



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Sukkot 5770 By Rabbi David Teutsch

Sukkot is at once a rejoicing in the bounty of the harvest, *z'man simchateynu*, and a reawakening to our fragility in the face of the awesome power of nature. Each year I am moved again by the power of this juxtaposition. In much of America, Sukkot comes just as the evening chill of autumn is taking hold. We are aware of the shortening days and the coming of winter. We decorate our *sukkot* with gourds and fruit, brightening these temporary huts as if to fortify them enough that we can pretend that they—and we—are strong enough to have nothing to worry about. But the stars shine in, and the wind blows through. More than a few *sukkot* are knocked over by its gusts. The forces of nature highlight our frailty.

So too it is in our daily lives. We have established routines and relationships. We are surrounded by an abundance of material goods that we largely take for granted. We live with a bounty unimaginable even a few generations ago. And yet the routines in our lives can be overturned in a moment by the diagnosis of disease, by dismissal from a job, by a family tragedy or an exploded relationship. Jewish tradition teaches that one of the things we should recall when we give *tzedakah* is that we can go from giver to receiver with a single turning of the wheel. As it says in Vayikra Rabbah Behar 34:4:

מי שעשה זה עני יכול לעשותו עשיר ומי שעשה לזה עשיר יכול לעשותו עני
The One who made this person poor can make him rich,
and the One who made this one rich can make him poor.

A few months ago I was in Senegal as the scholar for an AJWS delegation of rabbinical students. For the first time I saw for myself a level of heartbreaking poverty that until then I had known about only as a bunch of statistics—villages without electricity or safe water, without sewage and garbage disposal, without access to routine medicine or sufficient food. I played with a lively, handsome four-year-old and held him on my lap while knowing that the worms inside him would probably kill him for lack of a few doses of inexpensive medicine that are completely beyond the means of his village to provide. That child stays with me. But for a turning of the wheel. . . .

Why does Sukkot confront us with the dual message of bounty and fragility? Perhaps as a reminder that we should celebrate our bounty rather than take it for granted, and that awareness of our own fragility should serve as motivation to help those at the bottom of the wheel. While in Senegal I met Molly Melching, the founder of Tostan, the largest not-for-profit organization in that part of the world. Molly built it with key early help from AJWS, and today it is playing a powerful role in the elimination of female genital cutting, the introduction of literacy and self-governance within villages and the improvement of people's daily lives. I am grateful to Molly for demonstrating that we are not helpless in the face of the world's problems. Despite our fragility, any one of us can make huge differences in the lives of others if we decide to act.

Even in this time of economic uncertainty, we who have so much more than we usually acknowledge have an opportunity to see the Divine invitation in the sun and stars that shine through the roofs of our *sukkot*. The blessing of our bounty and the consciousness of our fragility together bring an awareness that we are called to act as God's partners. We need to help Molly and her allies help that little boy and all the others like him.

Does awareness of our frailty put a damper on our joy? In my experience just the opposite is true. Becoming aware of the many gifts with which we are surrounded and experiencing them as the remarkable gifts that they are is only possible when we realize that there is no automatic entitlement to them. Accepting our fragility helps us not to take what we have for granted and to feel joy about our many gifts. May this truly be a holiday for rejoicing in the many gifts of the season. And for sharing those gifts.



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