

Shabat shalom. Chag sameach. (By now) you all know that “chag sameach” means “happy holiday.” (well, actually “holiday happy”) . But as I was looking back on my notes of this talk that I offered 3 years ago (you can excuse yourself now if you don’t want to sit through it again)—I noted something interesting about that word “chag” which *is* typically translated as “holiday.” “Chag” seems close enough to the Arabic “haj” –meaning “pilgrimage”-- to wonder about whether or not they’re linguistically related. Could “chag” also mean “pilgrimage” too? And that seemed more likely given that Sukkot is one of 3 pilgrimage holidays, (as you’ll soon hear more about.) So I did what the rabbi does when stuck with such a conundrum (you know .....yes, I sought out Rabbi google --no, they don’t have a Rebbetzen google) And what I came up with was.....a porn website. So you’ll have to do your own googling to figure it out, but I believe some sources *do* suggest that the Arabic and Hebrew “haj” and “chag” are cognates—in essence, the same.

And since I may have already got myself into trouble, I shall follow counsel’s advice and interrupt myself in order to offer:

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OK then.....

Well here we are. We’ve made it! It appears that all of us here have been written into the The Book of Life. Well done. It’s all downhill coasting until next High Holidays, right? Well I know, that you know, that the Jewish Way isn’t like that. As a matter of fact, our “Way”—Jewish Law is called “halacha” from the Hebrew root “halach” meaning “to walk or go”. And our way on this 8-day holiday that we’re in the middle of, was historically a Way of just that – walking.

One of the earliest references to Sukkot, must have entailed an ancient version of speed walking as – Sukkot is the **name** of the 1<sup>st</sup> pit stop on our escape route out of Egypt. In later biblical times Sukkot became one of the “Shlosha Regalim” (meaning “3 feet”) – a pilgrimage chag –then THE most important holiday of our calendar whereby throngs of people came to the Temple in Jerusalem for a week-long feast and celebration, bringing along choice offerings

Leviticus 22:26-23:44 & Numbers 29:12-16

from the Fall harvest. But what I *got* in reading all this was that Sukkot was not a low-key informal camping hangout situation. No. This was about leftover pagan sun-worship –full-on intense ecstatic partying. Think Burning Man or maybe Fremont Solstice Parade gone viral. There were all manner of musical instruments and singing, juggling, torches and inexplicably – burning of the priests’ old undergarments. In any case the point is the Torah commands us specifically on Sukkot “*usmachtem lifnei Adonai Eloheichem*” to be joyful before your God” – and they were. (AND, it’s curious, is it not? that this time of ecstatic rejoicing comes exactly at the time of the *grape* harvest.....)

### Season of our JOY

Yet, in our days Sukkot has come to be seen somehow as an aside—a poor cousin to the High Holidays. After the crescendo of Yom Kippur, perhaps we’ve come to see ourselves as done for now – internally spent – ready to hibernate. Sukkot comes immediately on the heels of Yom Kippur to offer an antidote to this post-High Holyday inertial blah. It affords us the opportunity to reap the energies of both the external harvest of the season and those of the internal harvest experienced on the High Holidays. But although we, too, are mandated to rejoice, we do it a tad differently from our forebears, So what exactly do we do?

### DWELLING IN THE SUKKAH

We too set up temporary shelters—called “sukkot” – (“sukkah” in the singular). (Or “succos” for those of you who grew up with a more Ashkenazi bent.) We cover the structure with “schach” – bamboo or other branches or plants. And this schach must allow for a spaciousness through which one can see the stars and, intriguingly, is *required* to provide more *shade* – more *shadow* than it allows in sunlight. And then we decorate. We put up colorful fruit, vines, ears of corn, art and the like. And check this out: I read that some folks decorate with onions! Interestingly, this is because of another reference to “**shadow**.” Psalms 36:8 states “Mankind shelters in the **shadow** of Your wings. And the word for onion “batzal” sounds like and looks like “b’tzeil” the Hebrew for “in the shade” or “shadow.”

And here, I’d just like to point out how I love that the rites of Sukkot ever so subtly interweave the shadow. I mean, look, as Jews, Torah mandate or not, we can’t quite ever seem to do unbridled joy. Jon Stewart once offered a case in point. Upon expressing his delight for the honor of receiving yet another Emmy, he couldn’t stop himself from noting: [quote:] “I don’t know how long it’s going to last, I am.....Jewish.....I’m sure I’ll find a way NOT to enjoy this.....[unquote] But seriously, I actually do believe there’s wisdom in this cultural neurosis of ours. Even at our most joyous occasions—weddings—we express a similar sentiment. One of the myriad reasons given for ritual glass smashing at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony is this: shadow is ever-present in our reality. We can’t know joy or light without their opposites. We notice and acknowledge and embrace the fact that shadow plays a critical role in our lives.

## USHPIZIN

Additionally, there's a curious kabbalistic tradition of welcoming in USHPIZIN – Aramaic for “guests”. These guests consist of our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob along with Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. Each ancestral spirit is said to represent a particular quality – s’fira—on the kabbalistic tree of life.

## FOUR SPECIES

Daily, with both real visitors and supernal ones, we are to gather together 4 specified species - a palm branch—otherwise known as lulav, myrtle, willow and an etrog (similar to a lemon) and shake them together in each of the 6 directions (*which those of you who visit the Sukkah will have the opportunity to experience*). Each species is assigned a body part that it's said to resemble. Myrtle gets the eyes, willow the lips, etrog the heart and lulav – the spine. In this way, *symbolically* we use all the parts of our body to “rejoice before the Eternal One.”

## LULAV as SPINE

And so with shadow and light; ancestral Ushpizin and other sukkah guests; coupled with the symbolism of the spine-like lulav, I found myself thinking about **alignment and balance**—both physical and spiritual. It strikes me that it helps to have external input—as in, we need someone to watch our backs. I'm a huge fan and practitioner of Iyengar-based yoga in which body alignment is taken very seriously and is the jumping off point for deeper alignment of mind and spirit as well. I am quite scoliotic—my spine has a defined curvature. Therefore, unlike many folks, I cannot often tell when I am in alignment or don't know which way to shift when I feel out of alignment. I literally need someone to **watch my back**. And spiritually, too, I need the support of my community in order to stay *aligned* with my deepest integrity—with my highest intents for the New Year and beyond. Indeed, this is a powerful gift of a Jewish path – that we have proscribed ways and times of doing our individual processes, but with the ritual, structure and support of community. But to allow for that support – that feedback—takes an enormous amount of **trust**—and for me, this has often been the big difficulty.....

## ESSENTIAL DISTRUST

For a long time now (like at least since I was a teen) [*should I wait for you to do the math? Yes, that's a good 30-some yrs!*] I've approached my world with a heavy dose of suspicion and general lack of trust that initially, I was scarcely aware of. I have this overly-sensitive radar for detecting inauthenticity, and therefore I get false-positives all the time. If I trust *anything*, it's that I'll be discounted, unappreciated, dismissed and taken advantage of. (It's interesting to note that this last piece – this concern regarding being taken advantage of—is so present in *Israeli* consciousness that Hebrew slang has made up a word for it –**friar**—about the worst thing you can call an Israeli.) When I'm collapsed in this orienting assumption, it colors an enormous amount of my interactions. It keeps me shut down, angry, reactive and blocks me

Leviticus 22:26-23:44 & Numbers 29:12-16

from receiving input that intellectually I recognize as valuable, but nevertheless, won't allow in. Perhaps most disturbing, it creates a disconnect - a seemingly solid barrier between myself and others.

*[At this point, might I just suggest that if you're sitting here listening to this and saying to yourself 'right on' – I know so many people who need to hear this message!—consider – just consider that there may be something in it for you as well. Because although this is certainly about my process, I know I'm not alone out there....OK, I'll give you a moment to get behind that thought...]*

So naturally, my negative expectations translate into attitudes and actions that *guarantee* the manifestation of those things I fear most – that I **will** be dismissed, rejected and thus I remain entrenched in the view that the world is untrustworthy and forever against me. Do you get how hard that is? How oppressive it is to live with that as an assumed reality?

Upon recognizing this tendency in myself, I thought surely I had to force myself somehow to learn to do the exact opposite --to trust wholeheartedly – to let all that sun shine in – be entirely vulnerable. But of course that, too, misses the point. Because although it's true that completely defended, I was impermeable and rigid; on the other hand, with no protection, I am over-exposed and at the mercy of the elements. Both extremes are equally damaging.

And so intuitively I resisted what I thought I was supposed to do because I sensed that there's wisdom too in the shade – the shadow – in the protective nature of it. And there is. Therefore, I can prudently allow in plenty of light, while, as the sukkah rules mandate, maintain the healthy protective skepticism of being a bit more shade-heavy.

And herein lies the deep teaching of the sukkah for me. I don't have to force a change in action. The shift in perception—in awareness itself is healing—gives me access to possibility I could not previously see. What's required is to rest in the awareness of what always already is. To make *room* in awareness for *both* shadow and light – a prudent balance of protection and transparency; solidity and flux. With the right mix of metaphorical *schach* gently covering my being, from this sukkah-space, I am afforded the freedom to be paradoxically, at once safe *and* open; protected *and* vulnerable. In a word – whole.