

Sukkot is the Answer

Everyone and his boss knows about the High Holidays. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have become as much a part of the vernacular as schlepp and schmaltz. But Sukkot is probably as unfamiliar to the uninitiated as gefilte fish.

The High Holidays are moments of exceeding power. The most evocative text from our liturgy: “Let us give an accounting of the awe of the day...who shall live and who shall die.” (Unetaneh Tokef, Machzor) These are days when our lives are held in the hands of the One, True Judge. At the end of his life, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai famously expressed to his students: With a king, I can beg, plead, bribe and cajole to grant me my freedom, but before the King of Kings – who will take no bribe, He knows my heart of hearts, what can I do?! (TB Brachot 28b) As opposed to other holidays, during the High Holidays we do not chant the Hallel prayer. The themes of joyous celebration during these angst-ridden times would be misplaced.

But as Yom Kippur ends, when the connection to Heaven switches from Google to Britannica, we are left to process and to reflect on those critical moments. During this season, we imagined the unimaginable: what if my life were to end tomorrow, would I be happy with what I’ve left behind? Am I content with what I’ve done with my life? If not, then I better get to making sure the rest of my life does not look like the time that I’ve left behind me.

In Jewish tradition this is the process of Teshuva, repentance. The Hebrew is powerful though. *Teshuva* can mean repent as return, but it can also mean repentance as response. Part of the process of change is of course the reassessment. We would never bother to change anything if everything felt acceptable in stasis.

During the High Holidays, we are stirred to change. The Shofar wakes us from our sleep. The liturgy haunts us. The austerity of Yom Kippur strips down non-essentials. In essence, we have asked – or we have been asked – the difficult questions. We have, hopefully, gotten our full attention, but now we need a response. I am awake, but whence do I move?

Sukkot is the response; this holiday is our answer. We step out of our homes, we build huts or tabernacles, and we get in touch with the solidity of

nature and the full spectrum of our vegetation. Sukkot grounds us with the structure and implements to make our commitments real. Let's not close our hearts and our eyes to this great season of visions; let's answer the questions that are deep within us.

Chag Sukkot Sameach, Good Yom Tov
Rabbi Menashe East