



Celebrity for a Moment

THE ECHO OF THE SUKKAH

Erav Sukkot 1997. 3 pm. Moise Amsalem of Montreal hears a knock on the door. It's a court clerk with a summons for urgent legal proceedings. The Building Committee had issued a complaint against Moise, demanding he immediately dismantles the *sukkah* he just built on his balcony.

The residents, many of whom were Muslims, argued that the building's constitution forbade such a structure and that it damages the building's esthetic appearance and lowers the value of the apartments.

So a few hours before *chag*, Moise finds himself in court. The judge on duty seemingly understood what was happening and postponed the case for a few days, which of course made the whole thing redundant. Moise took down his *sukkah* at the end of the *chag* and case closed.

Or so he thought. The next year, Moise's neighbors issued a lawsuit well before Sukkot, and the case went through a number of courts before ending up in the Canadian Supreme Court. There, in 2004, the judges ruled that Amsalem's religious freedom overrode his neighbor's objections, and allowed him to build a *sukkah* on his own balcony. Inter alia, the judges noted that the temporary structure is only up for one week a year, it is not really a nuisance and neither does it lower the value of the apartments.

Indeed, the *sukkah* is transient in essence, a דירת עראי, a temporary dwelling. And this is also the spiritual message of the *chag* itself.

Sukkot is חג האסיף, the time when the farmers gather in their produce. Such

a time is naturally accompanied by a sense of joy and satisfaction. After a whole year of hard work, the farmer finally sees blessing in his efforts. He can spend time at home now and literally enjoy the fruits of his labors. It is precisely at this time the Torah teaches us to leave our beautiful homes for a week and live in a shaky shack.

Because stability, abundance and security are only an illusion.

We are all mortal. Anything we build, anything we obtain or achieve, is all transient and temporary.

A father asked his son what he wanted to be when he grew up. "A mega-star," said the boy. Among all the dreams a person can have, this is perhaps the most pathetic. However, one could say, perhaps, that this dream is a weird variation of the ancient human dream of immortality.

Even if we all die someday; even if our stay here is temporary, surely our name and fame will remain for eternity?

Well no. I was once asked in an interview how I want to be remembered in 100 years' time. I said no-one would remember me in 100 years' time, apart from my great-grandchildren perhaps, if I manage to be a particularly good human being.

Even if we become celebrities or mega-stars for a moment, our names and fame will disappear like a dream in the night. In ancient Rome, when a victorious general marched proudly through the city streets, a slave would march beside him and whisper in his ear: "Remember death... Thus passes worldly glory."

This is what Kohelet teaches us too. The King of Jerusalem repeatedly tells us, הַכֹּל הִבָּל – everything is vanity. הַבָּל is also the breath that comes out of our mouths, which of course dissipates very quickly... as does our entire life.

"Yesterday I was but a drop of sperm," said Marcus Aurelius, "And tomorrow I will be a pile of dust."

Some people would learn from this that life has no value, but Kohelet's conclusion is different: "The sum of the matter, when all is said and done, is to fear G-d and keep His commandments, for that is Man's sole duty." One can live a life of value, if one foregoes the pretension of living forever, and endows his or her life with meaning here and now, as our G-d taught us.

Even if our *sukkah* only stands for a week, we will build it with care and beauty. We will hang colored chains even if we fear – or perhaps hope – the rain will destroy them. And if necessary, like Moise Amsalem, we will fight for our right to build our temporary structure.

A person's life, deeds and name do not last forever, but they can reverberate through eternity if we instill them with meaning and value.

Then this flash of lightning that is our life will fully illuminate for one short moment, and what more can we ask for? No-one will remember us down here in another 100 years, but some-One in Heaven will remember us forever.

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