

September 17, 2021

Rabbi Wexler – *Ha'Azinu*

I hope everyone had a meaningful Yom Kippur. Yes, Yom Kippur was only yesterday but now that we have broken our fasts and enjoyed our bagels and lox, our attention moves immediately to the next holiday: Sukkot. The festival of Sukkot begins just five days after Yom Kippur. Why are the two holidays so close together?

Believe it or not, Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle might provide us with an answer. The teacher and student had a famous debate which is depicted in a painting by Raphael known as “the School of Athens.” At the center of the painting stand Plato pointing towards the heavens and Aristotle pointing towards the ground. According to Plato, the greater reality is found in a spiritual world beyond this one, what he called the world of the forms. According to Aristotle, there is no world of the forms, only this real material world in which we live.

Plato and Aristotle began a great debate; a debate that has continued between religious thinkers, philosophers, and theologians throughout Western civilization until today. Is the ideal world some spiritual reality, as Plato taught? Or is the ideal world, like Aristotle taught, this material reality, where we live our day to day lives? This debate brings us squarely to Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

Yom Kippur is our most spiritual festival. We attempt to leave the physical world behind. We do not do the things that make us material beings – eat, drink, bathe, work, etc. We wear white, the color that angels would wear. Yom Kippur is seen as a rehearsal of our own deaths, our passing into the spiritual world. However, Yom Kippur does not last forever. It’s only one day. We can’t live without shmeor and whitefish for too long.

Five days later comes Sukkot, our most material festival. We leave our homes to eat, and some people actually live, in Sukkot, temporary dwellings. We are exposed to the elements. We wave four species of plants in every physical direction, and march around the synagogue with them. We are material creatures and on Sukkot we come back to earth, to our material world. Through celebrating Sukkot, we realize that our task is to help perfect the material world. Rather than only finding God in heaven, we must also work to bring God to earth.

As we prepare to turn to Sukkot in a few days, may we continue to inscribe our names in the Book of Life by remembering that life is not about some other world or making it to heaven. Instead, life is about this world. Life is about today. Life is about creating heaven on earth.