

Breaking Barriers with Hoshanos

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

Why do we circle the bima on Sukkot, and what does it have to do with Israel's strife?

Which Crisis

We've all heard about the commotions at the Yom Kippur services in Tel Aviv. Honestly, I didn't want to talk about it, because it's a rather painful topic.

I'd definitely prefer to talk about anything else but the problem is that the Yom Kippur incident is our crisis—and perhaps together we can solve it; and the holiday of Sukkot, which we began celebrating today, carries a message that I believe is very relevant.

Circling the Bimah

One of the beautiful traditions of Sukkot is the "Hoshanot." We take the Lulav and Etrog (not on Shabbat), and we encircle the Bimah where a person stands with the Torah scroll in hand, and we recite the "Hoshanot."

The origin of this prayer comes from the time of the Holy Temple.

The Mishnah (Sukkah 4:5) tells us that when the Temple stood, people would go to a place called Motza, not far from Jerusalem, and collect willow branches. They would bring them to the Temple Mount and set them up around the sides of the altar. During each day of Sukkot, the priests would circle the altar with the Lulav and Etrog in hand and say, "*Ana Hashem Hoshia Na, Ana Hashem Hatzlicha Na,*" from the Hallel prayers (according to Rabbi Yehuda, they would say, "*Ani VaHu, Hoshiah Na*").

To commemorate those customs, our Sages enacted that every day of Sukkot, we take the Lulav and Etrog, encircle the Bimah, and recite the two supplications that were said in the Temple, "*Ana Hashem Hoshia Na,*" and "*Ani VaHu, Hoshiah Na.*"

This custom of encircling the Bimah every day of Sukkot once and seven times on Hoshana Rabbah is reminiscent of a very familiar story in Tanach: When Joshua conquered Jericho, the Israelites circled the walls of Jericho once every day, and on the seventh day, they encircled the walls seven times; at that point, the walls of Jericho collapsed. In fact, the Jerusalem Talmud connects the custom of Sukkot directly to this story; it says in the name of Rabbi Acha that the custom was enacted to commemorate the story of Jericho.

Taking Down the Walls

But what is the connection between the two? Who are we trying to conquer? What barriers are we trying to bring down on Sukkot?

The answer may be found in the unusual words, "*Ani VaHu Hoshia Na.*"

Everyone is familiar with the verse "*Ana Hashem Hoshia Na,*" from Psalm 118, recited during Hallel. When we reach these words, everyone proclaims them loudly and fervently, "Please G-d, save us!" But what does the phrase "*Ani VeHu*" mean? "I and Him — save us"? Who is "He," and why does the prayer use such strange terminology?

The Jerusalem Talmud explains that "Him" refers to G-d, and the passage is trying to say that G-d is with us, on our level, during our moment of distress. It is "I and Him," together.

One famous example of this idea is the story of the burning bush, when G-d first revealed Himself to Moses. Rashi explains that G-d revealed Himself from the thornbush and not from another tree to teach "that G-d suffers with Israel in their distress." G-d was trying to show Moses that He too, suffers from the subjugation of the People of Israel.

The Rebbe would often cite the verse, "*bechol tzarasam lo tzar, in all their affliction He is afflicted,*" which means that G-d suffers alongside the Jewish people and accompanies them into exile. He would also quote the words of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: "Wherever Israel went into exile, the Divine Presence went with them."

So, in this prayer, we are asking G-d to redeem us—for His sake, and in doing so,

He redeems Himself as well. And that's exactly how the Hoshanot begin: "*Hoshana Lema'anacha Elokeinu,*" that He should save us, not just for our sake but for His sake as well.

In essence, it seems that we are trying to break down the barriers that separate the Jewish people from G-d, so that it becomes "*Ani VaHu,*" where G-d feels our pain and leads us out of exile.

Should He Tell The Truth?

But what kind of barrier could possibly exist between the Jewish people and the Almighty? Doesn't the Talmud teach that "not even an iron barrier can sever the bond between Israel and their Father in heaven"? (Pesachim 82b).

The answer is rather straightforward. The Rebbe said many times that the only barrier capable of truly separating us from G-d is the one we raise between ourselves and our fellow Jews.

Let me share a story about Rabbi Zvi Greenwald, a warmhearted Chasid who lives in Israel.

In the 1950s and 1960s, he would often journey to secular kibbutzim and host gatherings called "An Evening with Chabad." Being a talented speaker, he would regale his audience with Chassidic ideas, stories about the Rebbe, tales from Russia and so on, and another colleague would sing beautiful Chabad melodies. They would all say some l'chaim, people would ask questions, and the crowd would really open up. It was always a very enjoyable evening.

Once, while Rabbi Greenwald visited the Rebbe, he mentioned that some people criticized him, suggesting that instead of being warm with the kibbutznikim, he should "tell them the unvarnished truth" and rebuke them for not observing the Jewish traditions.

The Rebbe immediately responded: "Heaven forbid that you should speak harshly to them. By doing so, you build a wall between you and them. They want to learn about Judaism—so share with them what Judaism truly is. G-d forbid, don't reprimand them."

The wall that separates one Jew from another is the only one that can potentially

stand between us and G-d. When we encircle the Bimah during Sukkot, we strive to break down this barrier that divides us from each other. That's why we carry the four species, which symbolize the four types of Jews—even the Aravah, which seems to have no benefit. The set is only kosher when they all come together. Additionally, we have the mitzvah of the Sukkah. When we invite another Jew to share the Sukkah with us, we remove the barriers that might divide us.

And this unity with our fellow Jews gives us the power to unite with the Almighty. It's only then that "*Ani VaHu*," we are with G-d "in one boat," and He can "Hoshia Na" — save us.