



BORN IN THE SUKKAH

Andrew Weinstein

I wasn't born in the sukkah. I was, however, born on Sukkot. But even though it is brought down in *halacha* (Jewish law) that sleeping in the sukkah is a mitzvah in which even very young children should be trained, there is definitely no mitzvah for a woman to give birth in a sukkah (even to make sure that her new-born son doesn't miss out). Truth be told, I personally recommend a hospital, since childbirth is considered to be a life-threatening situation. I figure, if it's that serious, you should be in a hospital, right?

Of course, what if a woman wants to give birth at home, with a midwife, for instance? If she's going to give birth at home, and your sukkah is supposed to be your temporary home, so maybe the sukkah is the right place. But once again, I don't think this line of reasoning is correct. (A disclaimer: I am not a rabbi -- I am not someone who can answer another person's question about *halacha* (Jewish law), but I am a Jew (thank G-d!) and so I certainly can talk about Torah.) Since the *halacha* says that a sukkah should only be used for dignified activities, giving birth in the sukkah is probably inappropriate. Don't get me wrong, childbirth is a wonderful thing, an amazing thing! It's not, however, something to which everyone gets invited. Now maybe I'm just being old-fashioned (*cont. on p. 3*) **Sukkah** (*cont. from p. 1*)... by saying that childbirth is more of a private experience. Still, I think I've got tradition on my side, since

ANSWERING TO A HIGHER AUTHORITY

David Pine

No, this article is not about the *kasbruth* of hot dogs. It is about how the beauty and significance of Rosh Hashana can help us take responsibility for our actions, bring us closer to G-d, and make us happier people and better Jews.

One of the most beautiful prayers of the year is the Rosh Hashana *musaf* (additional service) that is recited after the first blowing of the shofar. The *musaf* is divided into three sections; *Malkhiot* (acknowledging G-d as our King), *Zichronot* (remembering what G-d has done for us), and *Shofrot* (references to blowing the Shofar). Each section contains a total of ten *pesukim* (verses) from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings that refer to the particular theme. Pick up a *machzor* (a High Holiday prayer book) and check it out -- it's magnificent!

I'd like to focus on *Malkhiot*, the first section. *Malkhiot* comes from the word *Melech* -- King. A major theme of Rosh Hashana is recognizing G-d's authority and our submission to Him. In the vernacular, this might be expressed as "there is someone bigger than me in charge here -- someone who calls the shots and runs this place. I better do what He says."

But the question is: What are we submitting to, and are we just doing it because He says so?

To a certain extent, we are doing it because He says so. (*cont. on p. 2*) **ANSWERING** (*cont. from p. 1*)... But, after all, the Torah tells us: "I have put before you today life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life" (Deuteronomy 31:15, 19).

THE TEACUP

Rabbi Avrohom M. Alter

"Behold, I set before you today, a blessing and a curse" G-d announces to the Jewish people in Deuteronomy(11:26).

So where is the blessing already? Why does it so often seem to be the opposite? Challenges, trials, tribulations, anxiety and yes . . . pain and suffering! The answer perhaps is that we need to readjust our perspective -- to gaze anew, from a fresh viewpoint, that which He bestows upon us -- to trust, to understand, and YES, to KNOW, that all that He bequeaths (no matter how it feels) is ultimately for our good, even when we search for understanding!

Perhaps the following story will help us better understand:

There was a couple who used to go to England to shop in the beautiful stores. They both liked antiques and pottery and especially teacups. This was their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

One day in this charming little shop they saw a lovely teacup. "May we see that?" they asked, "We've never seen one quite so beautiful." As the lady handed the cup to them, it suddenly began to speak.

"You don't understand," the teacup said. "I haven't always been a teacup. There was a time when I was red, and I was clay. My master took me, rolled me, and patted me (*cont. on p. 2*) **TEACUP** (*cont. from p. 1*)... over and over. I yelled out, 'Let me alone!' But he only smiled. 'Not yet,' he said.

The Talmud reiterates "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of heaven" (Megillah 25a). So the choice to fear G-d and observe His Torah is ours. Isn't this a conflict with how a king operates? G-d, our King, is telling us what to do, yet the choice to obey is ours? How do we reconcile these two ideas?

Fear of G-d is not the reason that we observe the Torah. We don't do what G-d asks because we are afraid of being punished or because we want to get him "off our backs." (Although this is one level of fearing G-d, it's not the one to which we should ultimately aspire.)

Things become clearer when we realize that what G-d wants for us and what is good for us are one and the same thing. This is not so unlike when we were kids and our parents told us that something wasn't good for us. At age seven we may not have agreed. But what about at age thirty? Then we see the wisdom of the restrictions that we were unable to see then.

What we should realize is that when we reach a certain point in our lives, it should become clear to us that *there is no other way to live*. To do what we feel like at a particular moment will ultimately yield a purposeless existence. To live up to our responsibility as Jews by observing the Torah is what makes us a "Light Unto the Nations" (Isaiah), not to mention that it is also uplifting, and makes us feel great, too!

The great sage, Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204 C.E.) explained that the mitzvah of fearing G-d is properly expressed when you recognize G-d's greatness, become awestruck and can't help but ask: "Who am I to question His authority? How can I even stand before Him to ask forgiveness? How can I not do what He asks of me?"

So this Rosh Hashana we need to ask ourselves: What are we here for? Do we have a higher purpose? It can't just be to work, buy stuff and have fun on vacations. There must be more.

On Rosh Hashana we revisit these questions and restate our responsibility to G-d and to ourselves. We may have temporarily forgotten this responsibility, neglected what is good for us, but now we are coming back. We may climb the ladder one rung at a time, but we are moving in the right direction.

We must make our own growth meaningful and bring our desires into line with G-d's. The closeness we then feel will mean that we are not only doing what G-d wants, but what we ourselves want as well.

One of the most vivid images of the High Holidays describes that our fate is "written" on Rosh Hashana and on Yom Kippur it is "sealed," dependent, of course, on how much we repent for our past behavior and resolve to change our future course. This year, however, the first day of Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat. This leaves us with a dilemma -- one is not permitted to write on Shabbat, so how can G-d "write" our fate?

One of the fundamental principles of *halachah* (Jewish law), posits that one may violate the Shabbat in order to save a life. We therefore hope that G-d will employ that life-saving measure and will inscribe us in the Book of Life this coming Rosh Hashana.

May you all have a *Shanah Tova*.

David Pine is a volunteer for NJOP as a one-on-one mentor, and teaches beginning Hebrew, Basic Judaism and various Holiday Classes. He is a securities law attorney who lives in Manabattan.

"Then I was placed on a spinning wheel," the teacup continued, "and suddenly I was spun around and around and around. 'Stop it! I'm getting dizzy!' I screamed. But the master only nodded and said again, 'Not yet.'

"Then he put me in the oven. I never felt such heat. I wondered why he wanted to burn me. I yelled and knocked at the door. I could see him through the opening and could read his lips as he shook his head saying, 'Not yet.'

"Finally the door opened. He put me on the shelf, and I began to cool. 'There, that's better,' I said. Then he brushed me and painted me all over. The fumes were horrible. I thought I would choke.

"STOP THE TORTURE!!"



'Stop it, stop it!' I cried, but he only nodded and said, 'Not yet.'

"Then suddenly he put me back into the oven. This time, however, it was twice as hot, and I was sure I would suffocate. I begged. I pleaded. I screamed. I cried. All the time I could see him through the opening, nodding his head saying, 'Not yet.'

"At this point I knew there wasn't any hope. I would never make it. I was ready to give up. Then, at the last moment, the door opened, he took me out and placed me on the shelf. An hour later he handed me a mirror. I couldn't believe it was me. 'It's beautiful. I'm beautiful.'

"I want you to remember, then,' he said, 'I know it hurts to be rolled and patted, but if I had left you alone, you would have dried up. I know it made you dizzy to spin around on the wheel, but had I stopped, you would have crumbled. I knew it hurt and was hot and disagreeable in the oven, but if I hadn't put you there, you would have cracked. I know the fumes were horrible when I painted you all over, but if I hadn't done that, you would have never hardened. You would not have had any color in your life. And if I hadn't put you back in that second oven, you wouldn't have survived for very long. You wouldn't have been sufficiently durable.

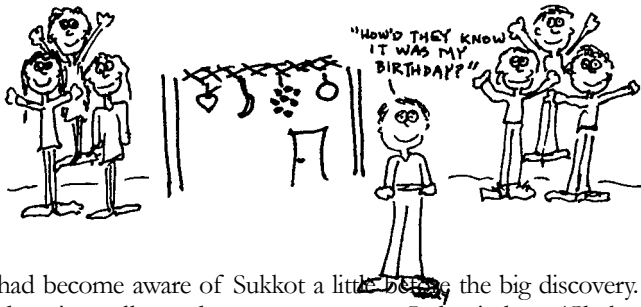
"Now you are a finished product. You are what I had in mind when I first began with you."

The moral of this story: Hashem knows what He's doing for all of us. He is the potter, and we are His clay. He will mold us and shape us, so that we may be fashioned into a flawless object, so we can fulfill His perfect will. Being Hashem's vessel is ultimately the best, most perfect blessing for us all!

Rabbi Avrohom M. Alter is a rabbi at the Yeshiva Migdal Torah - The Jewish Learning Center in Chicago, IL.

being old-fashioned is part of what makes tradition "traditional," wouldn't you say? Finally, there's the "very old-fashioned" reason a woman wouldn't have to give birth in a sukkah: a woman is not obligated to be in the sukkah in the first place, since it's a time-bound positive commandment. Discrimination! Sexism! *Oy Vey!* You think you've got me, don't you? Not this time. Tell me, when's the last time you saw a man give birth?

But I digress (so I've been told). As I said, I was born on Sukkot, on the first day of the holiday, yet I believe it would be safe to say that the idea of giving birth in a sukkah never even crossed my mother's mind. My family didn't have a sukkah close by when I was born anyway. On Passover, we had Seder with my grandparents and my mother's extended family. On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we went to synagogue and ate by my grandparents with my mother's extended family. I even went to Hebrew school after regular school two days a week and on Sundays as well. But I didn't know that my birthday was the first day of Sukkot until I was 21 years old. I never thought to find out my Hebrew date of birth -- not until I started getting involved with Torah in a serious way. What an exciting discovery! You see, while it's not really a traditional Jewish thing to celebrate birthdays, for me there was no loss, since my birthday came out (that is, I came out) on the day referred to in the prayerbook as "the time of our rejoicing" -- for the whole Jewish people, no less!



I had become aware of Sukkot a little before the big discovery. I recall that in college there were some Lubavitcher (Chabad) Chassidim who would stand on the street asking ethnically-profiled people if they were Jewish. During Sukkot, an affirmative answer meant a solicitation to perform the mitzvah of waving the four species (lulav, etrog, hadasim, and aravot). I think that I once took them up on their offer. That was before I had gotten seriously involved, back when I didn't think much of what I called "Jewish socializing," and had bravely declared that I would marry the woman I loved, regardless of her background. In spite of this, I had never lost my affinity for things Jewish, or my own very strong sense of Jewish identity. I remember taking a non-Jewish girl to see *Fiddler on the Roof* one summer during high school. I will never forget the scene where Tevya has to decide what to do about his daughter who has taken up with a Russian non-Jew. "On the one hand... on the other hand... On the one hand... on the other hand..." And I'm rooting with every fiber of my being for Tevya to CUT HER OFF -- all the while sitting next to this non-Jewish girl in the movie theater. *Oy*. A long sigh. I'm digressing again.

Since then, thank G-d, I've had the privilege of sitting in a lot of sukkahs. I've even been in a geodesic sukkah in a communal household in Boston! One year, I built my own sukkah from scratch and used corn stalks fresh from the harvest as the *schach*/covering (the squirrels managed to find a little corn here and there). I've been a guest in my Rebbe's sukkah. I've slept in the sukkah of the Karliner Shul in Tiberias, which is in a building which used to be the house of Rabbi Medel of Vitebsk, right next to the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee). It was a truly wonderful place to sleep. I've been to

the sukkah next to the *Kotel* (Western Wall). I've had Russian immigrant guests in my sukkah in Haifa, where my wife (who is from a Moroccan family) ended up understanding their Yiddish better than I, who had learned German in high school specifically because it was similar to Yiddish.

Looking back on my journey in this world, which started on Sukkot, I think back to the journey of the Jewish people in the desert, who were sheltered by sukkot on their journey out of Egypt to the land of Israel. Though the desert was a long detour, in the end they reached the land. I also feel privileged to have reached the land of Israel, and to be able to celebrate Sukkot again with my wife and children in our family sukkah, as I now have many times.

May we all soon merit to sit together in the Messianic Sukkah made from the Leviathan's skin!

Andy Weinstein is a software engineer from Marblehead, MA, who has been living in Israel for the past 14 year. Currently, he lives in Efrat with his wife and four children, bli ayin bara.

SUKKOT'S MYSTICAL GUESTS

According to the kaballah, the Jewish mystical tradition, the Divine Presence (*Shechina*) accompanies every Jew into the sukkah. The *Shechina* is accompanied by the seven shepherds of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aharon, and David.

Why are these seven personalities invited into the sukkah? The sukkah, the temporary dwelling, reminds Jews of the time of wandering in the wilderness. Each of the seven ushpizin lived through their own exile under the guidance of G-d.

Abraham - went forth from his homeland and his father's house to go to Canaan, the unknown place that G-d would show him (Genesis).

Isaac - went to Gerar in the Kingdom of Philistia when there was famine (Genesis).

Jacob - left his home to protect himself from his brother and to find a wife (Genesis).

Joseph - was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt (Genesis)

Moses - led the nation out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness and to the borders of the Promised Land (Exodus).

Aharon - led the nation in the wilderness in his role as High Priest (Exodus).

David - was driven into the wilderness to avoid the wrath of Saul (I Samuel).

Each of the seven *Ushpizin* also personifies character traits which strengthen the Divine Presence in this world: **Abraham** - loving-kindness; **Isaac** - inner strength; **Jacob** - truth; **Joseph** - righteousness; **Moses** - Divine eternity; **Aharon** - Divine grandeur; **David** - Divine sovereignty

Each evening the host of the sukkah welcomes the seven *Ushpizin* (guests) by saying:

"I invite to my meal the exalted guests: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aharon, and David. May it please you, Abraham, my exalted guest, that all the other exalted guests dwell here with me and with you - Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aharon, and David."

On each night a different guest is welcomed, in a specific order. Thus on the second night, one says: May it please you, Isaac, my exalted...and on the third night: May it please you, Jacob, my exalted...etc. Adapted from www.njop.org's Crash Course in Jewish Holidays

LISTENING TO OURSELVES

Rabbi Ari Perl

One can scarcely think of the High Holidays without the concept of *tefilah* (prayer) jumping immediately to mind. However, given the current crisis in Israel -- and the many ways each of us have found ourselves personally attached to the situation there -- it seems that *tefilah* has assumed even greater importance, and a new sense of urgency. We yearn to give expression to so many different things, yet we constantly feel frustrated by our inability to do so satisfactorily.

To even begin the quest for meaningful *tefilah*, I believe that it is critical to understand the concept of *tefilah* in its uniquely Jewish terms. *Tefilah* is more than prayer, even though that is how we tend to conceptualize it. Prayer, however, is really a process by which we attempt to impact on the course of events and circumstances external to ourselves, yet the very word *tefilah* indicates otherwise. The literal definition of *tefilah* is 'self-examination,' since the verb *lehith-palel* means 'to judge oneself.' The reflexive nature of both the noun and verb indicates that *tefilah* is not so much a vehicle to affect the world around us, as it is meant to be an opportunity to stimulate a process of introspection and internal growth. More than petitioning G-d through *tefilah*, we are -- quite literally -- talking to ourselves. In fact, our tradition insists that *tefilah* be recited in tones audible to oneself. This seemingly strange emphasis on the volume of prayer (after all, an omniscient G-d is clearly not hard of hearing) underscores the fact that, in the Jewish tradition, *tefilah* must not merely be offered, it must also be received. And, as we all know, it is much easier to talk than it is to

listen. Thus we learn that the first and most important step toward meaningful *tefilah* is listening to the words we recite, and allowing them to fuel a process of introspection and self-evaluation.

Truth be told, however, it is not always easy to listen to one's own *tefilah*. The successful pursuit of a meaningful *tefilah* experience within a traditional liturgical framework means rising to the challenge to make mostly ancient texts both accessible and relevant to the modern American Jew. This becomes even more difficult since so many Jews are often unfamiliar with both the Hebrew language and the religio-philosophical concepts expressed therein. While it is a definite challenge, it is one that can be overcome. All it takes, like many things in the Jewish religious arena, is study and sustained practice.

This year, as we pray for the safety and security of our brethren in Israel, it is my fervent hope that 'listening to ourselves' over the upcoming High Holiday season will move us steadily closer to that ever-elusive goal of meaningful *tefilah*, and thereby play a small part in bringing a peaceful resolution to the current crisis that has dragged on for far too long.

Rabbi Ari Perl is the rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel Abraham and Voliner in Overland Park, KS.



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org.

Readers: This is your newsletter, and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.