

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Bunim Alter *ben Chilkiyah a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

The Defining Mitzvah

PARSHAS EMOR 5778

Is there a particular mitzvah that could be considered a litmus test to determine who is truly a Jew? If so, which would it be? The answer, as we shall see, emerges from Chazal’s account of the great Day of Judgment.

Fair-Weather “Jews”

The Gemara (*Avodah Zarah 2a*) recounts at some length the proceedings to take place when Hashem reveals Himself to dispense reward and punishment at the end of days: “R’ Chanina bar Papa expounded: In the future-to-come, Hashem shall bring a Torah scroll, place it in His chest, and declare: ‘Whosoever has occupied himself with this – let him come and claim his reward!’” The Gemara proceeds to relate how the various nations will approach, claiming that they aided Yisrael in the furtherance of their Torah studies; but alas, their claims will be rebuffed and disproven. Finally, crestfallen, they will appeal for a chance to be granted the *mitzvos* as Yisrael was. After much back and forth, Hashem will offer them a single mitzvah – the mitzvah of *sukkah* – for them to perform in order to ascertain whether they are worthy of reward. The Gemara outlines what happens next: “Immediately, each one will take (his materials) and go and construct a *sukkah* on top of his roof. But Hashem will cause the sun to shine intensely... And each and every one of them shall kick and leave their *sukkahs*.” (The Gemara concludes that they have no room to complain about this matter, as it often happens that the weather poses a challenge around Sukkos time, but Yisrael rises to the occasion and doesn’t react in this manner.)

We see, in any event, that it is the *sukkah* that serves as the “defining mitzvah,” determining who is indeed worthy and capable of serving Hashem as a Jew. We find a further intimation of this idea in the *passuk* in this week’s *parshah*, which states: **כָּל הָאָזְרָח בַּיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁבֶּה בְּسֻכֹּת** – “Every native amongst Yisrael shall dwell in *sukkos*” (*Vayikra 23:43*). The Medrash (cited by Rashi) expounds that the seemingly superfluous mention of “Yisrael” in this verse comes to include *geirim* (converts) as well. Now, it is noteworthy that such an exposition was even necessary. *Geirim*, after all, are full-fledged Jews, upon whom is incumbent all the *mitzvos* of the Torah; why would we think that the mitzvah of *sukkah* is any different? Thus we see, once again, that there is something about this particular mitzvah that runs contrary to a gentile’s nature. As such, one may have entertained the notion that a “newly-minted” Jew, who had just recently lived his life as a gentile, might be unsuited and incapable of dwelling in a *sukkah*. To correct this notion, then, the Torah had to explicitly state that even a convert is included in the mitzvah (*cf. Ta’am V’das [R’ Moshe Sternbuch], parshas Emor*).

What is it, then, about this particular mitzvah that makes it so “exclusive” to the Jewish people? This matter, as we shall see, touches on the very fundamentals of what the *sukkah* is all about.

Out of This World

The beginning of *Maseches Sukkah* discusses the particulars of the *sukkah*’s dimensions, as the Mishnah states (*1:1*):

סֻכָּה שֶׁהָיָה גְּבוּקָה לְמַעַלָּה מֵעֲשָׂרִים אַפְתָּחָה פְּסִילָה.

“A *sukkah* that extends higher than twenty cubits is disqualified.”

The Gemara (*Sukkah* 2a) clarifies the basis for this disqualification. Rava explains that it is founded on the notion that in commanding us to dwell in *sukkos*, the Torah was conveying the following directive: **א מִדְרַת קֹבֵעַ וָשֵׁב בְּדִירַת עֲרָאי** – “Exit your permanent dwelling, and stay in a temporary dwelling.” If the walls of one’s *sukkah* were to be of too significant a height, they would have to be constructed from strong material and with a firm foundation in order to prevent them from toppling over. Such a structure, then, would automatically be of a permanent nature, thus defeating the whole purpose of the *sukkah*.

The *Meshech Chochmah* (Vayikra 23:43) adds that this exercise – leaving the comforts of one’s permanent abode to dwell outside in a temporary structure – is something that goes against one’s inherent nature. As such, the act of dwelling in the *sukkah* serves to uplift a person above his worldly tendencies and confer sanctity upon him. And it is for this reason, explains R’ Yeruchem Olshin, that the mitzvah of *sukkah* serves as the premier litmus test determining one’s status as a Jew. A gentile is essentially beholden to his *teva* (nature) and is unable to break free of its bonds. But this itself is the hallmark of a Yid, who rises above *teva* to serve and connect with Hashem (cf. *Yerach L’mo’adim, Chanukah, part II*, § 30).

It is worthwhile to cite the words of R’ Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, as he regards the mitzvah of *sukkah* in a related vein. And so he writes: “What is the element that turns our hearts away from Hashem, leads us either to arrogance or despondency, such that from the great worry over our comfort we are essentially left incapable of attaining a truly pleasant life? This comes from... our dependency on wealth, which has become as an idol in our lives. It becomes a false fantasy, as everyone builds a ‘tower of Bavel’ for himself, obtaining security only under the shelter of his own handiwork. **The sukkah is intended to liberate us from this inanity.** Fulfillment of the mitzvah of *sukkah* removes the shackles that bind our hands, keeping us enslaved to the accumulation of wealth and deification of man’s handiwork. In their place a person shall coronate the blessed Hashem as the sole foundation of our lives. The *sukkah* teaches us to place our trust in Hashem and choose the path of faith” (*Chorev, ch. 30, § 219*).

And so we see that the *sukkah* is something designated for Jews alone; for only a Yid is capable of disengaging himself in this manner from the material world. The mitzvah of *sukkah* enables him to reorganize his priorities, such that he recognizes what is truly “*arai*” (temporary) and what is “*keva*” (permanent). Indeed, the Chida also characterizes the mitzvah in these terms. The *sukkah*, as we know, commemorates the “*Ananei Ha’kavod*,” the special Clouds of Glory that accompanied and sheltered Yisrael when they left Egypt. He wonders, however, why it is that the Torah instituted a specific commemoration only for this aspect; after all, the Jews in the desert were also blessed with the wondrous *be’er* (well of water that accompanied them in their travels) and the *mon*, the bread that fell from Heaven. But the Chida explains that this is precisely the point. Hashem did not wish to memorialize the *be’er* and the *mon* that provided for Yisrael’s materialistic needs. He deemed only to institute a commemoration for the *Ananei Ha’kavod*, an intrinsically spiritual entity. As such, the mitzvah of *sukkah* serves as a reminder of where the true *Kavod* (Glory) lies – not in this temporary world, but in the permanency of Olam Haba – the World to Come (*Otzros Hatorah, Sukkos*, p. 167).

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