

Living the Lessons of Sukkos

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

Sukkos has always been one of the most beloved holidays among Chassidim. A deeper look into the details of the holiday show that each element represents another foundation of Chassidic philosophy.

Why Chassidim Love Sukkos

Different holidays inspire and excite different kinds of Jews. There are some that are uplifted by the Tisha B'av seriousness while others, like Chassidim, feels that Sukkos is “their holiday.”

Why? Well, for starters, as the Torah itself says, Sukkos is “zman simchaseinu”—the “time of our rejoicing.” While a Jew has the mitzvah of serving G-d happily every day, and especially on Shabbos and holidays, the Torah explicitly tells us three times that when it comes to Sukkos, we must be happy.

And happiness is one of the foundations of the Chasidic movement.

Additionally, when it comes to Sukkos, you’ve got the sukkah.

Now, the sukkah symbolizes the concept of unity. As the Sages say, “All of Israel is fit to sit in one sukkah”—the sukkah is the great “uniter” of the Jewish Nation, bringing together Jews of all categories and types. We see clearly how even Jews who are not concerned about other mitzvos and have no sukkah of their own are only too happy to visit and eat in a sukkah—the sukkah has some magical power of unity.

Uniting the Four Species

On top of that, there’s the famous lesson of “the Four Species.” The Midrash compares the four components of a lulav and esrog set to four categories of Jews:

1. The esrog, which “has a taste and has an aroma,” symbolizes those Jews who both study the Torah and keep the mitzvos—they are “masters of good deeds.”

2. The lulav, which comes from a date palm tree, has “taste.” Dates are good to eat. But it has no “aroma.” As the Midrash goes on, “so too with the Jewish Nation—it has among it masters of Torah with no good deeds.”

This means that there are Jewish people who love to learn, to study the Torah. They enjoy it. However, when it comes to doing mitzvos... not so much. These are not people who run to do mitzvos. They're not the first to offer to help when someone is moving into a new apartment, or when someone is sick in the hospital. If there's no alternative, then they'll do it—but it's not something that lights their fire. If you tell them there's going to be some lecture or speech somewhere, they'll drop everything and run over—but to help complete a minyan, not necessarily.

3. Then you have the hadasim, the myrtle twigs. The hadasim, the Midrash continues, “have aroma but have no taste—so too does the Jewish Nation have people who have good deeds but have no Torah.” These are Jews who very much love to help, and who are always the first to donate whatever is needed—but if you invite them to a Torah class, they don't want to join. And if they do actually show up, they catch a snooze in the middle of the class.

4. Finally you have the aravos, the willow twigs. Says the Midrash, “Just as the aravah has no taste and has no aroma, so too does the Jewish People have among it people who are neither masters of Torah nor masters of good deeds” (Yalkut Shimoni Vayikra 4251).

To properly observe the mitzvah of the Four Species, it's not enough to have the Four Species on the table. Rather, one must unite them together, and only then do you fulfill the mitzvah of lulav. If one of the four is missing from your hands, you haven't done the mitzvah.

And that's the innovation, the contribution, of Chasidic philosophy. When is it possible to serve G-d? When can a Jew draw close to G-d? When he or she specifically recognizes that all Jews are equal.

At a Chasidic farbrengen, the traditional group discussion with singing and a few l'chaims, the rich are not recognized before the poor and the scholars don't get extra special treatment over the ordinary folk. Instead, all of them sit together in comradely love, and talk—and Chasidim have always believed that it is specifically then, sitting at a farbrengen, that Chasidim have the power to bless other Jews

and that their blessings have more influence than Malach Michael, the archangel Michael, himself.

Make It Yours

But that's not the only thing about the lulav that symbolizes the Chasidic movement and its philosophy. In the halachos, Jewish laws, of lulav there are three additional laws that symbolize Chasidism, too.

One, the Four Species need to be "mishelachem"—belonging to you. You have to personally own them to do the mitzvah properly. They have to be legally yours. As a general rule, a mitzvah object doesn't need to belong to you for you to do the mitzvah with it. For example, you can do the mitzvah of tefillin even with tefillin that belong to someone else. Tefillin don't have to be yours. Likewise, a tallis doesn't have to be yours, and it's also true for whatever mitzvah. Only with this mitzvah does the Torah say, "And you shall take for yourselves," meaning, from that which is yours. It has to belong to you. And if you don't have a lulav and esrog and someone lets you use theirs, they have to give it to you as a gift—and only then do you fulfill the mitzvah. (Then you give it back to the person who gave it to you as a gift.)

But here, Chasidism innovated that every mitzvah must be "mishelachem."

When is a mitzvah really a mitzvah? When it's yours. When it belongs to you. When you invest in it, and sweat and work for it, then you really feel that you've done something for G-d. But if you take it lightly and you didn't invest anything into it, then keeping this mitzvah doesn't really say anything to you—it changed nothing in you.

Make it Beautiful

The second halachah of the Four Species that symbolizes Chasidism is that all four must be "hadar," or beautiful. This refers to all four in general and to the esrog in particular. Now, why the esrog? Because on it the Torah says, "pri eitz hadar," the fruit of a beautiful tree—meaning that it must be a beautiful and extra-special fruit.

And along comes Chasidism and says that every mitzvah must be done with "hidur

mitzvah,” the beautification of a mitzvah. Chasidim are very busy with making mitzvos beautiful—not just doing the minimum but on the contrary, trying to do as much more as possible. For example, it’s okay to make kiddush on Shabbos using plain grape juice—but Chasidim always try to do it with wine.

On Pesach, there are those who eat machine-made matzos—but there is the hidur, the “beautification,” of the mitzvah that demands only eating matzos made by hand, and Chasidim will pay a lot more money just to only eat such matzos.

On Chanukah, you can light a menorah with ordinary wax candles—but there is the hidur of lighting the menorah with the same kind of oil that was used in the Beis Hamikdash, and so Chasidim always try to light their menorahs with olive oil, and not just any olive oil but 100% extra virgin olive oil. As a matter of fact, the Rebbe said many times that the identifying sign of a Chasid is that he is “mehader” in mitzvos.

Make It Alive

The third and most important rule of all with regards to the Four Species is that they are forbidden to be dry. If one of the four is dry and shriveled, it invalidates the entire mitzvah of lulav. The lulav (and the esrog, hadasim and aravos) must be moist and fresh—if it’s wilting, you have to exchange it for another one.

And here too, along comes Chasidism and says that the most important thing for a Jew to be is to be fresh and alive. To be full of vitality and vigor. A Jew who keeps the mitzvos out of rote is “dead.” He’s dry. True, some Jews can be compared to the willow twig—no taste, no aroma. But at least he’s alive. That’s better than a Jew who’s an esrog—filled with Torah and mitzvos, but a dry esrog, a person unmoved and unexcited by keeping mitzvos. His connection with G-d doesn’t inspire him. He’s a “dry” Jew.

The message, my friends, is that we must be Jews who are full of life.

So this Sukkos, let us try to be livelier, more vigorous Jews. Let us try to do our mitzvos in the finest manner possible, with whatever hidur we might be comfortable to adopt. Let us make the mitzvos not just G-d’s mitzvos but our mitzvos. Let us try to internalize them. And let us remember that all Jews are equal.