



October 17, 2008/Tishrei 18 5768, Volume 61, No. 3

TORAH STUDY

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A nation of builders

RABBI RAPHAEL LANDESMAN
Sukkot

One thing that always strikes me around holiday time is the diverse skill-set that observing the Jewish festivals requires. For Pesach, we need to be proficient house-cleaners (and detectives), ferreting out all of the crumbs and banned leaven substances from their hiding places. For Shavuot, we call upon our endurance training in order to be able to stay awake all night studying Torah. In preparation for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we become self-help professionals, examining our deeds and misdeeds with the goal of avoiding the mistakes of the past 12 months and managing the unpleasant consequences that may have followed. For Hanukkah, we are lighting technicians, expert in the relative merits of different types of wicks and fuels; for Purim we are production crews, complete with costume designers, comedy writers and seamstresses.

And then there's Sukkot, which is truly in a class by itself. Immediately after our emotionally uplifting and spiritually cleansing Day of Atonement, we are asked to put aside our prayer books, grab a quick bite to eat and break out our toolboxes. After all, we only have four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot to get our miniature houses in order, so we'd better get cracking. And it's not just sound advice to get after it without delay - it's actually stated explicitly in the Code of Jewish Law that it is a mitzvah to begin working on one's sukkah the night after Yom Kippur, in order to start off the new spiritual fiscal year with a bang (hopefully not on one's thumb).

This sudden and drastic change in focus has never ceased to amaze me, how we can go so swiftly from penitence to plywood and from communal prayer to corner braces. We go from being the People of the Book to a Nation of Builders. What is the lesson behind this mandatory radical transformation?

The answer, as expressed by many Torah commentaries, lies in the nature of the Jewish holiday experience. Much of the Torah's description of our festivals focuses on the rhythm of the agricultural cycle: the names given to these special times refer to seasonal events, names such as "The Chag of the Harvest," "The Chag of the Ingathering of Crops," and so on. This despite the fact that the Torah also makes clear that the festivals are to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt and the Jewish people's subsequent sojourn in the desert.

The duality within the themes of our holidays reflects a similar duality in the nature of us. We are, after all, both flesh and fire, both soul and body. Jews are not to deny either part of their makeup, but rather to harness it all in the service of God. So the Torah talks about agriculture in the same breath as celebrating the creation of the Jewish Nation, because we should celebrate our harvest by thanking God for all His blessing, the blessing of food on the table being no less a gift than that of our historic salvation. And we should understand that the toil of plowing, planting and reaping can be and should be done as an act of service to Him, with the intention of taking the blessings that He bestows and using their fruit to maximize our spiritual potential.

We approach Sukkot with this concept in mind. The prayers and sublime thoughts of Yom Kippur lead to the physical yet transcendent toil of the building of the sukkah, to instill in us that the spiritual fire of the 10th day of the month of Tishrei can find expression in the hammer blows of the eleventh day. May we be successful in finding holiness and meaning in all of our endeavors.

Rabbi Raphael Landesman is Phoenix Community Kollel's director of education and dean of Shearim Torah High School for Girls.