

# TORAT HAR SHMUEL

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## BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

There is a famous Gemara in Meseches Avoda Zara (3a) which speaks about the nations of the world asking for a second chance to receive the Torah after they witness the glory Bnai Yisroel achieved during and after Matan Torah. The Gemara relates that Hashem acquiesced provided they observe a "Mitzva Kalla", an easy Mitvah, that of residing in the Succah. The nations agreed, constructed their Succot and entered accordingly. Hashem then brought the sun out of its sheath and turned up the temperature to a point where they could not handle it. As everyone fled for relief, they kicked the Succah in disgust as they exited their overheated environment.

Many places that comment on this Gemara are remarkably critical of the fact that they kicked the Succah on the way out. I would like to understand this Gemara from a different, more realistic perspective. If someone offered you a business opportunity, one that required a minimal investment with a huge return with the understanding that said investment was safe, most people would jump in. (Indeed, memories of Madoff!!) If as the investment unfolded, you found out something occurred that made it impossible to continue, thereby forcing you to forfeit the promised return, how would you feel? Would you not "kick" the person who brought you the opportunity? Why do we condemn those people who, forced out of the Succah by the oppressive heat, kicked it? Obviously the heat and kicking the Succah re-

quire proper understanding, one that goes beyond the concept of "mitztaer", a legitimate reason to leave the Succah.

In order to understand the answer to this dilemma, one needs to understand what occurred behind the scenes. In advance of Bnai Yisroel receiving the Torah, Hashem offered it to the nations of the world. Hashem approached Yishmoel and asked them if

they wanted His Holy Book, to which they responded, "My K'siv Bay" – what's written in it?? As logical as the question was, it clearly indicated that their acceptance was conditional based on what Hashem wanted them to commit to. Hashem indicates that murder is outlawed, to which they respond that murder is part and parcel of how they live. (Nothing has changed!!) Yishmoel passed on the opportunity. The same offer is made to the children of Eisav. They too proceeded to ask what was in the Torah, to which Hashem responded that stealing and adultery are prohibited. Esav wasn't about to give those up, so they too passed. (What's interesting is that these prohibitions were already in effect as a result of being part of the seven Mitzvos given to Noach. What they were really

rejecting were the nuances. As an example, they refused to accept the fact that embarrassing someone publicly is the equivalent of murder.)



Matan Torah, historically referred to as "The Revelation", was an event that the entire world was aware of. Everyone perceived and understood the glory acquired by the children of Israel as a result of saying Na'ase V'Nishma followed by receiving the Torah. We became Hashem's nation, His children, as the rest of the world looked on with jealousy.

So now the nations approach G-d and ask for a second chance, redemption, so they can enjoy a special place in Hashem's "family". The first time it was offered to them unconditionally. It was Yishmoel and Eisav that placed conditions on the table, not Hashem. If they want it now, it comes with the understanding that they will have to earn it by performing a Mitzvah Kallah, an easy Mitzvah, that being Sukkah.

So why did Hashem appear to sabotage the process?? My answer revolves around a greater understanding of what the children of Israel received on Har Sinai. Although we know that the Jewish people received the Torah, what they received in the eyes of the nations was what I call

"The ultimate truth". What better way is there to describe the Word of G-d than with what is His stamp, His seal, His signature? There is a place in every person that desires to connect with the truth, to be honest with them self and the world in which they live. The problem today is that this concept comes with many different definitions. Ask the Pope and he'll swear up and down that the resurrection took place, (despite the reality that no one witnessed it, as opposed to the three million plus that witnessed Matan Torah). Ask the Dali Lama and he'll give you a totally different understanding of the truth. What marked the uniqueness of Matan Torah is that for a short time in the history of mankind, everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, acknowledged one truth, one ultimate reality authored by Hashem Himself. The proof that this is correct is that everyone wanted in, they wanted a second chance. The Catholic Church has always understood Matan Torah the same way Orthodox Judaism does.

What the nations of the world thought is that "The Truth" is cheap and easy. If there is one thing that history has proven, it's that the truth often times comes at a very high price. Let's

look back on the early part of Avrohom's life. When challenged by Nimrod to acknowledge him as a god or die by fire in the furnace, Avrohom chose the latter. Keep two remarkably important points in mind. The first is that Avrohom fully expected to die rather than turn his back on the real G-d he professed. Secondly, this all occurred prior to Hashem appearing to Avrohom and acknowledging that everything he believed was correct. Since then, how many Jews have died rather than forsake our Heavenly Father. How many Gentiles died for the sake of being true to their beliefs and moral values, a feat that often goes overlooked during the Holocaust?

Hashem was not asking those residing in the Succah to die for the truth, just to put up with the heat, to demonstrate that there was some backbone to their commitment in exchange for their heightened status in Hashem's heavenly abode and the blessings that said status comes with. Why is all this mandatory? Inevitably

everyone is faced with the question, "What do you believe in? Who are you? What do you stand for?" History has proven that these questions are not simple intellectual exercises. They generally require one to take a side, often times that of the weak and persecuted. How many times have these questions been asked with a sword on one's throat or a gun pointed at their head??

There is another moral point we can learn from Avrohom's life that relates directly to Succos as well. On the third day following Avrohom's Bris Milah, he was sitting outside waiting for the opportunity to invite travelers into his tent. Something amazing occurred as explained by Rashi. As was the case with the Succah inhabited by the pagans wanting their second chance, Hashem brought out the full force of the sun to keep the visitors away and force Avrohom back into his tent. Apparently Hashem acknowledged the concept of "sick leave" whereas Avrohom decided that his life mission of Kiruv, Chesed & Hachnosas Orchim was more important than the pain associated with having circumcised himself three days earlier. Messiras Nefesh, the willingness to sacrifice oneself on many different levels, comes in two forms. The



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most obvious is in response to a negative imposition of values by another, expressed throughout history in the form of forced conversions and death. There is also Messiras Nefesh from a positive perspective as demonstrated above by Avrohom. It's the willingness to go the extra mile despite the unanticipated inconveniences, *L'Shaim Shamayim*, not because one is trying to impress another. This has much more to do with being righteous privately in Hashem's Eyes than *frum* in the eyes of another. Why?? Because as Avrohom recognized and taught us, it's all about Him, Hashem, not us!!

The heat experienced in that Succah by the pagans could have been viewed from both perspectives. Rather than taking to heart what was at stake and rising to the challenge, they viewed the heat from the negative and responded in a manner that made it clear they did not want to be inconvenienced. It was about them, what they wanted, expressing no willingness to sacrifice anything. In my opinion, this is what kicking the Succah on the way out represented. When it comes to "G-d", be it Hashem or their avodah zara, they were there to take, to be serviced rather than to provide service.

There is a proof we can draw upon that validates the reality of this "goyishe" attitude. The two sons of Aharon lost their lives during the dedication of the Mishkan because they brought a "strange fire". All of the commentators express what they feel was the essence of the sin. What was wrong with Nadav and Avihu doing something extra, even though it wasn't commanded, to show their love for Hashem? Shimshon Raphael Hirsch provides an eye opening answer not only in regard to what their sin was, but illuminates the essence of what idol worship was founded upon. He explains that every time a pagan worshipped their idol or brought a sacrifice, it was not out of love or thankfulness for that particular god. It was because they needed something, be it water, health, riches, whatever. It was not about the god or the sacrifice. It was eccentrically about them!! Pagan life was founded on taking, being serviced. Rarely if ever was it about being thankful. And if it was, it included some sort of physical act, usually sexual, that satisfied their lust as they "thanked" their god.

This was the problem with the strange fire brought by Nadav and Avihu. It mimicked the pagan process, which is why it was rejected by Hashem and cost Aharon's sons their lives. The very foundation of our national character as founded by

Avrohom, Yitzchak and Ya'akov is based on the reality that it's all about Hashem – "Ayn Od Milvado". The King of Kings owes us nothing!! Couple this with the reality that He delights in our prayers and lovingly provides us with our needs, and the only question that should pop into our minds is what more do we need? What we need is to understand how to respond to this reality. What does Hashem "need" from us?? The question is ridiculous as Hashem, by definition, has no "needs". There is something, though, we can *offer* that will bring great joy to our Heavenly Father. The simple acknowledgment that we know where everything comes from is what Hashem desires. A "thank You" to the provider of all we have and enjoy and the understanding that it comes from an Infinite Entity that desires to be close to us, to be our Father.

The pagans in the Succah could not provide this because they were so wrapped up with themselves that there was no room for another, not even Hashem Yisborach. Put up with the heat in exchange for the ultimate and infinite truth?? Their response was a resounding no because this would force them into a position of subservience, a huge price to be paid by a malignant ego. Indeed, what kicking the Succah represents is their anger when they realized all of this was not about them, but about Hashem, Divine Service.

The reality is that they could have left the Succah due to "mitzta'er", the same reason one is not required to eat in a Succah when it's raining. Had they done so, *respectfully*, the process could have continued to move forward. The reality is that it was not Hashem but the Pagans who threw in the towel. Their exit made it clear that the process had concluded and they no longer had any interest in "the Truth". Why?? Because Emes revolves around Hashem, its ultimate source, not us.

So what is the theoretical philosophy that manifests itself in the Mitzva of Succah? During Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and the intermediate days, we focus on Teshuva. Volumes have been devoted to the topic, specifically differentiating between repentance of "fear" versus repentance of "love". The same distinction can be applied to the concept of "Ayn Od Milvado" specifically as it relates to Succah. Acknowledging that Hashem is the sum total of *everything* can also be viewed from the perspective of "fear" and "love". There are many people who are incapable of differentiating between "hishtadlus", the human effort that goes into



earning a living, and the myth that how much we make is in our hands. Often times, those who think they are in control find out they are not when it's too late, either as a result of simple business miscalculations (i.e. Madoff), or worse, when they are caught falling short of the ethical standards called for by Halacha in the world of business.

For those that adhere to the Hishtadlus philosophy, serious character refinement is required to make it work. How much Hishtadlus is enough? How much do we worry about how a deal is going to work out? Do we truly believe in the concept that everything is in Hashem's Hands, HaKol B'Yday Shamayim...? These are real time challenges that cannot be taken lightly, especially living in a society where the financial demands are as great as they are.

One of the key challenges facing the diaspora Jewish community at large, and is destined to get worse before it gets better, is Yeshiva tuition. A family with three children in Jewish day school or Yeshiva is looking at an absolute minimum of thirty thousand post taxed dollars just to cover tuition, and that's with a generous scholarship in place. Financial commitments of this caliber on top of a mortgage, living expenses and an economy in dire straits which impacts how much one can take home from their business can precipitate many sleepless nights – with all the Emunah and Bitachon in the world firmly ingrained in a couple's religious and spiritual character.

When we acknowledge "HaKol B'Yday Shamayim..." and "Ayn Od Milvado" said acknowledgment can be seen from two perspective – b'yirah, with fear and/or b'ahava, with love. Most of us have elements of both in our wiring. When it's all said and done, it comes down to the following reality. We are safer in Hashem's Succah than we are in our own houses. What makes a Succah take on the reality the Torah calls for is when it becomes our *home*, and the eight days of the holiday are uniquely suited to achieve this lofty goal.

The average person will express that they feel secure with a roof over their head, clothes on their back and food on the table. Do we need more than a Succah to achieve this? No!! So we go after the big house, the fancy car and clothes, all the accoutrements that make life luxurious. What we need to support the lifestyle tends to run parallel to how much the family earns. The

problem is that we presume we will continue to make the necessary income to support the lifestyle we've adopted. If the line between needs and wants is blurred, and one's income diminishes so does part of the lifestyle. If too much of it disappears, ownership of the big house and fancy cars is at risk. In light of the difficult economy we are in, how many respectable frum families find themselves in this difficult position. What a remarkably difficult test for Torah observant people to go through. Hishtadlus is stressed out of desperation and decisions are made trying to control situations that are out of our control.



So how do we sit in the Succah? Do we weather the storm with Bitachon and Emunah or do we panic and become mentally unraveled? As expressed above, for most it's somewhere in the middle. There are those gifted with a personality that won't flinch even under the most stressful circumstances. They

can smile, b'ahava, and calmly convince all their adversaries that the temporary setback will be resolved in short order. Somehow, miraculously, all of us have seen this unconditional faith in Hashem result in nothing short of financial miracles. The real question is if it is a miracle or the normal consequence of gifted Emunah reflecting the reality of how this world can operate if we reach this level?

And there are those who are forced to use every bit of spiritual strength available to maintain, b'yirah, a difficult balance within their stressed psyche, something many would call "normal" under the circumstances. The question is who is responsible for the stress? Do we know our place, or do we attempt to control situations we have no control over?

The amount of stress we experience during these times works hand in hand regarding our understanding of Hashem's role in the entire process. That line needs to be drawn with great care, understanding, and at times, enormous courage. One thing I can guarantee is, as Rabbi Akiva expressed, "Kol man d'ovid Rachmana, l'tav ovid" – "Everything Hashem does, He does for the good". It will be OK. May all of us be zoche to understand the complete message the Succah imparts.