



Sacrificing for Other Jews

Golda Meir was asked by IDF soldiers during the Yom Kippur War, "What is the point of this sacrifice?" She answered with a poignant story about the resilience of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union, and helped them see the bigger picture. On Sukkos, according to Rabbi Akiva, we celebrate the resilience of the Jewish people in the desert. Remember – whenever faced with a decision about Jewish observance, don't lose sight of the bigger picture.

Winning While Losing

At Sukkos of the year 5734, or in October of 1973, a few days after the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, then-Prime Minister Golda Meir decided to visit Israel's soldiers stationed in the southern Golan Heights. This was after a bitter battle in which Israeli tanks had succeeded in stopping a fierce Syrian attack.

So Prime Minister Meir flew to the Golan Heights, where she got a real-time update on exactly where the battle was happening. At that same moment, she also noticed a unit of religious soldiers standing in a mobile sukkah praying the Shacharis morning service with talleisim on their shoulders and lulavim in their hands. She said that she wanted to approach the group and speak with them. However, when she drew near, she discovered that they were deep in prayer. So she respectfully waited.

When they finished reciting their prayers, she addressed them by saying, "Chag Samayach!" ("Happy Holiday!") Startled, they turned

around to discover no less than the Prime Minister herself standing before them. Now, this was a reserve unit that had been pressed into service straight from Yom Kippur synagogue services, and they had not seen their families since. Prime Minister Meir first asked them how they were doing, then wanting to know what they did in their civilian lives.

Then she said: “Does anyone have any questions for me?”

Silence descended upon the small crowd. Then, one young soldier spoke up: “I have a question,” he began.

“My father was killed in the War of Independence, but we won. My uncle was killed in the 1956 war, but we won. My brother was killed in the Six-Day War, but we won. Last week, I lost my good friend here in battle, and I am sure that in the end we will win. But are all these sacrifices worth it? What is all this worth if we can’t live here in peace?”

Thank You For Remaining Jewish

Golda Meir was silent for several moments. She then addressed the soldier. She said, “I cry and mourn for all these losses. In my bed at night, I think about all of them and their families. And I must tell you that if this war was just about us and for us, it’s likely that you’re right. But if our sacrifices are for the entire Jewish Nation, then I believe with all my heart that it’s worth any price.”

She went on, recalling how in 1948, she had been appointed as Israel’s first representative to Soviet Union.

It was during an era then when Stalin ruled with an iron fist. All religious activities were strictly banned. Anyone caught serving as a mohel or shochet, or teaching Judaism in any form, would at best be sent to Siberia, or simply shot to death. Jews would put on tefillin under their blankets so that their own kids wouldn’t see them

performing religious activities and then happen to drop one unnecessary word at school. And as part of that regime, Russian Jews were absolutely forbidden to forge any connection with staff of the Israeli embassy or consulate.

So Golda Meir got to Moscow in the month of Tishrei, and during the holidays, the Israeli diplomatic staff went to pray at the Great Synagogue of Moscow.

The first time they got there, there was only a small crowd present, because no one knew that Israel's diplomatic corps would be going to shul.

So the next time they came, it was Simchas Torah, and this time, tens of thousands of Jews filled the streets—mothers with babies in arms, old and young alike. Even Jewish soldiers in the Red Army showed up. Despite all the dangers and threats from the regime, Jews came to express their support and love for the Land of Israel.

So Golda Meir entered the synagogue, and people simply wanted to touch her and say to her, “Shalom Aleichem!” or “Gut Yontif!” She replied to all of them in Yiddish, “Adank eich far blaiben Yidden” (thank you for staying Jews). It was one mighty display of family love and bonding.

Now speaking to the soldiers in 1973, she concluded that it was at that moment in her life that she understood that what happens in the Land of Israel influences the entire Nation of Israel, all the Jewish people.

Do We Celebrate G-d or Us?

This brings us to the Sukkos holiday at hand.

This holiday is called Sukkos, of course, after its primary mitzvah, the sukkah.

The Torah (Vayikra 23:42-43) commands us: “For a seven-day period you shall live in booths. Every resident among the Israelites shall live in booths... in order that your [ensuing] generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt.”

On these verses, the Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 11a) cites a dispute between the Sages over what exactly it is that we are remembering when we sit in our sukkah booths. According to Rabbi Eliezer, it is the Ananei HaKavod, the Clouds of Glory, that we are reminded of by the sukkah. According to Rabbi Akiva, they literally made booths for themselves, and it is those that we are reminded of by the sukkah.

Thus, according to Rabbi Eliezer, it is the supernatural and miraculous giant walls made of cloud that surrounded the entire Jewish Nation while it wandered the desert. These Clouds of Glory served them as guides, showing them in which direction they were supposed to go.

Additionally, the Clouds miraculously also served as a giant heating and cooling system. It goes without saying that a desert can get hot during the day—and, as many people may be unaware, really cold during the night. So the Clouds of Glory protected the Jewish Nation from temperature extremes throughout their 40 years in the desert.

To sum up, Rabbi Eliezer holds that we remember the great miracle of G-d protecting us with the Clouds of Glory, and so we sit in the sukkah.

But according to the opinion of Rabbi Akiva, which holds that the Jews built actual sukkos for themselves, we can still ask the question: What exactly are we remembering on the holiday of Sukkos? There was no miracle here!

In other words, every Jewish holiday commemorates some miracle or supernatural event: Pesach reminds us of the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt, Shavuot reminds us of the miraculous Giving of the Torah

(thunder, lightning, smoke and all), and Sukkos reminds us of the miracle of the Clouds of Glory—but not according to the view of Rabbi Akiva, which says that Sukkos simply reminds us of the huts that the Jews built for themselves. So what is the miracle?

Rabbi Akiva Loved the People

In a Sichah of Parshas Vayishlach 5731, the Rebbe quotes the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 110b), which says there that Rabbi Akiva was a “Chasid,” a very pious person, and he was very stringent when it came to the merits and good points of the Jewish Nation. Every time he had the opportunity to find whatever merit or defense for a Jewish person, or Jews as a whole, he would state it. On this, the Rebbe adds that Rabbi Akiva was even prepared to leave the Land of Israel and travel off to the islands of the sea—all just to find merit for the Jewish People. (Sichos Kodesh 5731, Vol. I, pg. 243 at length.) (This is to teach us what is a Chasid—someone who finds merit for another Jew.)

And perhaps we can say that this is why Rabbi Akiva was the one who held that the entire concept of the sukkah is to remember the sukkos that the Jews built in the desert—because in saying so, Rabbi Akiva wanted to stress that the holiday of Sukkos is there to remind us of the greatness of the Jewish Nation, which traveled the desert for 40 years living in simple huts but still never gave up or lost hope. As the Prophet Yirmiyahu (2:2) says, “So said the L-rd: ‘I remember to you the lovingkindness of your youth... your following Me in the desert...’”

In other words, Rabbi Akiva’s innovation is that the entire theme or mission of Sukkos, so to speak, is to emphasize the greatness and merit of the Jewish Nation—to remind G-d, so to speak, of the sacrifice of the Jewish Nation upon leaving Egypt, and thus find merit upon the entire Jewish Nation.

Do It For the Entire Nation

And the lesson, my friends, is clear to us: It sometimes happens that a

person says to himself or herself that he or she doesn't see any importance to some specific mitzvah. For example, he may not be interested in building a sukkah this year—in earlier years, he built a sukkah for the kids, but now they're all grown up and he doesn't want to bother build a sukkah for just him and his wife. For him, the shul sukkah is enough.

To this, the answer is: Every mitzvah that a person does, besides the influence that the mitzvah has on him or her, also influences the entire Jewish Nation.

So if a person who built a sukkah every year suddenly doesn't put up a sukkah this year, his Jewish neighbor is likely to think to himself that if he, the "religious" one who put up a sukkah every year, compromised on it this year, then I can allow myself to not celebrate the Sukkos holiday at all. So we must remember that we don't live on the Moon—rather, every good deed or act we do has an effect on others.

So now, my friends, the happy holiday of Simchas Torah is rapidly approaching—and here, too, we might hear the same excuses: "I used to bring the kids for the dancing, but now, the kids are all grown up, and I'm not exactly up to dancing myself nowadays—it's not for me."

If we know someone who thinks that way, we might remind him that coming to dance on Simchas Torah is not just about him. True, he's already danced enough and his children have all flown the nest—but in his community, there are other Jewish children, and who will dance with them if not him? When he was a kid, somebody put him on his shoulders and so, today, he should come to shul and put another Jewish kid on his shoulders. True, that kid may not be your son or even your grandson—but he's a Jewish child into whose soul you can sear the holiday of Simchas Torah.