

The Inner Beauty of Sukkot

Chol Hamoed Sukkot 2011

The Jewish Center

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In this season of so many sermons, I thought we could do something a little less ambitious this morning. My goal is simply to understand one line from our Yom Tov davening.

We say it every day during Hoshanos. It's just four words long: We call out **אני והו' הושיע נא**. It's an ancient saying that dates all the way back to the Mishna if not to the Temple itself.

So would anyone like to venture a translation?

In deference the many machzorim and siddurim that we use and have used here at The Jewish Center, I did a little research that I'm happy to share with you:

- Artscroll renders it: Ani Vaho bring salvation now. Very helpful.
- The old Adler Machzor has it as O Eternal, we beseech thee, save us now – a translation that really has almost nothing at all to do with the Hebrew.
- Hoping that Chief Rabbi Sacks would have a formulation that is both relevant and elegant, we find instead that his Koren Siddur follows the model of the late Philip Birnbaum. He sidesteps the issue entirely by not translating any of Hoshanos.

So we have next to nothing to go on: A transliteration, two refusals to translate, and a rendering that is not at all connected to the text.

In fairness, there is an esoteric explanation that **אני והו'** are two in a series of 72 three-letter names of Hashem. But our Center tends to be made up of more rationalists than mystics. So we're stuck. How do we understand such a central line in our Sukkos davening when it seems so resolutely to defy translation?

Allow me to share with you an explanation based on a comment of the Torah Temimah (Ex. 15:12). He connects our obscure line with a piece of Talmudic exegesis in Maseches Shabbos (133b). As we say in Az Yashir every morning, **זה קלי ואנוהו** – this is my God and I shall glorify Him. Recognizing that it's not possible in a literal way to beautify God, the gemara poses two possible interpretations. The first is well-known:

התנאה לפניו במצות; עשה לפניו סוכה נאה, ולולב נאה, ושופר נאה, ציצית נאה, ספר תורה נאה וכתוב בו לשמו בדיו נאה, בקולמוס נאה, בלב לר אומן וכורכו בשיראין נאין

Be beautiful in front of God by making your mitzvos as beautiful as possible: A nice sukkah, a nice lulav, a nice shofar, and so on.

But then the Gemara proposes a second possibility:

אבא שאול אומר: ואנוהו - הוי דומה לו: מה הוא חנון ורחום - אף אתה היה חנון ורחום.

According to Abba Shaul, to glorify God means to be like God. Just as he is merciful and compassionate, you be merciful and compassionate.

It's very poetic, but where does Abba Shaul see this in the text? How does he make the leap from ואנוהו – I will glorify him – to הוי דומה לו – be like him?

Rashi explains that it's actually a very short leap. For the word ואנוהו – is really just a contraction of the words אני והוא.

אעשה עצמי כמותו לדבק בדרכיו.

I will make myself like Him. I'll imitate Him. I'll be on His team. It will be Ani V'hu – we'll be together.

Returning to our opening question: Ani V'ho is code for Ani V'hu – it's code for the virtue of ואנוהו.

As the Torah Temimah explains, Abba Shaul isn't disagreeing with the first approach; he embraces it fully. His approach is additive. Of course we should bring glory to God's name by procuring the most beautiful lulav and esrog we can find. But that doesn't obviate the need for us to act in a way that is befitting someone created in the image of God.

There is no time of the year in which we are more overtly and consciously concerned with the aesthetic. Just look at our beautiful shul, our stunning sukkah, our lovely arba minim. Growing up I can remember years when we searched through dozens upon dozens of lulavim and esrogim to find the ones that were just right.

As the Gemara encourages us to, we make it a value to care about the way things look on Sukkos. So perhaps it's no coincidence that precisely at the moment we have taken up the symbols of the aesthetic, we pause to revisit the second dimension of this important dynamic. We stop and attempt to internalize the notion that our goal is really to synthesize the two: At once to pour our whole selves into the beautification and sanctification of God's mitzvos in all their intricate detail, and at the same time to comport ourselves according to Abba Shaul's ethic of אני והוא – in a way that attaches sanctity to the name of Hashem.

The two answers of the Gemara really represent two fundamentally different philosophical outlooks: two poles on a vast spectrum of Jewish engagement. At one extreme is the first type: The person interested in Hiddur mitzvah – the details person. Anything less than the proverbial perfect Esrog is unacceptable. This type tends to be hyper-organized and extremely responsible. She's not particularly reflective or especially sensitive, but her tzeddakah checkbook is always up-to-date. She buys her שהחיינו fruit for the second night of Rosh Hashana before it's even in season. For her, the mitzvos are paramount and she lives her life accordingly.

On the opposite pole is the Jew much more interested in being מקדש שם שמים – in Judaism's role in the world. She's not overly scrupulous about mitzvos; the most important aspects of Judaism for her are not duties, but people. She davens not so much out of a sense of obligation, but because she loves shul and the melodies move her. She sees the divine in other people and tends to value emotional intelligence over rigorous religious observance. For her, the main thing is to be a good person and a good Jew.

Each of us naturally falls somewhere in the middle, but we surely incline at least a little toward one of these two poles. What an extraordinary moment: To stand with lulav and esrog in hand – the very paradigms of הידור מצוה – and proclaim aloud אני והו' הושיע נא – it will be when we model our behavior after God's – when we are as scrupulous about people as we are about mitzvos – that the true salvation will come.