

# Sukkot: Here Today ...

By Senior Rabbi Joseph Dweck

A story is told in the Talmud<sup>1</sup> of Rabbi Eliezer, who had fallen ill. Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. Upon entering the house Rabbi Yohanan lifted his sleeve and it is said that the house filled with light. Upon seeing this Rabbi Eliezer began to cry. Rabbi Yohanan asked him why he was crying and Rabbi Eliezer responded “I am crying over your beauty that will one day be swallowed by the earth”.

The despair that Rabbi Eliezer felt over the transience of beauty has also filled the thoughts and writings of the world’s greatest philosophers and poets. The fact is, however, that all will die; our loved ones, our sun, our earth, our universe. Yet, after all this time knowing that death inevitably comes to all living things, we human beings still have not come to terms with the reality; we refuse to accept the fleeting nature of life as normal. There is good reason for this.

Somewhere, deep in our hearts we know that eternity is a reality and that the impermanence of the love and beauty that we know in this world is a violation of what existence should be. Love, truth and beauty are the closest things that we have to eternity in this world and the passing of any of them to us is, rightfully, an aberration.

On Sukkot we focus on the reality of life’s transience. We build a temporary dwelling, the *succah*, and we live our lives for seven days in a place that is inherently provisional. But it is especially when we face life’s impermanence that we feel most profoundly that beauty must find its place beyond destruction. Facing the fleeting beauties of life we have two choices of response: we can throw ourselves into the moments as we have them and we can feel completely, love intensely, act enthusiastically and experience totally, the radiance of the present — even with an undercurrent of sadness, knowing all the while that it will not last and the pain of saying goodbye will come. Or we can stand back and embrace the creed of “no attachment”, pretending not to care and not to feel in fear that we will one day have to feel the pain of letting go.

If we look to Yaakov avinu, we see that he chose the former. When he was in the house of Lavan, he married his wives, had his children, raised his family and earned his wealth

there. He fully invested in all he was doing and he did it faithfully.

*It is twenty years now that I have been with you: your ewes and your she-goats have never miscarried, the rams from your flock I have never eaten, no torn beasts have I ever brought you — I would make good the loss, at my hand you would seek it, stolen by day or stolen by night!*<sup>2</sup>

Yet, when it came time to leave, he moved without hesitation, since Lavan was not “looking at him the same way anymore”<sup>3</sup>. He let the place in which he built all that he had, fall into the past. He knew from a dream he had years earlier, with a ladder that rose towards an eternal universe in the Heavens, that all that he loved here would wait for him and be forever valuable.

On Sukkot, like Yaakov Avinu, we learn to choose the former as well. We pour our hearts into the temporary, filling it with hard work and love. We take a fruit and greens from the earth that will barely last the 7 days and we rejoice amidst the evanescence knowing that with those very focused experiences we are crafting our eternal lives. There is no way to get around the fleeting nature of our world — with every passing moment we experience another death. Yet, with each ending, sacred closure is created which gives birth to a unique eternity that emerges from it all. Knowing this, we resolve on Sukkot to fight for the dying light and in doing so our joy is born out of our absolute demand for, and embracing of, eternity.

Moadim LeSimha



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<sup>1</sup> Berakhot, 5b

<sup>2</sup> Bereshit, 31:38-39

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 31:2