



YAAKOV

Two-Part Harmony

Rabbi Noam Sender

“**A** And Yaakov journeyed to Sukkot and built himself a house, and for his livestock he made sukkot; he, therefore, called the name of the place Sukkot” (Bereishit 33:17).

The home is a powerful image for the personality of Yaakov. As the Gemara in Pesachim 88a points out, whereas Avraham and Yitzchak related to the Temple Mount as a “mountain” and “field,” respectively, for Yaakov, it was a home. “A home built from stones,” Dr. Yael Ziegler states sharply, pointing out how Yaakov seems to live a life “strewn with stones,” a life strewn with difficulty and hardship. But Yaakov’s gift is that he takes those moments of hardship and transforms them into a “home” – a stable, inner world of morality and ethics whose building blocks were hewn from the lessons he learned.

Yaakov, however, also understands the danger of permanence, the illusion of stability.

His was a life of uncertainty and was subject to the brutality of sudden shifts in fortune. “And Yaakov answered Pharaoh, ‘The years of my sojourn [on earth] are 130’” (Bereishit 47:9). Yaakov knew he was simply a sojourner in this ever-changing world, never settled, never set. So he built a *sukkah* for his livestock, showing us the importance of embracing vulnerability and impermanence.

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Ishbitz in the Mei Hashiloach points out that Yaakov purposely built the *sukkah* after his encounter with and victory over Esav.

At his time of triumph, it was reasonable for him to finally feel settled and stable in his own home, confident in himself and in his mission. And so it was precisely at this moment that he built a *sukkah*, to remember his complete dependence on G-d and the continuing fragility of life.



Though he was a man of two names and many modes of being, he could ultimately find harmony between them all.

A similar dynamic occurs within us every year, continues the Mei Hashiloach. Emerging from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, one might feel victorious and confident. Rather, one *should* feel victorious and secure, holding the four species aloft like a triumphant warrior! But to temper any possibility of arrogance or pride and to ensure we understand how dependent we are upon Hashem’s kindness, we immediately step out of our homes and into the *sukkah*, embracing instability, with the knowledge that everything is in the Hands of G-d.

This movement between the home and the *sukkah* represents an essential element of real spiritual growth.

We must build inner lives of stability founded upon truth and morality and lived experience.

We must become grounded like a rock, faithful, stable, dependable and deeply committed.

But on the other hand, Yaakov teaches us not to become too set in our ways, too stuck, too static.

We must step outside of our comfort zones and our homes from time to time, and realize that we know absolutely nothing and that our lives and our very existence are still as mysterious as ever.

From time to time, we must embrace the knowledge that life is “*hevel havalim*,” a mere fleeting breath.

But herein lies the true gift of Yaakov. Though he was a man of two names and many modes of being, he could ultimately find harmony between them all. His Divine expression is that of *tiferet*, harmony, balance. His life testifies to the ability of a human being to live with contrast and conflicting modalities and maintain a sense of self throughout it all.

It is easy to live in one way or another – to live with stability and consistency, or to reject physicality altogether and embrace a life of transience. But to live simultaneously in both worlds, well, there’s the rub. The life of Yaakov and the festival of Sukkot teach us that it is not only possible, but it is the very purpose of our lives.

Rabbi Noam Sender is a rabbi at Blake Street Hebrew Congregation and Leibler Yavneh College in Melbourne, Australia, as well as a father to four, husband to Sara, jazz musician and aspiring novelist.