



“If I’m Here, Everything is Here”

REFLECTIONS ON Z’MAN SIMCHATEINU

Sukkot is defined as *Z’man Simchateinu*, the season of our rejoicing. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine true and authentic rejoicing while many of us are living under lockdown, in quarantine, or apart from our families. I wish to highlight a special aspect of Sukkot that might help us experience *Z’man Simchateinu* on a more profound level this year.

The pinnacle of the festivities during the era of the *Beit HaMikdash* was *Simchat Beit HaShoeva*, the Rejoicing of the Water-Drawing House. The Rabbis tell us: “One who has not seen the *Simchat Beit HaShoeva* has never seen rejoicing in their life.” (Mishnah, Sukkah 5:1) The Rabbis asked and answered: “Why is it referred to as ‘*Beit HaShoeva*’? Because from there they draw the Holy Spirit, as it states (Yeshayahu 12:3), ‘You will draw water in joy from the springs of salvation’” (Talmud Yerushalmi, Sukkah 22b).

Among the stories in the Talmud about this event is this puzzling statement: “When Hillel the Elder was rejoicing at the *Simchat Beit HaShoeva*, he said this: If I’m here, everything is here, and if I’m not here, who is here?” (Sukkah 53a). How can Hillel, our role model for humility, have said something that sounds so arrogant?

The explanation can be found in one of the most profound lessons of

Megillat Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), which we read on Sukkot: “For to a man who is good in His sight, He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner He has given an occupation to gather and to accumulate” (2:26). King Solomon’s frustration relates to his inability to find happiness in all his endless assets, possessions and properties. He was the richest of kings, but it did not give him a sense of security and joy. He says: “I built myself houses, and I planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted in them all sorts of fruit trees. I made myself pools of water to irrigate a forest sprouting with trees... I had possessions of cattle and flocks, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I accumulated for myself also silver and gold, and the treasures of the kings and the provinces” (2:4–8). After years of accumulating and gathering, he realizes it is all in vain because nothing external can make him happy in this world: “Then I turned [to look] at all my deeds that my hands had wrought and upon the toil that I had toiled to do, and behold everything is vanity and frustration, and there is no profit under the sun” (2:11).

According to Kohelet, the “sinner” is the person who misses out on life. He is the one who is obsessively occupied with gathering and accumulating wealth. The person who finds joy and happiness is the one who has the wisdom and the courage to realize our

happiness and our sense of security comes from within us and not from any external factor. That is why “being here” was everything for Hillel.

We tend to think of our brick homes as providing us with a sense of safety and belonging. But in truth, as long as our safety depends on external factors, we will remain inherently insecure and unhappy. Our careers, expertise, accomplishments and assets do not define who we are. It is our deeper purpose in the world that brings meaning to our lives and gives us the sense we belong here.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook writes: “I must find my happiness within myself, not from social acceptance, not from my career nor anything else. The more I will know myself, the more I allow myself to be original and stand on my own – with an inner awareness combined with wisdom, emotion, poetry – the more the light of G-d will enlighten me and the more my strengths will evolve to become a blessing to me and the world” (*Arpilei Tohar*, p31).

True happiness is not defined by our social strata. It is not achieved through the acquisition of wealth, nor is it a result of any pleasurable experience. True happiness is based on the courage to present who we truly are. That is why there is no more appropriate timing to learn the message of Kohelet than on Sukkot. This was

our historical harvest festival – *Chag HaAsif* – when the farmers, having gathered all the produce of their fields, estimated the annual revenue of their business. It is specifically at this time of ingathering and assessment we were told to move out of our comfort zone and into the *sukkah*. Sitting in the most fragile possible dwelling under the shade of the *schach*, which symbolizes the *Shechina* (Divine Presence), teaches us to lend meaning and purpose to all we have accumulated.

In her book, *Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown writes: “Often people attempt to live their lives backward: they try to have more things, or more money, in order to do more of what they want so that they will be happier. The way it actually works is the reverse. You must first be who you really are, then do what you really need to do, in order to have what you want.” On Sukkot, we stop living our lives backward. We realize that in order to find true joy, we need to be our most authentic selves, and define ourselves without any external factors or conditions.

Sometimes, when we feel empty or depressed, we tend to attribute it to the many challenges and hardships we believe are unresolved in our lives. In truth, the core reason for our feelings of worthlessness emanates from our inability to love ourselves, to have self-compassion and to find the true

resilience from within. The Midrash in Bereshit Rabbah (1:14) explains the meaning of this verse: “For it is not an empty thing for you, for it is your life” (Devarim 32:47): אם ריק, מכם הוא – if your life feels empty, it is because of your inner emptiness!”

The Holy Spirit drawn from the waters of the *Beit HaShoeva* was our own spirit, empowered and inspired by G-d. Only when we dare to believe in ourselves, and in the spark of holiness within our souls, can we attain the level of authentic, internal and everlasting happiness. These waters of the *Beit HaShoeva* served as a mirror to help us reflect on our inner spiritual strength, which is the root of our security and resilience, and for that reason, Hillel exclaimed: “If I’m here, everything is here, and if I’m not here, who is here?”

Our challenge this year is to develop a true inner joy based not on our external assets but rather on our faith and inner resilience. During the past few months, many of us have experienced a feeling that our world is collapsing. We have experienced enormous uncertainty, financial challenges, lockdown, illness, and the loss of dear relatives and friends. The pandemic has shut down everything that usually provides us with a sense of security and happiness. The loneliness of social distancing has affected our sense of belonging, which is an acute and primal emotional need. This year,

perhaps Sukkot can give us an opportunity to recalibrate our lives according to Hillel’s teaching. While most external factors are beyond our control, we still have the ability to work on our personal growth, practicing authenticity and self-compassion, and developing the muscles of resilience and belonging.

Especially this year, Sukkot is our opportunity to recognize our most authentic place in the world. When we pick up the *Arba Minim*, we say: “Let it be recognized that I am called by the Name of *Hashem*.” The Sfat Emet explained this verse by saying: “The wisdom (*da’at*) that descends on us on Sukkot lies within our ability to recognize our unique place in the world” (Sukkot 5657).

Do we have the courage to leverage the challenges of COVID-19 to find our inner resilience and happiness?

“[Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?” (Avot 1:14)

Rav Ronen Neuwirth, formerly Rav of the Ohel Ari Congregation in Ra’anana, is author of “The Narrow Halakhic Bridge: A Vision of Jewish Law in the Post-Modern Age,” published in May by Urim Publications.