

# Sukkot Insights

## Looking to the Stars

The Mishna, *Sukkah* 22a, has an interesting comment about how much *schach* is ideal for a sukkah:

המעובה כמין בית אע"פ שאין הכוכבים נראין מתוכה כשרה.

*If [the sukkah has a cover that] is thick like [the roof of] a house, even though one cannot see the stars when inside of it, it is valid.*

The implication of the Mishna is that, ideally, one should be able to see the stars when sitting in the sukkah, but if the *schach* is thicker so that one cannot see the stars, it is valid. The Rosh (*Sukkah* 2:2) quotes a Yerushalmi that the Mishna is really dealing with the *kochvei chama*, the “stars of the sun.” In other words, the sun’s rays should shine through during the day. This implies that there is no requirement or even ideal to be able to see the stars at night. However, the Rosh’s son, the *Tur* (*Orach Chaim* 631), does not follow this approach. He rules explicitly that the *schach* should be such that the sun’s rays and the night stars are visible from the sukkah.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 631:3, follows the *Tur*’s approach and writes that the *schach* shouldn’t be too

thick and one should be able to see large stars from inside the sukkah. The *Mishna Berura*, 631:5-6, writes that there is room for leniency if the sun’s rays are visible during the day or if there is one area of the sukkah where it is possible to see the stars. This is especially true if there is a concern that the lack of sufficient *schach* will allow the sukkah to become more easily invalidated by a strong gust of wind. Nevertheless, we need to ensure not to make the *schach* too thick such that rain won’t enter. In that case, it is possible that the sukkah is not valid.

We can understand why the *schach* can’t be so thick that it won’t allow rain to enter, because then, it is more like a permanent structure. Why, however, is there a requirement that we see stars? Isn’t subjecting ourselves to the elements sufficient to call the sukkah a *diras arai*, a temporary structure? Furthermore, why do our rabbis specifically use stars as the metric to determine how much *schach* we should use?

I heard from the Talner Rebbe that the imagery of stars can be understood based on the following passage in the Gemara:

ומצדיקי הרבים ככוכבים לעולם ועד אלו



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“Those who bring the many to righteousness are like stars forever” (*Doniel* 12:3), this verse refers to those who teach children.

### Bava Basra 8b

Why does the Gemara compare our teachers to stars? One possibility is that stars don’t shine as soon as they appear. When they first appear, it is not completely dark and only later, when it is completely dark, do we see how bright they truly shine. Similarly, a teacher doesn’t always see his *talmidim* (students) shine right away. The fruits may come months or years later.

On a deeper level, the symbolism of a star represents the fashion and the

manner in which we should educate our children. Rashi (Bereishis 1:16, based on *Bereishis Rabbah* 6:4) tells us that the stars were created to appease the moon. The moon should have had the same glory as the sun, but Hashem couldn't have both the sun and the moon on equal levels, so He diminished the power of the moon. In order to appease the moon, He created the stars to enhance the moon's glow.

A star's entire existence and purpose of creation is to facilitate and to enhance the light of the moon. That is the essence of *chinuch* (Jewish education). The educator must have that mentality — to mimic the stars. *Chinuch* is about cultivating and nurturing the student. The educator is selflessly dedicated to teaching others.

If we had to choose a holiday where the theme is education of children, many of us would choose Pesach. I would argue for Sukkos. The Torah tells us why we sit in the sukkah:

בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

יִשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת. לְמַעַן יָדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת  
הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ  
מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

*You shall dwell in booths seven days. All who are citizens of Israel shall dwell in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am Hashem your G-d.*  
**Vayikra 23:42-43**

The whole purpose of sitting in the sukkah is *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*, so that your generations may know. We sit in the sukkah and discuss with our children our experience as a people in the Midbar when we left Mitzrayim. There is even a discussion in the poskim (See *Bach* and *Bikkurei Yaakov* to *Orach Chaim* 625) as to whether one fulfills the mitzvah on the first night if he doesn't remember the reason for sitting in the sukkah. The first letters of *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem* make up the word *yeled*, child, because educating children about the messages of the sukkah is a core theme of Sukkos. We are all responsible to teach our children

about Hashem's protection and how He watches over us.

This is why we want to be able to see the stars when we sit in a sukkah. On Sukkos, we want to look to the stars, our educators, as a source of inspiration for how we educate our own children. Like the stars, we must approach *chinuch* with selfless dedication. We put our children's needs first. We need to think about the unique needs of each of our children, we need to be patient, we need to find creative ways to teach our children so that they can understand and be inspired. Our selfless dedication will be the catalyst for teaching foundations of *emunah* and we will truly fulfill *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*.

Through our efforts to try to teach like our educator stars, we will also learn to appreciate their efforts. They selflessly devote their careers to ensuring *l'ma'an yedu doroseichem*. They are at the forefront of ensuring that our *mesorah* (tradition) is passed on and they will be igniting the spark in the stars of the next generation.

## Being Uncomfortable: The Pursuit of Meaning

Koheles makes us uncomfortable. When the time to read Koheles arrives each Sukkos, we shift in our seats, looking for somewhere to go. The book is so long (it's twelve chapters). It seems deeply pessimistic (the word *hevel*, which means futility, vanity and emptiness appears more than thirty times). It is full of apparent contradictions (is joy a virtue or worthless?). And it questions the meaning of our life and challenges our assumptions.

Today, Koheles makes us uncomfortable on a global level. In an era of such enormous technological

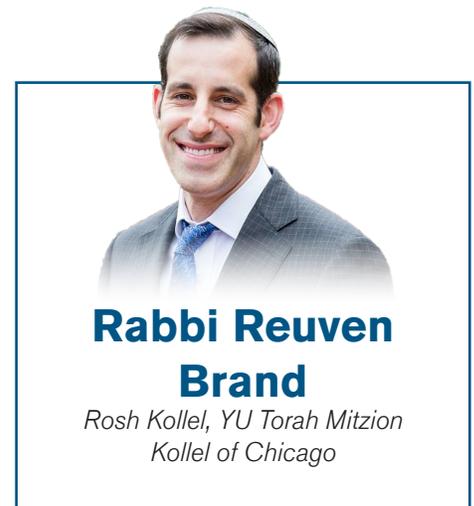
progress and innovation both in scope and speed, we feel a tense dissonance with the stark descriptions of Koheles as it derides life's material and physical pursuits.

We are also troubled on a personal plane. For example, we often tell ourselves and others that we don't have time for certain things, yet Koheles tells us that in fact there is a time for everything.

All of this can be very unsettling. We want to turn the other way and hide the book, as our sages nearly did. Yet, we are called upon to confront it, to reflect on it and to grow.

We must face the key question:

How do we reconcile the often-repeated



statement that the life we live under the sun is futile with our deep-seated belief that the life Hashem has given each of us is full of purpose and meaning?

Perhaps Shlomo Hamelech, the author

of this Divinely-inspired work, is encouraging us to rethink the frame in which we live our lives. He is asking us to consider: Must we exist and operate in a world that is only “under the sun”? Must we define our success in material and physical terms? Is life always a situation where one’s win is another’s loss?

Through Koheles we are called to see a deeper side of life beyond a transactional, superficial natural existence.

In the book of Koheles, God is referred to by a specific name: Elokim. This appellation connotes the way in which Hashem connects with our world through nature. It is the name through which our measurable, scientific, natural world was created as the first pasuk in Bereishis describes, *Bereishis bara Elokim*. Koheles is noting that in a purely natural world, we face terrible challenges: scarcity, loneliness, frustration, inequality, and futility. We dutifully proceed through this world under the sun — the symbol of a fixed fate — only to meet the same end as every other creature.

Yet, there is another name of God. It is י-ה-ו-ה, which was introduced when Hashem endowed Adam Harishon with a soul. It connotes a transcendent, spiritual identity: הויה ויהיה (“was,

is, and will be”). In this realm we experience life differently. When we live on the level of הויה we bypass the contradictions and frustrations of the material world. We don’t resolve the problems; rather we find respite and refuge as we seek and create meaning within every life circumstance. The energy of life — the light of Hashem — is present within every moment and every place, helps us navigate life even in the absence of a concrete Why.

Shlomo Hamelech wrote three books: Mishlei, Shir Hashirim, and Koheles. Yet his name, Shlomo, which connotes wholeness and peace, is noticeably absent from his Koheles. Perhaps because in the natural world we never feel whole. Only through a meaningful (Mishlei) and passionate (Shir Hashirim) spiritual life does a person feel a sense of wholeness.

Our sages understood that Sukkos is a time of material plenty. Imagine an agrarian society in which an entire year’s supply of food was just harvested: storehouses brimming with sustenance. It is understandably and deservedly a time of joy and happiness. We can easily imagine how this momentary bliss of palpable material blessings can shape one’s orientation. Koheles is the sharp and uncomfortable reminder of the fickle and often fleeting nature

of worldly success (see Sforno’s commentary on Chapter Two). Koheles cautions us to avoid the inevitable dopamine crash that follows the material, physical high found in the world of Elokim. It is the reminder that living a superficial, hedonistic life will end in frustration. Ultimately, it presents us with the opportunity to choose a spiritual framework for our lives and mine the spiritual connection that lives within the material world.

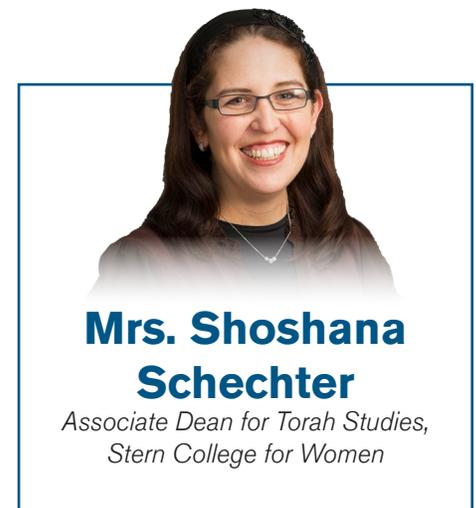
The discomfort we feel when confronting Koheles helps us orient ourselves properly. By jolting us out of the comforts and rhythm of a natural, physical orientation (what Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt”l termed a “bovine” existence), we reappraise our values. In practice, this perspective of י-ה-ו-ה invites us to rethink where we devote our resources when making a simcha, how we spend our available time, and what we praise in conversation. We take a fresh look at life with an eye to the spiritual depth with which we live, as Koheles helps us realize the true joys of life. With this perspective we elevate our natural, ordinary existence by coloring it with our spirituality. As Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, remarked, “we must find some spiritual basis for living, else we die.”

## The Simcha of Sukkot

“*V’samachta b’chagecha v’hayita ach sameach*,” you shall be joyous on your holiday and you shall have nothing but joy” (Devarim 16:14-15). Many of us are familiar with this famously exhorted phrase referring to the holiday of Sukkot. But what does it mean to be happy and why are we mandated to be happy specifically on Sukkot?

The holiday of Sukkot is explained

in the Devarim reference to the Shalosh Regalim as a time that we are recognizing G-d’s role in sustaining us and demonstrating gratitude for our harvest, “*ki yevarechecha Hashem Elokecha b’chol tevuat’cha*,” for the Lord your God will bless all your crops (Devarim 16:15). This requirement to rejoice during the chagim is perplexing, however, since rejoicing at harvest time would seem to be the natural human reaction. Yet the Torah usually does



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not command us to follow our natural instincts, but rather to control our natural instincts in order to elevate us in holiness. So why command us in this instance to simply follow our natural inclination? To answer this question, we must understand the meaning behind the word “*simcha*” — happiness, — and what G-d means when He tells us to be happy. The American dream of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is most often translated in hedonistic terms, with “happiness” being defined as materialistic success. A student of mine who converted to Judaism as a young adult was inspired to convert because, as she explains, she saw her parents working hard to make money in order to buy a house, a car and go on vacations, and she felt strongly that there must be more meaning to life — that happiness must stem from something deeper than just material success. We as Jews are encouraged to pursue happiness, but that happiness is qualitatively different from the general American definition. Real, long-term happiness comes from a deep sense of fulfillment and meaning.

The Malbim in *Sefer Hacarmel* defines the word “*simcha*” as consistently content, as opposed to “*gila*,” which is a sudden happiness that is fleeting. Often the *gila* that we feel following a single, exciting event is followed by *simcha*, which is a more consistent happiness, a *simchat olam*, or eternal happiness that comes from an appreciation of G-d and the recognition that following G-d’s will is our recipe for a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “happy” as “feeling or showing contentment, having a sense of trust and confidence in (a person, arrangement or situation).” Interestingly, the first time the verb “*sameach*” appears in the Torah is in Parshat Shemot, when Moshe is

chosen by G-d to be the leader of the Jewish people, with the initial mission of bringing the Jews out of Egyptian bondage. The Torah tells us the reaction to this appointment by Moshe’s older brother, Aharon: “*v’ra’acha v’samach b’libo*, When he sees you he will rejoice in his heart (Shemot 4:14). Aharon is praised for this emotional reaction, because in place of the instinct of jealousy at his younger brother’s appointment, he showed contentment and confidence in G-d’s choice. The Torah encourages happiness that stems from the contentment that comes from trust and confidence in G-d, not just in ourselves.

In Megillat Esther (5:9), Haman leaves Esther’s first party “*sameach v’tov lev*,” joyful and exuberant, with his *simcha* defined as personal feelings of contentment due to confidence in himself. That *simcha* was fleeting and ended badly for him.

The *simcha* that we are commanded to feel on Sukkot is the Jewish definition of happiness, which stems from having a sense of trust and confidence in G-d and finding meaning in that relationship. Perhaps for that reason, the element of *simcha* is highlighted more in reference to the agricultural component of the Shalosh Regalim. As we gather the first of our crops and harvest them at the end of the agricultural cycle, we are happy because we trust that G-d is sustaining us. Commentaries question the wording of the second command to be happy on Sukkot, “*v’hayita ach sameach*,” asking why the word *ach* is used and what exactly it means. The Ibn Ezra defines *ach* as “only,” explaining this phrase as meaning we should do nothing else but rejoice. Rashi explains that this phrase is not a command but a statement, a promise from G-d that we will only be happy because He is taking care of us (Devarim 16:15). Both

Rashi’s and the Ibn Ezra’s approach strengthen the entire thematic approach to Sukkot. If, in fact, on Sukkot we are celebrating our trust in G-d and His sustaining us, then it makes sense that we are commanded to be only happy. Human nature would allow us to be happy only if the harvest gathered is a strong and plentiful one. Our happiness would naturally be dependent on the success of the harvest in each particular year, and in a year with a less plentiful gathering, our happiness would be tempered or nonexistent. The Torah is telling us “*v’hayita ach sameach*,” be only happy, regardless of the outcome of that particular harvest, because of our trust and confidence in G-d. The Malbim, after defining *simcha*, differentiates between *sameach b’*, *sameach l’* and *sameach al*. *Sameach b’* is to be happy in the thing itself, as is used in the phrase “*v’samachta b’chagecha*,” be happy in the chag itself, because of the holiday, not because of the harvest. It is ultimately that relationship with G-d that we are celebrating on Sukkot as we go out in our temporary huts, which demonstrates our trust in G-d and our confidence that He takes care of us and is the source of all our needs. That recognition leads to a feeling of contentment, which should enable us to feel nothing but *simcha* on Sukkot.

There is also a clear correlation between our happiness that we experience as a result of Hashem’s caring for us, and our caring for other people. Like Aharon who was happy not for himself but for Moshe’s honor, our *simcha* during the chagim is not just about our own satisfaction, but how it translates into helping others. The practical application of G-d providing for us is that we must provide for others. The Rambam in *Hilchot Yom Tov* explains that the key component of *simchat yom tov* is sharing with others. Those who enjoy their food

on Yom Tov without sharing it with others do not experience *simchat yom tov*, only “*simchat kreiso*,” happiness of the belly (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:18).

The *simcha* that we experience on Sukkot should inspire us to translate that *simcha* into helping others

## The Esrog as a Tool for Achdus

The four species that are employed in the mitzva of *daled minim* are replete with symbolism. *Midrash Rabba*, Vayikra (30:12) notes that the esrog has a taste and aroma, the lulav has a taste and no aroma, the hadas has an aroma and no taste, and the arava has neither. Taste stands for good deeds, and aroma represents Torah knowledge. The Midrash compares each of the species to a different type of Jew: one who performs mitzvos, one who studies a great deal of Torah, some who achieve both, and others who have yet to accomplish either. Chazal conclude by stating that the Torah’s command is to create an “*agudah*” — to unite all forms of Jews as one, just as all four species are held close together. This unity brings atonement to Klal Yisrael and proclaims the greatness of Hashem. Indeed, the Baalei Tosfos (Vayikra 23:40) express this notion as a necessary element in the process of repentance that begins on the Yomim Noraim. We refer to this goal in the prayers of Rosh Hashana and

experience that same *simcha*, which comes from knowing we are being taken care of. As Rashi says so beautifully on the words “*asiti k’chol asher tziviti*,” I’ve done as you commanded me: “*samachti vsimachti vo*” — I was happy and I caused others to be happy

Yom Kippur, “*V’Ye’asu kulam agudah achas*” — may all unite in service and recognition of Hashem just as the four species and types of Jews form an *agudah*.

However, Ramchal, in the classic ethical work *Mesillas Yesharim* (end of chapter 13), adduces additional meaning from this Midrash. It is impossible, he explains, for one nation of so many individuals to exist on the same level of spirituality. Each person has unique abilities and talents to employ in *avodas Hashem*. Some will be suited to satisfy the basic requirements of Judaism while others are equipped to go above and beyond as needed. This reality creates an opportunity for more inspired souls to elevate others and positively impact the array of Jewish population. The “*agudah*” created by the four species is not only a symbol of the blessings of unity, it is a mandate for those who are capable to bring others closer to the love of God and encounters with the Divine. Elsewhere (end of chapter 19), Ramchal includes in this the responsibility to pray on behalf of other

(Devarim 26:14). Ultimately, that is our goal in general and on Sukkot specifically. May we enjoy both personal and communal *simcha* during Sukkot and beyond, and help spread that *simcha* to those less fortunate.



Jews and to find merit in their actions.

In this light, the heightened spirituality of this time of year behooves us to make the inspired choice to be the “esrog” of the Midrash. To whatever extent possible, we can choose to raise our Torah and mitzvos to the next level, rather than choosing to wait passively to be the subject of influence of others. We are not to suffice with achdus alone, but to capitalize on achdus and become a source of positive influence drawing others near, just as we draw the *daled minim* near, each day of Succos.



Learn more about Sukkot with shiurim and articles from the Marcos & Adina Katz YUTorah.org site at [www.yutorah.org/categories/holidays/Sukkot/](http://www.yutorah.org/categories/holidays/Sukkot/)