

The Invisible Stump Sukkot 2019

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In Israel, it's quite common for regional councils to hold competitions for the most beautiful sukkah. Participants aren't building models; actual Sukkahs are viewed and judged. Obviously the results are typically contested and no actual winner can be announced. But the idea is a good one. Because among our goals is to produce a Sukkah that's not just utilitarian, but aesthetically pleasing.

The idea is based on the line we say every day in davening: זה קלי ואנוהו. We can't make God beautiful, but we can certainly make His mitzvot beautiful. So we don't settle for just any Etrog; we find the nicest Etrog – the most beautiful. And we don't just slap together a sukkah; we don't settle for the bare bones; we do whatever we can to enhance it.

Of course this ethic applies all the time. But when we think of preparing for the seder, we don't have a seder table decorating event.

The ethic of הידור מצוה it seems is most pronounced on Sukkot. And perhaps it's no accident. For the pasuk itself already alludes to the notion. The Torah doesn't ever mention the term Etrog. We're told about a פרי עץ הדר – a beautiful fruit.

The Karaites, in fact, had no tradition of an Etrog. But they agreed that whatever fruit you were using had to be beautiful.

But at the same time, there's a competing ethic.

The sukkah itself has to be – by definition – impermanent. And not just impermanent – but something even more striking. And of course when we talk about the sukkah, we refer to the סכך. The walls can be made out of anything. But what's the סכך made out of?

חג הסוכות תעשה לך שבועת ימים באספה מגרנה ומיקרה.
למד שמסכין את הסוכה בפסולת גורן ויקב

It's the chaff; the refuse; the leftovers from the harvest – the stuff you would otherwise discard.

And that's the halacha – it can't be anything which is still attached to the ground – so it's by definition not living anymore. And it can't be something that's been fashioned by human hands. So it's bound to be something – not just temporary – but quite literally disposable. Putting aside the reusable bamboo that lasts for as long as it lasts – סכך is always going to be just one step away from the garbage.

So there's a great tension that grips the holiday of Sukkot. In one breath the halacha insists on hiddur. In the next, it tells us make do with the rubbish.

How do we reconcile it?

If you want to tell me זה קלי ואנוהו – Mitzvot should be elevated and elegant:

- I'll buy a silver Kiddush cup and I'll hold it every week.
- I'll buy a beautiful Mezuzah and it'll hang on my doorpost for the rest of my life.
- I'll buy an expensive Megillah or a stunning Menorah and I'll use it every year.

But what does it mean to insist on an ethic of מצוה הדור when it comes to something that's not just ephemeral – but disposable?

A couple months ago I read an article in the *Economist* that caught my attention. Two ecologists were hiking in New Zealand when they came across a kauri tree stump. The average passerby would surely have assumed it was dead. They never would have given it a second thought. But the ecologists noticed that it was very much alive. Scientists have acknowledged for some time the existence of what they call the wood wide web – a subterranean network of symbiotic fungi that trees use to communicate. But how a stump can survive without leaves for photosynthesis has been a longstanding mystery.

In a study published in the journal *iScience*, Dr. Sebastian Leuzinger and Martin Bader argued that the kauri stump lives by sharing water with neighboring trees. Most likely, they're connected through an underground plumbing system formed when their roots naturally fused together. So while trees may appear solitary aboveground, they're intimately connected underground.

In and of itself I found the study a breathtaking window onto the intricacy of God's created world. It's stunning.

But why would neighboring trees support a stump that's outlived its usefulness? From an evolutionary perspective it makes no sense. Why expend valuable resources preserving a relic with no reproductive capacity?

The scientists have a few guesses, but the question is substantially stronger than any of their hypotheses. And so they are – well, stumped. “We probably know more about the surface of the moon than how a tree internally functions,” said Dr. Leuzinger.

I'm certainly not in a position to venture a scientific answer to the question. But the theological solution seems fairly obvious.

If the stump still has a function to perform in this world – whatever it may be – its friends and family will naturally support it. Just because a given plant is past its prime doesn't mean it has no value.

And perhaps this is the governing theme of Sukkot.

Environmentalists may see imbedded in this argument an early nod to the notion of re-use. But I see something much bigger.

The Torah calls on us to do something quite profound.

First, it tells us not to discard what otherwise would surely be discarded. Take the remnants from your threshing floor and preserve them.

Next, it tells us to elevate them – quite literally. Take those remnants and put them on the roof of your Sukkah. They will become a *הפצה של מצויה*.

By putting them to this special use, you will sanctify them.

But then the halachah asks us to go even further. Decorate them; adorn them; beautify them. Yes, it's true, the day after Sukkot they really will be refuse and you really will discard them. But for the time being: Treat them like the treasures they are. Without them, you have no mitzvah; without them you have no Sukkah.

Sometimes on Sukkot we get stuck in a vocabulary of temporariness and the fragility of life. But I think there's quite a bit more to think about.

Very often in Judaism, objects are a stand-in for people.

Why didn't Moshe perform the first two plagues? Because the sand and sea had saved him.

Why do we cover the challah when we make Kiddush? So as not to *insult* the bread.

It's not about the object onto which we project a given value – it's about us. When it comes to the plagues or the challah, we're supposed to internalize the notions of appreciation or sensitivity.

And so it is when it comes to the *סכך*.

We take something that's not very pretty; has no intrinsic value; and has no staying power. We put it on a pedestal and we say: "This is our mitzvah!"

It's on us to transpose this ethic onto people. It's on us to see people for the treasures they are.

Of course it's a message that applies to people like doormen, mail carriers, security guards, bus drivers – right on down the list.

But I have another group of people in mind: People in our community who go unseen.

- Maybe they're not exactly in our social group or our demographic.
- Maybe they don't sit in our corner of the shul.
- Maybe we don't even know their names.

But they're here. And they're members of our community. You never know when showing someone a little attention can go a long way.

Jessica Gross told me a story recently about her father when she was sitting shiva. He was advertising executive and he taught a course as an adjunct professor at Baruch College. And there was one particular student who had a terrible lisp and never really participated in class. But when it came time to write a paper, it was clear to Prof. Gross that this was an exceptionally

talented young man. He sought him out. He met with him, told him what a gift he had and encouraged him to cultivate it.

Years later, the young man had achieved great acclaim his field and always attributed his success to the moment Prof. Gross identified him and saw him for who he could be.

Sure: Life is about relationships that accumulate and develop over time.

But we also have to have the vision to see the people who will otherwise go unseen. Like the trees supporting the stump that everyone passes by: There may be no self-interest. There may be no long term goal. But someone is looking out for their neighbor.

That's the world of the Sukkah:

Think of the Midrashim:

The Sukkah that's big enough to accommodate the entire Jewish people.

The Sukkah that's big enough to host all the Ushpizin.

So much of Sukkot is about seeing:

- Sukkah above 20 amot is disqualified because the schach will be out of view;
- Schach can't be so thick that it obscures your view of the stars;
- And our whole discussion of beauty is all about appearances.

It's all of a piece.

Part of our goal is to develop the quality of Avraham Avinu: an *ayin tovah* – a keen eye.

To see the beauty of the סֶכֶךְ is to see the treasures that otherwise go unnoticed – to attach value to them – to make sure we give them the care and attention they so richly deserve.