



Liminality

One of the qualities of our post-modern world is the constant state of flux. Things move rapidly. People and ideas change. Old accepted concepts are challenged, rejected, transformed and reinterpreted. It is a world in which boundaries have disappeared. Social scientists might describe our postmodern existence as a state of constant liminality: we are consciously, constantly, on the threshold of a new reality.¹

What does all this have to do with our religious experience or the experience of the holidays? In "Transforming Worship," author Timothy L. Carson describes Ya'akov's vision of the ladder ascending to Heaven (p. 61): "Jacob's dream floats somewhere in the sacred axis between heaven and earth." While much of Carson's analysis would be foreign to the traditional Jew, his observation of the liminality of the scene in which Ya'akov, in a dream state, observes a passage from earth to heaven and back again, is an important insight. What Carson fails to observe is the decidedly non-liminal conclusion of the scene. We as readers, and Ya'akov himself, take away a decidedly different sort of message from the vision, recasting the vision into what can only be described as a preliminal state of consciousness.

Indeed, Ya'akov lives in a preliminal state. The Land promised to him never quite becomes his; only in the future will his descendants inherit and inhabit it. He understands that his task is to lay the groundwork, but he personally will not cross the threshold.

As Moshe prepares to take his leave from the nation, they stand poised to

cross the threshold into a completely new reality as a nation in its own land. Moshe's speech begins with what we may call spiritual geopolitics: G-d created clearly defined borders for the nations of the world, affording each its own space – but this overarching division reflects something particular to the descendants of Ya'akov. In Bereishit (Chapter 46), the Torah tells us the sum total of Ya'akov's family that migrated to Egypt during the great famine was 70. Corresponding to this number, Jewish tradition refers to the totality of humankind as "the 70 nations of the world," all descended from Noah after the flood. The peoples of the world were divided – linguistically, culturally and geographically – when they misused their unity to rebel against G-d in the aftermath of the great deluge.

In contrast, Moshe refers to the Jewish people as Ya'akov and the foundational experience of Jewish nationhood is depicted in a desolate wilderness, a place without borders, in which they are surrounded by G-d alone. The Torah describes the Jews being "encompassed," which the commentaries understand as the Divine protection afforded by the Clouds of Glory.

The *sukkah* is a modest structure, with no real boundaries. The walls may be made of wood, fabric, or even bits of string. The *sukkah* is a halachic construct, a philosophical construct if you will. Therefore, the walls need not be real barriers of brick and mortar. A set of strings tied three handbreadths apart is enough to create a theoretical wall according to *halacha*, and that is enough to make a *sukkah* "kosher."

Perhaps the *sukkah* is the antithesis of the postmodern state of liminality: We are commanded to create boundaries, to mark off both physical and philosophical borders. There are absolutes, and we are commanded to acknowledge and respect them. Common wisdom understands that children need rules in order to thrive and to make sense of the world around them; this is no less true of adults. We need borders and boundaries. Not everything is negotiable, subject to subjective reinterpretation. Things need firmness. The postmodern rejection of historical fact in favor of subjective narrative flies in the face of truth, and of Torah.

As Jews, we live in a world of absolutes, yet we are commanded by the same Torah that creates the boundaries never to forget that we are part of a larger world. We have Torah-mandated responsibility for those within the camp, as well as for those who remain beyond the philosophical and physical borders we construct.

¹ Liminality is a term used to describe the psychological process of transitioning across boundaries and borders.

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