

Succot 5781, 2020:

Star Gazing

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Dovid Shmuel ben Chasiyah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

There are many intricate rules concerning the construction of a *succah* that are presented in the *Gemara* and codified by the *poskim* (halachic decisors). 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...” In his celebrated work, *Mishnah Berurah*, the Chafetz Chaim (1838-1933) explains 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 many latter-day authorities rule that even the nighttime stars need to be visible through the *schach*. Regardless as to which stars are being referenced in these classic Rabbinic sources, we must ask a straightforward question, namely, why did our Sages mandate that the stars should ideally be visible through the *schach* of the *succah*?

Rabbi Mordechai Yoffe *zatzal* (1530-1612) discusses this question in his work, *Levush Malchut* (*Orech Chaim* 631:3):

And it is highly preferable that its covering [the *schach*] should not be very thick, rather, [it should be comprised of materials that] allow the large stars to be seen from within [the *succah*]. Afterall, this is the meaning of the term, “*succah*” that is stated in the Torah, and standard *schach* is normally comprised of such [materials]. (Translation my own)

The contemporary scholar, Rabbi Raphael Sindler Sadin, in his work, “*Pnei HaShulchan*,” suggests that Rav Yoffe is indirectly ruling that “one ought not to make a thick covering [of *schach*], for in that case, [the *succah*] would then become like a house [and the stars would no longer be visible from under the roof]. (Translation and brackets my own) In sum, in order to maintain the temporary nature of the *succah*, its *schach* should be thin and allow for the large stars to be seen from within.

While Rav Yoffe focuses upon the requirement to maintain the temporary aspects of the *succah*'s construction, Rabbi Yosef ben Meir Teomim *zatzal* (1727-1792), in his work, *Pri Megadim*, provides us with a spiritual analysis as to why we ought to be able to see the stars through the *schach*: “So that one will remember Who created all of this [the stars] and enables us to dwell upon the earth. As it is written: ‘When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars that You set in place.’” (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:4, verse and *Pri Megadim* translation my own) By extension, Rav Teomim intimates that *Chazal* wanted the Festival of *Succot* to be a powerful teaching moment wherein we could become acutely aware of Hashem's Creation and our place in His universe. As *Dovid HaMelech* declares in an oft-cited verse: “How great 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)

I would like to offer another possible answer to the question, “Why did our Sages mandate that the stars should ideally be visible through the *schach* of the *succah*?” *Chazal* were acutely aware of the need to instill G-d-consciousness in each of us. Without a sense of Hashem's direct presence and immanence in our lives, it is impossible to feel He is our *Yedid Nefesh* (the Beloved of our Soul) and protector. The *siddur* gives powerful voice to

this notion during the Friday night *tefilah* “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.” Quite beautifully, and in ways words alone cannot truly express, we ask the Almighty to actively reach out to us in this expression of *hashgacha pratit* — Divine providence — and surround us with His *succah* of peace. This, I believe, is one of the feelings that our Sages wanted us to experience when we gaze at the stars from under the frail *schach* of our *succot*.

May it be G-d’s will, and our heartfelt desire, that this *Succot* will be a time when we truly feel His Divine presence encircling and protecting us as we gaze at His stars above our *succot*. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, *Chag Sameach*, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and_the *parasha*’s name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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. Please click on the highlighted link.