

The Particulars of Universalism

Sukkot 2017

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After the gravity of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I usually try to begin Sukkot with something light or funny. But I'm afraid the events of this past week have taken all the wind out of my sails.

There's no escaping the tension we all feel today.

On the one hand, we sit here as Americans and human beings horrified and grieving over the deadliest mass shooting in our country's history. And it's a kind of doubled sadness. There's the pain we feel for the victims and their families. And then there's the pain we feel about living in a world that produces this kind of evil.

And at the same time, we sit here as Jews celebrating our most joyous holiday. We're surrounded by all that's lush and beautiful. This is זמן שמחתינו – Sukkot is meant to be our happiest time of the year.

How do we reconcile these competing emotions?

Before turning to this question, let me share with you a different kind of tension.

Thinking about Sukkot as part of the שלש רגלים, it is by far and away the most universalistic of the three. Pesach and Shavuot are about very specific aspects of Jewish identity. Exodus and revelation are exclusively Jewish. But Sukkot has an additional dimension.

- As we'll read in the Haftorah from Zechariah, we dream of the day when this Yom Tov will be celebrated by all humanity:

וְהָיָה, כָּל-הַנּוֹתֵר מִכָּל-הַגּוֹיִם, הַבָּאִים, עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם; וְעָלוּ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה, לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לְמֶלֶךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת, וְלָהוֹג, אֶת-הַגַּג הַטְּפוֹת.

Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

- The fact that we offer 70 bulls over the course of the holiday is also significant. ל"חזו"ל say this suggests that we're acting not only on our own behalf, but on behalf of all 70 nations.
- And of course when we pray for rain, it's not just for us, but for all humankind. As the Mishna tells us, the whole world is judged for rain at this time.

On this reading, there is something about Sukkot that is decidedly universalist.

At the same time, however, there is something about Sukkot that's profoundly particularistic.

Think of the Arba minim. They're the produce of the Jewish land meant to represent different kinds of Jews all coming to together in the service of the divine.

And it's true even sociologically. The world has assimilated our most prominent symbols and icons. Anyone on the street can identify a menorah or a matzah or a shofar. Show them a picture of some *aravot*... and you're sure to get a blank stare at best.

So what does it mean to celebrate a schizophrenic holiday? Are we meant to focus on fellow Jews or should we be paying attention to the wider world? Do we turn inward or do we turn outward?

The answer is not simply that Sukkot is a time to acknowledge or embrace both the ethics of particularism and universalism. There's something much subtler and much more important going on. What I want to suggest is that the Mitzvah of Sukkah is a kind of bridge between these two ideals.

Like the Arba Minim, the Sukkah is totally particularistic. It tells our story. Either literally or with the clouds of Glory, God sheltered us in the wilderness for 40 years. That never happened to anyone else. But it goes even further. In all its temporariness, the Sukkah is the very embodiment of Jewish history itself. We are eternal wanderers. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, other nations build palaces and triumphal arcs. We build a Sukkah.

And that's the symbolism of the Ushpizin, too. Into our home for wanderer, we invite the wandering Jews of Tanakh: From Avraham to David: All travelers – all individuals who never entirely reached their destination. Which is why we don't include Shlomo: he doesn't fit the pattern.

But it's this unique aspect of our story and our identity that enables us to see the world from a universalistic perspective, too.

As the Torah tells us so often, we were strangers – so we understand the fate of the stranger.

ואהבתם את הגר כי גרים הייתם.

We have a special Mitzvah to love the stranger because we were strangers. But I would actually translated it a little differently: We were wanderers. The גר is the sojourner – the person without a home.

People are displaced, oppressed, victimized – we can sympathize because we've been there before. It's by focusing first on our particular story that allows us to then broaden our lens see the world from a wider perspective.

David Brooks once put this very well.

“It's a paradox that the artists who have the widest global purchase are also the ones who have created the most local and distinctive story landscapes. Millions of people around the world are ferociously attached to ... J.K. Rowling's version of a British boarding school or Downton

Abbey's ... version of an Edwardian estate. It makes you appreciate the tremendous power of particularity."

The best way to develop a sense of shared humanity that transcends the bonds of family or tribe, is first to establish the bonds of family and tribe. If we know our own story really well, we'll have an easier time understanding other people's stories.

Of course there's no good way to reconcile the tension we feel today. But in the end, it's not just that we hold both perspectives at once. It's that our particularism positions us to excel at universalism.

As members of the Jewish people, we have so much to celebrate – and nothing can diminish our celebration. Even someone who should rightfully be sitting shivah gets up and joins the community today. Our national joy supersedes individual grief.

But it's precisely when we become conscious of our own particular identity that we become better able to see ourselves as part of something larger.

By way of contrast: the storylines in the media are taken up with the mystery of the shooter's motive; the details of the arsenal he assembled; and the debate over gun control legislation. All of these are interesting – and maybe even important.

But we Jews see a very different story. We picture in our mind's eye a crush of people in a desert at the mercy of forces beyond their control with no protection, no shelter and no recourse. And we think of our own ancestors and we imagine their sense of vulnerability, anxiety and utter terror – and all of the sudden it's not a very big leap from the Midbar to Las Vegas.

To sit in the Sukkah is to be reminded of a narrative that is uniquely and inimitably Jewish. We look up at the סכך and we know what it means to have faith and what it means to be members of God's chosen people. But then we look past the סכך and see the stars and we're reminded of our place in the cosmos. We're reminded that every human being looks up to the same heavens from the same earth and dreams the same dream: The dream of living in a world that's decent and safer and prosperous.

May the Almighty spread his Sukkah of peace over us and over all humankind.

וּפְרוּשׁ סֻכַּת שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל-כָּל-הָעוֹלָם
וּבְאִמְרַת אֱמֶן.