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SUKKOT

Sukkot Perceptions

Professor Mathew E. May, in the best of his six books, “In Pursuit of Elegance,” argues for the need for simplicity. He points to a fascinating study:

“When psychologists at the University of Illinois showed a picture of an elephant in a jungle to a study group consisting of people from all ages from the United States and Canada, the image triggered different brain activity as shown by functioning magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Basically, for all Americans, the part of the brain that recognizes objects was lit up. Not so for the Asians. In other words, Asians saw a jungle that happened to have an elephant in it. But the Americans saw an elephant without taking much notice of the jungle.” (In Pursuit of Elegance: 2010, Broadway Books. Page 11)

Seeing the bigger picture and focusing on the general versus the specific is at the heart of Sukkot. First we enter Elul and force ourselves to discover our dead weight that we may have been carrying; following this period of self-reflection and loneliness we enter into a relationship with Hashem on Rosh Hashana, i.e. Malchiyot; our mission is completed on Yom Kippur, when, after discovering our negative baggage we can finally dispense of it. We leave Yom Kippur as a new person, likened to a man with no possessions, just his devotion to HaShem.

On Sukkot it is time to re-enter society, to return to our homes. But our homes shall be all alike: general, nondescript, and non-specific. Built of the most basic materials and for the most basic needs. The Sfas Emet explains the verse “V’Hayitah Ach Sameach” (Devarim 16:15) and in particular the exclusionary term “Ach” as to eliminate specificity as a means to be happy. Indeed Rashi states that this verse is not a command rather a promise. As the Sfat Emet explains; if we can embrace simplicity and look at the big picture we *will* be happy.

The Talmud (Sukkah 11b) teaches us of a famous debate between Rebbe Akiva and Rebbe Eliezer as to what this holiday is commemorating. According to Rebbe Eliezer we sit in Sukkot so as to remember the Clouds of Glory that Hashem surrounded us with during the sojourn in the wilderness. Rebbe Akiva however takes a simple approach: Sukkot is to remember the actual Sukkot

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built in the desert, “.....Succot Mamash”

In the journal *Moriah* (Kovetz HaMoadim p299), in an article by Rav Y. Tzadka, the writer points out something extraordinary: in all other places in the Talmud where Rebbe Eliezer and Rebbe Akiva debate the interpretations of verses their opinions are in the reverse: Rebbe Akiva is the one to have an esoteric understanding based on exegesis and tradition, whereas Rebbe Eliezer always takes the literal approach, sometimes even utilizing similar phrasing found in the above Talmud in the name of Rebbe Akiva: “*Rebbe Eliezer says Aviah Mamash; Rebbe Akiva says*” (Yevamot 48a)

In the above article, the author suggests that the Talmud that we have today in tractate Sukkah contains a printing error thus radically changing the way this Talmud has been read for well over a millennia.

Perhaps a less drastic, although homiletic, understanding can be offered. Rebbe Akiva does indeed always take the sophisticated approach, after all the Torah is the most sophisticated text. Sukkot however, as explained above, represents minimalism, the ideal of embracing the basic and simple. It is by Sukkah, and Sukkah alone, that Rebbe Akiva felt that the Torah wanted this theme translated into interpretive ethos of the day as well. Thus, Sukkot Mamash.

This is the Sukkah and this is the holiday of Sukkot. Let us embrace that which is simple and our happiness will be exhilarating and lasting.

Chag Sameach ■

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