



Ha'azinu-Succot 5781: Earth Song

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God.

Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature.

— Anne Frank

Having just spent a day essentially unhooked from the external world and our basic amenities on Yom Kippur, and having examined the direction of our lives on Rosh HaShana, we now transition back into the world and begin tending to our daily affairs for the new year.

The passage back from the Days of Awe into our daily lives is tricky. Rather than just return to business as usual, we want the inspiration and awareness of those ten auspicious days to remain in our souls and consciousness throughout the year. The Torah does not leave us to transition back into the world without guidance and support. For just over a week following Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur we celebrate the festival of Succot, a time given to us to re-engage with the ever-present challenges of our lives.

We begin doing this by receiving the world on its own terms. We accept its transience in the temporary dwelling of the *Succa*, and we appreciate the grace of its natural beauty by using the flora from our beloved homeland Israel, the *etrog* (citron), the *lulav* (palm branch), *hadas* (myrtle) and *'araba* (willow) in our prayers.

The lulav and etrog are markedly different from any other paraphernalia we use in our repertoire of mitzvot. While we use natural materials in our *tephilin*, *tsitsit*, and *sepher Torah* for instance, they are processed and made into items that are specifically designed for the mitzvah. The lulav and etrog however are simply taken from the tree and used as they are. We add nothing to them but our consciousness.

When we take the lulav, we are accepting the world on its own terms and incorporating it into the human mind and being. We embrace the natural world and celebrate it as home.

Succot falls at the time of year when the northern hemisphere of the earth tilts away from the sun and moves into its dormant winter. The leaves on the trees wither and fall, daylight becomes fleeting and the cold air clashes with our warm blood. With the seasonal change at Succot we are reminded of how precious the earth's produce is to us as we prepare to bid our farewell until their return in the spring.



Just before the stark days of winter we take eight days in autumn to respect the earth from which we were taken and to which we will return, and to celebrate the meaning that the human mind brings to its otherwise inherently miscellaneous contents.

Please Lord! On this day seal a blessing for the wheat, barley and spelt!

Please Lord! Bless the oats and rye!

Please Lord! Bless the rice, beans and lentils!

The olives...the grapes, figs and cumin...

The walnuts, dates and apples!

Peanuts, almonds and pomegranates!...

All the vegetables and seeds! (Prayer for Circuits of Hoshana Rabba - Sephardi Rite)

Before we begin building our homes and lives around us we acknowledge that we are of the earth, that we come from it and return to it, and that if we are to grow in any capacity upon it we must first acknowledge our natural existence, its transience and the beauty and uniqueness that it brings with it.

In that basic acceptance we establish firm footing for dealing with the complexities of life that are bound to develop over the year. Succot helps to properly orient us by placing the beginnings of our year in nature, and thus our own humanity. When we are comfortable in our own skin and upon our own mother earth and we commune with the nature of our planet and our lives upon it, we can begin to build truly substantive layers of meaning and complexity upon its foundation.

It is fitting then, that we read Moshe's poem in perashat *Ha'azinu* this Shabbat which speaks of the struggle of the Jewish people over history to reach their greatest potentials. Moshe opens by calling heaven and earth to bear witness to his words.

Listen heavens, that I may speak. Hear earth, the utterance of my mouth. (32:1)

He envelopes his words in metaphors of nature.

Let my teaching drip like rain

let my words flow like dew

like droplets on the foliage

like showers on the grass....(32:2)

This, because he believed that the steady laws of nature would be the most faithful witnesses¹ to the contents of his address.

¹ See Rashi, *ibid.*



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As we embark upon the new year and aim to develop a greater degree of personal integrity and relationship with God, we pause and touch upon the nature of our planet and our lives upon it and find happiness in its sweet and familiar embrace².

² This is indeed meant to be the experience of Succot and one reason that we call it the 'Festival of Happiness'. It is also why if one is experiencing considerable discomfort in the Succa he is no longer obligated to sit within it. See Succa, 25b; Shulhan Arukh, OH, 640:4.

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