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SUKKOT: DWELLING IN THE MIDST OF NATURE'S ENERGY

“In this modern age very little remains that is real. Night has been banished, so have the cold, the wind and the stars. They have all been neutralized. The rhythm of life itself is obscured. Everything goes so fast and makes so much noise and people hurry by without heeding the grass by the roadside, its colors, its smell and the way it shimmers when the wind caresses it.” - Gaston Rebuffat

Biblical Judaism – that is, the way of life for the Israelites – was shaped and molded by their direct experience with the landscape around them. The physical geography, communities of plants and animals, soil condition and weather all left indelible impressions on their way of life, and our understanding of Judaism. For example, the native plant *Salvia palaestina* – the model for the menorah used in the Temple – is described exclusively in botanical terms in the book of Exodus (25:31-35).

This fundamental connection to the environment is culturally expressed in the Torah in ways subtle to our contemporary ears. For example, many biblical names reflect nature, such as Rachel (ewe), Leah (bovine antelope), Caleb (dog), Jonah (dove), Hamor (male donkey), Tamara (date tree), and, of course, Adam (earth).

In many parts of the Torah the influence of the seasons, weather patterns and other environmental factors are impossible to miss. In his book, “The Savage in Judaism,” Howard Eilberg-Schwartz notes that “Israelite thought is saturated with metaphors drawn from domains of experience concerned with raising animals and growing crops. Fauna and agriculture supplied Israelites with images for thinking about human experience and social life.”

The psalms overflow with images of leaping mountains, gushing springs, flowering plants, dancing stars and many other metaphors drawn from nature. Indeed, the very rhythm of life for the ancient Israelites was intimately and inextricably grounded in their relationship with the natural world.

In a journal entry dated July 27, 1869, American naturalist John Muir described his own spiritual and environmental awakening this way: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.”

Written more than 2,500 years after Avram wandered into the arid region of the Negev and the culture of biblical Judaism developed, Muir’s journal entry neatly describes the way Judaism was once so tightly attuned to the ebb and flow of the natural world.

Unfortunately, we’re no longer so attuned. As rabbinic Judaism evolved after the destruction of the Second Temple, it not only grew distant from its biblical roots metaphorically, but also literally. I want to discuss the importance of rediscovering this lost connection to the natural world around us – once understood as an essential quality of Judaism. My urgency is both selfish and altruistic: I truly believe that the future of our planet and its ability to sustain diverse life, something I want for my remaining years and for my children and their children and their children, is necessarily linked to a worldwide awakening of our connection to the universe as described by Muir. I also truly believe, backed up by ample scientific evidence easily

accessible for any skeptics, that we, human beings, are at once the cause of the rapid depletion and degradation of natural resources, yet, at the same time, are part of the solution to our growing environmental crisis.

David Ben-Gurion, first prime minister of the modern State of Israel, said it eloquently when he saw the Negev for the first time at the recently formed community of Sde Boker that overlooks the stunningly beautiful valley of Ein Avdat: “The energy contained in nature – in the Earth and its waters, in the atom, in sunshine – will not avail us if we fail to activate the most precious vital energy, the moral-spiritual energy inherent in the inner recess of our being; in the mysterious, uncompromising, unfathomable, and divinely inspired soul.”

This brings me to my altruistic motivation: Connecting deeply, intimately and frequently with the Earth is good for our spiritual and physical well being. In the words of Walt Whitman: “Now I see the secret of making the best person: It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the Earth.”

Spending time outdoors is not just fun – it is fundamental to our well-being. Muir wrote that when we spend time in the mountains, “nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

This brings me now to share some thoughts about Sukkot, the quintessential and arguably most important nature related holiday in the Jewish calendar. Yes, virtually all Jewish holidays have strong ties to the Earth, especially Passover and Tu B’shvat. However, only Sukkot was once so prominent that it was known simply as “The Holiday.” Only Sukkot connects to the Earth and what we today call environmental concerns, in all of its manifestations, from the *sukkah*– the branch covered shelter – to the ritual etrog and lulav – palm heart, myrtle and willow – to the agricultural themes and desert trekking history of the holiday. Sukkot is simply and unequivocally the most nature related holiday, bar none, in the Jewish calendar.

Alas, despite our ever growing environmental awareness and passion for outdoor activities, it is with sadness that I, a rabbi, confess that it is also a holiday that few Jews celebrate. It seems that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur exhaust us as well as eat up the too few days we can miss from work or school, leaving us with little left over for Sukkot. However, today it is time for us to reapportion our energy and resources and reconnect with our roots and perhaps hurry along world environmental healing.

The key element of celebrating Sukkot involves building and living in a little structure, a *sukkah*. Paraphrasing Muir, when we go out and into the *sukkah*, we discover that we are really going in – into the world. There is no easier way to encounter the divine presence than when immersed in the world, devoid of the modern conveniences that distract us. As French mountaineer Gaston Rebuffat described it: “In this modern age very little remains that is real. Night has been banished, so have the cold, the wind and the stars. They have all been neutralized. The rhythm of life itself is obscured.”

When we enter into the *sukkah*, life becomes real again. Our skin comes alive as wind caresses us. The movement of clouds in the sky and the sun across the heavens creates shadows and reflections that evoke new ways of seeing the world. Our olfactory sense is sent swirling with the aromas from the etrog, myrtle and slowly decaying roof coverings. Weather becomes an experience, not just a guideline for how to dress. Our sense of connection with the world intensifies and becomes intimate as squirrels and other often missed creatures sneak in and out of our *sukkah* to feast on the decorations hanging from the open walls and roof. A growing awareness that we are both fragile and insignificant creatures in the grand scheme of things enters our consciousness. This new sense of humility opens our soul and frees us from the hubris of self-importance that impedes our ability to enter into relationship with the natural that is so utterly indifferent to us.

To dwell in a *sukkah* mimics the experience of entering a wilderness, nature in full force. In the wilderness we learn to be attentive to all that is happening around us. Danger lurks behind trees and rocks. But so does

the divine presence. In the interior of the *sukkah*, a place surrounded by nature uncontrolled, one gets a taste of what it is like to enter into the wilderness, the place where we are most likely to meet an untamed God – a God unencumbered with rabbinic and metaphoric baggage. That is not only where our ancestors had most of their divine encounters, but also where most people say they most feel God's presence.

The wilderness is a place where the soul is free to roam. At times in our life we need this invigoration that comes with entering the *midbar* – the wilderness beyond the borders of society. Such enveloping encounters with unbridled nature rejuvenate and inspire us. Sukkot is all about connecting with nature.

There is a tradition of inviting *ushpizin* – ancestral or exalted guests – into the *sukkah*. Ushpizin are inspirations, mentors and guiding spirits for us. My *ushpizin* have included Muir, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These 19th century American philosophers have provided me with much theological and environmental wisdom.

In rabbinic tradition, Sukkot is linked to the coming of the messiah. Perhaps this is just the rabbi in me, but I believe that when we start to embrace and celebrate Sukkot with the energy we devote to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we will move closer to the better future associated with the dawn of a messianic era.

Source: Rabbi Howard Cohen