

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

Don't Worry, Be Happy?

This coming Shabbat marks the beginning of the Festival of Sukkot, the eight-day harvest celebration. Sukkot is such a physical and emotional change of pace from the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. During the High Holy Days we anticipate long hours of prayer, reflection, and repentance in the sanctuary. The walls of the sanctuary provide a warm embrace, a spiritual hug that comforts us as we consider the path, the purpose, and the meaning of our lives. But on Sukkot, we go outside and spend as much time as possible under a temporary booth with a roof protected only by some loose branches. Under the *sukkah* we are exposed to the elements. We may feel the wind and the brisk air of fall or the heat of the sun. Nature's noise buzzes around us, chirping and flying, barking and howling and reminding us that this big, beautiful world is beyond our control.

At first it takes a little time to make the transition from the cloistered sanctity of the Days of Awe to the natural openness of Sukkot. Of course, the first step is mustering the energy and rousting yourself out of bed in order to assemble the wood and tools to build a *sukkah* the day after Yom Kippur. Oy! My mind finds a thousand reasons why I should put it off for another

day or two. But my heart reminds me that I'll be much happier when the *sukkah* is up. My heart is right.

Still, the mind doesn't give up so easily: "This year is different. Right? Most were not in the synagogues for the High Holy Days. And why build a *sukkah* when you can't have a lot of guests over? So the heart reminds us to read the special Torah portion for this Shabbat, the section of Leviticus that teaches about Sukkot:

³⁹ Mark, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of Adonai to last seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰ On the first day you shall take the fruit of a goodly tree (an *etrog*), branches of palm trees, twigs from leafy trees and from willows of the brook, **and you shall rejoice** (*u'smachtem*) before Adonai your God seven days.

⁴¹ You shall observe it as a festival of Adonai for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. ⁴² You shall live in booths (*sukkot*) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³ in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I Adonai your God.

(Leviticus 23:39-43)

Sukkot is the only festival on which we are commanded to rejoice and be happy. But how can a person be commanded to be happy?

Even under normal circumstances one can't be cajoled to glee and joy. But now, after seven months of a pandemic, in the midst of a horrifically divisive political environment, happiness is too much to expect, let alone command. Well, that's at least what the head says. The heart? Well, the heart says, simply go outside and see the spectacular sunsets. Go outside and let the fresh air tickle your skin. Go outside and let the sun kiss your cheeks. And then, go outside and sit in a *sukkah*, take hold of an *etrog* and a *lulav*, wave them about to all directions, smell the tangy aroma of the fruit, and consider all that is in life for which to give thanks. Yes, even in the most difficult time, there is sweetness, blessings and happiness.

Ah, on Sukkot listen to the heart. Listen to the heart and be happy!

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Sukkot Sameiach!

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