem. Our inner core is great and sacred, which is symbolized by the physical property of light.

Stargazing

The star symbolism clarifies the concept of personal spiritual potential. A star generates light, which represents holiness; stars are really much greater than they appear. This metaphor uncovers a deeper message behind the ruling regarding seeing stars of the night. However, the *gemara* alluded to an additional type of star: אין כוכבי חמה נראים מתוכה בית שמאי פוסלין ובית הלל מכשירין ([when the] stars of the sun are not visible from inside [the *sukkah*], Beis Shammai disqualifies and Beis Hillel permits).¹⁸ What exactly are “the stars of the sun” and how are they distinguished from the stars of the night? Rashi and Rambam disagree on the definition of the term *kochevei chamah*. According to Rashi, “stars of the sun” are not stars at all. Rather, our Sages used the phrase “stars of the sun” to describe the rays of sunlight that stream through the cracks in the *schach*. This symbolism will be discussed later in this chapter.

The Rambam argues, though, that both phrases *kochevei laylah* and *kochevei chamah* mean “stars” in the literal sense; the only difference between them is the timing of their appearance in the

¹⁷ *Sichos of Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus*, p. 166.

¹⁸ *Sukkah* 22b.

sky.¹⁹ The “stars of the night” are smaller and only visible when the sky is dark. *Kochevei chamah*, by contrast, refer to larger stars that appear earlier in the evening at sunset. In light of the Rambam’s opinion, we may reiterate the question: What is the deeper significance of the *kochevei chamah* compelling our Sages to differentiate between them? How does this meaning relate to the function of the *schach* and the *sukkah* in general?

According to the Rambam, the core of the matter is the ability to see through the *schach* and look above. Hashem created a physical world in which His presence is veiled behind the mask of nature. Godliness is hidden within the limitations of materialism. Nevertheless, a person can never separate this world from its Creator.²⁰ How then can we find God in this material world? Rabbi Cohen answers that we can do so by seeing the stars through the *schach*. Catching a glimpse of the stars from within the *sukkah* symbolizes catching sight of the Higher Power from within our physical constraints. Human minds are limited and often unable to “see the smaller stars of the night” – that is, to perceive God’s involvement in every detail of life. At a minimum, though (and certainly according to Beis Shammai), it is imperative to see the larger stars (the *kochevei chamah*) – the bigger picture that God is running the world.

Essentially, visibility of stars (which generates a sense of getting a glimpse of God) is what fuels our fundamental faith. This kind of *emunah* was founded by Avraham Avinu, who the Torah calls אברהם העברי (lit. Avraham the Hebrew). The *midrash* describes him observing nature and contemplating its functions. He sought out a unifying system, and as a result discovered Hashem. העברי shares the same word root עבר (crossed over). Avraham Avinu is

¹⁹ *Hilchos Sukkah* 5:21.

²⁰ *Talelei Chaim* pp. 247-251.

“the one who crossed over” from idol worship to monotheism. He looked “outside the box” – passing above and beyond the physical limitations of our world.²¹

But how is this notion of “getting a glimpse of God” specifically relevant to looking at stars through the *schach*? Hashem’s Omniscience is too great to be contained within a material vessel. Therefore, Hashem constricted His Presence through a mystical concept labeled as *tzimtzum*, in order to fashion a physical world in which we can exist.²² The *sukkah* represents this dwelling place for humankind, explains Rabbi Cohen. The roof of this dwelling is the *schach*, which thereby symbolizes the boundary between the heavenly and earthly spheres of reality. It is not surprising, therefore, that an opaque *schach* is invalid, because the obscurity signifies a closed border between physical and spiritual entities. If the stars are not visible through the *schach*, meaning that we are unable to recognize the Creator of the world, then we are disconnected from the upper worlds and any spiritual existence.

If the *sukkah* represents the human dwelling place, then why do our Sages compare only a “thick-*schach sukka*” to a house? Rabbi Cohen underscores that it is precisely the nature of the *schach* that determines whether a dwelling is a house or a *sukkah*. A house is built to last, designed to protect its inhabitants by being capable of withstanding the elements. However, a Jew knows that this physical world is only a preparation for the World to Come.²³ The Jew seeks shelter in the *sukkah* – a temporary, fragile hut – thereby showing that he trusts in Hashem’s protection. In seeing the stars, his vision of the heavens expands; this enables him to “sit in the shade of faith,” by keeping him connected to the upper world of spirituality.

²¹ See *Bereishis Rabbah* 42:13.

²² See above, *parashas Devarim*.

²³ See *Pirkei Avos* 4:16.

Ceding the Ceiling

This fundamental message is not only relevant to Sukkos, but it is also important all year round. A person's home is more than his habitat. As Rabbi Cohen explains, one's home is an expression of his life's conduct and personal identity. A thick *schach* symbolizes a barrier between one's physicality and one's spirituality. When a person buries himself under the mundane material details of life, metaphorically speaking, he is putting a dense covering above his head. When one cannot get a glimpse of the stars, he lives an uninspired existence in which there is severe disconnect between his body and soul.

We cannot detach ourselves under a solid ceiling and blind ourselves from Godly light. This message is particularly pertinent for the period of Sukkos, which follows directly after the high holidays. Yom Kippur in particular is a thoroughly spiritual day; we refrain from the usual physical activities that sustain us and immerse ourselves in devoutful prayer. We emerge from the Day of Atonement feeling more spiritually aware and connected to Hashem. But then what happens after the day is over? We must return to our daily physical lives. The only way to maintain the inspiration of Yom Kippur is to be able to see the stars. Viewing the stars from inside our homes, through our daily conduct, means we have expanded our consciousness and carried this heightened spiritual awareness into our physical lives.

Preserving inspiration determines our degree of spiritual success throughout the year. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander underscores that all human achievement, especially spiritual achievement, is a result of the power of motivation.²⁴ One's goals can only be reached when one is fueled by fiery ambition. This idea implies

²⁴ *Sifsei Chaim*, pp. 87-88. See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Korach*.

that accomplishments are not dictated by natural talent or learned skills, but rather by the sheer desire to accomplish them. This notion is so strong that according to Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, failure is not the sign of lack of ability, but lack of ambition and desire.²⁵ Furthermore, one's expressed determination to attain a higher spiritual level and his concentrated effort to reach this goal indicates that, to some degree, he has **already reached that level!** Spiritual perseverance and enthusiasm indicate a strong connection with the goal.

Why is having spiritual ambition such a critical ingredient of a Jewish life? Growth-orientation is the defining quality of a Jew. Rabbi Yissocher Frand underscores that Jewish life is characterized by the steady struggle to reach new spiritual heights.²⁶ We may learn about this attribute from the following verse: "Noach, the man of the earth, debased himself."²⁷ The *midrash* argues that Moshe Rabbeinu is more beloved to Hashem than Noach based on the following proof. Noach is called 'man of the earth' after he is initially introduced by the Torah as 'a righteous man'. Moshe Rabbeinu, by contrast is called 'an Egyptian man' and later described as 'a man of God'.²⁸ Rabbi Reuvain Fine clarifies the distinction between these two righteous men.²⁹ Moshe Rabbeinu's name change indicated an upgrade (from 'Egyptian man' to 'man of God'), while Noach's name change indicated stagnancy. A person is not created to stay in one place; rather, a person's essence is to always move and progress. This is why the Torah's first description of Noach as **איש צדיק תמים בדורותיו** (a righteous

²⁵ *Michtav MeEliyahu* pp. 206-207.

²⁶ *Listen to Your Messages*, p. 24.

²⁷ *Bereishis* 9:20.

²⁸ *Bereishis Rabbah* 37:3.

²⁹ *Bein HaMishpesayim Bereishis*, p. 28.

man, perfect in his generation) may be interpreted as criticism.³⁰ When is it acceptable to criticize a *tzaddik*? When he doesn't try to change or noticeably improve himself.

If a perfectly righteous person is rebuked for being stationary, it serves as a humbling reminder to us to be constantly on the move, in a religious sense. In a similar vein, the *midrash* explains that the term *vayeishev* (lit. and he sat) has ominous connotations. Sitting still (a lack of movement) is dangerous and signals disaster.³¹ When we build *schach* that is very thick and fail to be inspired by the stars above, it means we have deteriorated to a state of apathy in our *avodas Hashem*. This dangerous apathetic attitude is described in the verse as follows: **שְׁלוֹם יִהְיֶה לִי כִּי בְשֵׁרִירוֹת לִיבִי אֶלֶךְ** – loosely translated, “I will be okay and I do whatever I want.”³² The Chazon Ish labeled a person with this philosophy a “*beinoni b'shittah*” – intentionally mediocre. The Saba of Kelm once instructed his students: Don't live in a “simple” manner, or else you will remain “simple” all your lives.³³ We become only what we strive to be. In all of our *avodas Hashem* – *tefillah*, *chessed*, Torah learning – it is our obligation to always endeavor to do more and be better. We need to look to the stars, always seeking personal improvement.

The fundamental problem with spiritual inertia is the risk of never fulfilling one's spiritual purpose in the world. Although this purpose is not openly revealed to us, Hashem created every single person with a unique mission he is meant to accomplish during his lifetime. Furthermore, He equipped us with the inborn abilities and the orchestrated circumstances that are conducive to empowering us to accomplish our missions. All of our life's conditions,

³⁰ See Rashi on *Bereishis* 6:9.

³¹ *Listen to Your Messages*, p. 24.

³² *Devarim* 29:18.

³³ *Bein HaMishpesayim Bereishis*, p. 24.

both positive and negative, were Divinely manipulated to encourage our personal refinement. Fortified with both the necessary tools and ideal environment to achieve our spiritual mission, our required participation is simply to have the desire to grow. Since we can never be certain of the precise task we are assigned, we must continue reaching for higher goals, always striving to achieve our maximum spiritual potential.

Going Above and Beyond

Spiritual inertia is rooted in contentment with status quo. The Slonimer Rebbe explains that even if one prays regularly, keeps kosher, and does *chessed* – he still may never complete his designated duty. Our fundamental human mission is expressed in the first Divine words to the first Jew: לך לך (go for yourself)! When Avraham (העברי – the one who crossed over) looked beyond the *schach*, surpassing the material world and moving into the realm of the stars, Hashem revealed to him that spiritual advancement is the Jewish paradigm for all time. Go! Move! לך לך מארצך – Go beyond the boundaries of the physical and seek out the Divine mission for which your soul was created.³⁴

All our forefathers exercised spiritual goal-setting; this is what the Torah attests to when Hashem repeats their names when speaking to them. In Yaakov Avinu's dream, angels ascended and descended a ladder, thereby seeing both heavenly and earthly images of Yaakov Avinu. The heavenly vision represented Yaakov Avinu's awe-inspiring spiritual potential, while the earthly image symbolized his present spiritual state. The angels recognized that his image above and image below matched, thus Hashem called

³⁴ *Nesivos Shalom on Parashas Lech Lecha*, p. 62.

out to him, “Yaakov, Yaakov”. We, too, each have a double image.³⁵ When we look in the mirror, we see the reflection of our present state. When we gaze out at the stars, we get a glimpse of Hashem’s vision of who we possibly can and should become. Our mission is to be driven to progress and bring these dual images into alignment.

Both the desire and the potential to advance are hard-wired into human spiritual genetics. Even angels, who we might assume enjoy the holiest spiritual existence, don’t possess this unique ability to change and improve.³⁶ A novel interpretation of the following verse demonstrates this contrast between humans and angels: ונתתי לך מהלכים בין העומדים האלה (I have given you [the ability to be] walkers among those that stand).³⁷ Angels are ‘those that stand,’ because they never progress. Similarly, Noach the perfect *tzaddik* was nevertheless rebuked for remaining spiritually static and not reaching higher.

The purpose of mankind is to grow and develop continually, as is illustrated by the following *midrash*. When Hashem asked the first human to name himself, the human called himself Adam. True, this name was chosen because the first human was created from the *adamah* – from the earth – but this name also reflects an inner essence. Earth facilitates the growth of vegetation. Similarly, human beings are “fertile soil” for maturity and development.³⁸

One may ask: if Hashem created us with a natural drive to progress, then why is change so difficult? So often we find ourselves stuck in the same behavior patterns – repeating the

³⁵ Rabbi Yissocher Frand, *An Offer You Can't Refuse*, p. 68.

³⁶ *Toras Emes* p. 166; see also *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Korach*.

³⁷ *Zechariah* 3:7; interpretation by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Eiger in *Toras Emes*.

³⁸ *Listen to Your Messages*, p. 24.

same actions – over the course of years. People are often so pre-occupied with maintaining their lives that they forget how to live. The power of habit hypnotizes us into accepting the status quo. Rav Shlomo Wolbe likens today's human conduct to moving like sheep in a herd; our prayers have become lip service and our *mitzvos* have become habitual and rote. How have our actions become so mindless? Why have we lost sight of the exalted, sacred potential of humankind?³⁹

This lack of awareness that leads to spiritual apathy is utterly tragic in Hashem's eyes. Yeshayahu HaNavi prophetically describes the pattern:

For You have abandoned your people, the house of Yaakov because they were filled with [sorcery] of the East and divinations like the Plishtim; and they contented themselves with the children of foreigners. Its land became filled with silver and gold with no end to its treasures ... Its land became full of false gods; they bow to their own handiwork, to what their fingers made.⁴⁰

Sadly, these verses paint a vivid picture of modern culture. We accept our spiritual mediocrity because we permit our behavior to be dictated by superficial foreign values. Fashionable notions dominate our mentality. Our generation enjoys unprecedented prosperity – silver and gold – which entices us to be completely immersed in materialism.⁴¹

Even if we are not personally wealthy, our surrounding culture predisposes us to lead a shallow existence. We regularly relinquish the tasks of our minds and our hearts to electronic devices – that is, as Rav Wolbe notes, when we see a beautiful view, we snap a picture. When we hear a beautiful song, we take a

³⁹ *Alei Shur*, p. 67.

⁴⁰ *Yeshayahu* 2:6-8.

⁴¹ *Alei Shur*, p. 67.

recording.⁴² Do we even know how to appreciate or enjoy these simple delights of the senses? To a degree, modern technology has stripped us of consciousness. With the constant beeping of our phones, we live a distracted existence, **rarely fully present in any experience**. Our mental and emotional skills lie dormant from lack of use. As a result, we are deaf to the cry of the soul. We need to listen to that inner voice that says: Grow! Change! Walk! Move! For this reason, we must see the light of the stars through the *schach*. As the prophet states: 'בית יעקב לכו ונלכה באור ה' (house of Yaakov, let us **walk** by the **light** of Hashem!)⁴³ May Hashem's light inspire us!

If we blind ourselves to Hashem's light with a solid ceiling above our heads, our souls suffocate from a confined existence. Only when we seize that higher vision, can we can move and grow.

Stars of the Sun

Now let us analyze the opposite position regarding the definition of the term *kochevei chamah*. As noted above, according to Rashi, "stars of the sun" does not refer to stars, but rather to rays of sunlight. Applying this translation to our Sages' statement renders an entirely different understanding of our *mishnah* altogether. מתוכה נראים מותוכה אין כוכבי חמה now translates as, "not being able to see sunbeams streaming through the *schach*."⁴⁴

Rabbi Cohen expounds on Rashi's opinion, explaining that rays of light represent Hashem's influence filtering into the physical world. Shadows are darkness; shade from the *schach*

⁴² *ibid*.

⁴³ *Yeshayahu* 2:5.

⁴⁴ *Talelei Chaim* pp. 247-251.

represents the concealing of Hashem's holiness, which is a necessary component of *tzimtzum* as described above. Therefore, Rashi's opinion teaches us that *schach* cannot be so thick that it prevents sunlight from entering into the *sukkah*. We must make room for Hashem's light to affect our practical lives.

At first glance, it seems that Rashi and the Rambam support completely opposing positions. The Rambam argues that we must look to the light **outside** the *sukkah*, while Rashi holds that we must see the light enter **inside** the *sukkah*. On a deeper level, however, these ideas actually represent two sides of the same coin. In both readings, the *schach* represents the demarcation between our physical world and Hashem's spiritual realm. This border must be penetrable – transparent from **below** according to the Rambam and transparent from **above** according to Rashi. A glimpse of light must penetrate through the *schach*, as alluded to in the verse: “Behold [my beloved] is standing behind our wall, observing through the windows, peering through the lattices.”⁴⁵ Rabbi Cohen explains that the only difference between Rashi and the Rambam's opinion is who is peeking at whom!

In Rashi's opinion, proper *schach* allows sunlight in and makes room for Hashem to shine his light into our lives. It is important to note, however, that just as too much sunlight renders the *schach* unfit, so too does excessive religious enthusiasm present a risk. A well-designed *schach* admits sunlight **in measured form**; this halachic detail metaphorically represents the necessity to regulate our excitement in spiritual pursuits.

On the one hand, we cannot have an opaque *schach* and remain completely numb to religious fervor. However, we must properly channel our passion for *avodas Hashem* into realistic terms.

⁴⁵ *Shir Hashirim* 2:9.

In this way, Rashi's opinion presents a perfect balance together with that of the Rambam. True, we need to look out and be inspired by the stars above, but to do so we need to allow Hashem's light to shine down in practical proportions.

Spiritual motivation is only beneficial when it translates into practical action. If our inspiration cannot be applied to physical reality – if sunlight doesn't infiltrate the *sukkah* – then plans for growth remain completely theoretical. However, the equally present danger of a thick-roofed *sukkah* is detaching our dreams from reality. When we make grand plans for spiritual growth without channeling them into a practical implementation strategy, we essentially turn the *sukkah* into an impenetrable house. Without the light filtering in, we sit in darkness and despair of ever achieving our grand spiritual goals. To make authentic strides toward our soul's purpose, we must balance our deeds and our dreams, the body and the soul, and our plans and our visions.

How can we transform our dreams into reality? As discussed earlier, setting our sights on lofty goals fuels our ambition to grow and change. But what element allows the light to flow into our material lives? Rav Wolbe sums it up in one word: *ratzon* – will-power. *Ratzon* is the power that fuels our actions.⁴⁶ When there is a will, there is a way! Our rabbis teach us that there is nothing that stands in the way of human resolute intention. If a person is determined to bring Godliness into his life, he will certainly succeed. *Ratzon* is not to be confused with fleeting whims; rather it is a focused, single-minded perseverance. If one earnestly desires to actualize his post-Yom Kippur aspirations, his *ratzon* prevents him from being deterred by obstacles, and his sincerity arouses heavenly assistance.

⁴⁶ *Alei Shur*, p. 120.

It is not our inborn talents and abilities that make us great, but rather our actions toward realizing our desire for change and growth. Rabbi Y. Y. Eliezer Meizlish relates the following powerful story that illustrates this point.⁴⁷ Rav Chaim Shmuelvitz ז"ל once went to visit his uncle Rav Avraham Yafen ז"ל in the Grodna *yeshivah*. At that time, Rav Chaim felt compelled to inquire about the quality of the different students in the *yeshivah*. Rav Avraham complied by surveying the *beis midrash* and differentiating pupils by specific attributes. This one is the deepest thinker, this one is the most studious, this one is the most devout, this one is the most diligent, and so on. Rav Chaim nodded his head, then asked his uncle bluntly, “But who is the **most outstanding student** in the entire *yeshivah*?” Rav Avraham then pointed for the first time to a quiet boy sitting in the corner. “This one. This is the very best student in the *yeshivah*.”

Rav Chaim was astounded. How could Rav Avraham consider this student so exceptional, and yet not acknowledge him as excelling in any of those important qualities? “Correct,” replied Rav Avraham, “this student’s outstanding attribute is different from all the others we discussed. This boy is the *mevakeish* of the *yeshivah*. He is a seeker. And this is the ideal character trait.”

We must always be seeking and striving to elevate ourselves in Torah and *mitzvos*. This pupil was never content with the level he had achieved; he was always *mevakeish* to go further and do more. This student continued for many years to search out Hashem, to toil in Torah, and he became none other than the Steipler Gaon, ז"ל.

Every single one of us needs to be a spiritual seeker. We can never say: *Oh, I could never be on that level! I'm just not cut out for it.*

⁴⁷ *Sichos B'Avodas Hashem*, p. 157.

It is not our natural talents or life circumstances that determine our spiritual achievements. If we lift our eyes, we can catch a glimpse at our heavenly image and compare it to the image in the mirror. Can we be like that boy sitting in the corner of the *beis midrash* who constantly strives to do better? Do we have a sufficiently lofty vision of ourselves that inspires us to progress? Furthermore, do we have the *ratzon* (the determination) to recalibrate religious fervor into consistent behavior that is both practical and spiritual at the same time?

As illustrated by a seemingly mundane halachic debate, we learn a fundamental lesson from the mystical power of the *mitzvah* of *sukkah*. “Seeing the stars” means that we allow ourselves to be influenced by Hashem’s light, by holiness. The *mitzvah* of *sukkah* requires us to go out – to leave our homes and free ourselves from the material world in which we are enslaved. לך לך – we must move outside the confines of our habitual ordinary existence. The numerical value for the word סוכה is the same as that of the word צא (go out). If we go out, we are raising the roof and breaking the barrier between ourselves and Hashem, our bodies and souls, our deeds and our dreams.⁴⁸

Schach must be made of something organic, an element that grew in the ground. Similarly, all mankind was generated from Adam HaRishon, a creation from the soil that facilitates growth. In order to grow, the partition between the physical and spiritual worlds must be porous – conducive for the light to flow in either direction. If we can get a glimpse at God, and we in turn allow Him to glance at us, then the holiness can flow between us. We will sit not in the shadows of darkness or doubt, but rather in the shade of faith – faith in Hashem and faith in ourselves.

⁴⁸ *Talelei Chaim*, p. 252.

After Yom Kippur, we sit in the *sukkah* and feel that Hashem believes in us, thereby allowing us to move forward and achieve our spiritual goals. May we soon see the day when Hashem will unite us all under His *sukkah* of peace.