



SUKKOT

THE ASCETIC MATERIALIST: A WELCOME PARADOX

Developing a Cunning Approach to Everyday Life

HOLIDAY OVERVIEW

Sukkot

For forty years, as our ancestors traversed the Sinai Desert following the Exodus from Egypt, miraculous “clouds of glory” surrounded and hovered over them, shielding them from the dangers and discomforts of the desert. Ever since, we remember G-d’s kindness and reaffirm our trust in His providence by dwelling in a sukkah—a hut of temporary construction with a roof covering of branches—for the duration of the Sukkot festival (on the Jewish calendar, Tishrei 15–21). For seven days and nights, we eat all our meals in the sukkah and otherwise regard it as our home.

Another Sukkot observance is the taking of the Four Kinds: an *etrog* (citron), a *lulav*

(palm frond), three *hadasim* (myrtle twigs), and two *aravot* (willow twigs). On each day of the festival (except Shabbat), we take the Four Kinds, recite a blessing over them, bring them together in our hands, and wave them in all six directions: right, left, forward, up, down, and to the back. Our sages in the Midrash tell us that the Four Kinds represent the various types and personalities that comprise the community of Israel, whose intrinsic unity we emphasize on Sukkot.

Sukkot is also called “the time of our joy”; indeed, a special joy characterizes the festival. Nightly water-drawing celebrations, reminiscent of the evening-to-dawn festivities held in

the Holy Temple in preparation for the drawing of water for use in the festival service, fill the synagogues and streets with song, music, and dance until the wee hours of the morning.

The seventh day of Sukkot is called Hoshanah Rabah (“Great Salvation”) and closes the period of Divine judgment begun on Rosh Hashanah. A special observance is the *aravah*—the taking of a bundle of willow branches.

TEXT 1

Leviticus 23:33–34, 42–44

לג. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.

לד. דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר, בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם
לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי הַזֶּה, חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לֵה' . . .

מב. בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים, כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל
יֵשְׁבוּ בַסֻּכּוֹת.

מג. לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בַסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, אֲנִי ה'
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

מד. וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶת מִצְוֵי ה' אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

33. And G-d spoke to Moses, saying:

34. “Speak to the Children of Israel, saying: ‘On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the festival of Sukkot, a seven-day period for G-d. . . .

42. ‘For a seven-day period, you shall live in booths. Every resident among the Israelites shall live in booths.

43. ‘So that your [ensuing] generations should know that I had the Children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt. I am G-d.’”

44. And Moses told the Children of Israel [these laws] of G-d’s appointed [holy days].



The sukkah is specifically supposed to be temporary. Yet, on the other hand, a person is supposed to do everything they usually do in the sukkah.

TEXT 2

Talmud, Sukkah 2a

סוכה שהיא גבוהה למעלה מעשרים אמה פסולה,
ורבי יהודה מכשיר . . .

ורבא אמר מהכא: "בסוכות תשבו שבעת ימים",
אמרה תורה: כל שבעת הימים צא מדירת קבע ושב
בדירת עראי. עד עשרים אמה אדם עושה דירתו
דירת עראי, למעלה מעשרים אמה אין אדם עושה
דירתו דירת עראי אלא דירת קבע.

A sukkah that is more than twenty cubits
high is unfit. . . .

Rava sources this ruling from the verse, "For a seven-day period, you shall live in booths." The Torah says that for seven days you should leave from a permanent dwelling and live in a temporary dwelling. Until the height of twenty cubits, one makes their dwelling impermanent, but above twenty cubits, a person doesn't make an impermanent dwelling, rather a permanent one.

TEXT 3

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Shulchan Aruch
HaRav, Orach Chayim
639:1*

"בסכות תשבו שבעת ימים", ולמדו מפי השמועה
"תשבו כעין תדורו", כלומר כדרך שהוא דר כל
השנה בביתו - הזקיקתו תורה להניח דירתו ולדור
כאן בסוכה עם מטותיו ומצעותיו וכלי תשמישו.

מכאן אמרו חכמים: כל שבעת הימים אדם עושה
ביתו עראי וסוכתו קבע, כיצד? היה לו מצעות נאות
וכלים נאים מעלן לסוכה, וכן כל כלי שתיה
הצריכים לו יהיו עמו בסוכה, כדרך שהן עמו בביתו
בכל השנה.

The verse states, "In sukkot you shall live seven days." Our sages taught that the word "live" implies "live as you normally live." In other words, in whichever way a person is accustomed to behaving in their own home, the Torah requires them to transplant into the sukkah—with their beds, sheets, and other useful articles.

Our sages thus declared: The entire seven days of the holiday, a person deems their home as temporary and the sukkah as permanent. How? If you have nice sheets and nice dishes, bring them to the sukkah; any cups for drinking should also be in the sukkah as they are in the house throughout the year.



The mitzvah of
sukkah contains an
inherent duality.

TEXT 4

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, Likutei Diburim, vol. 2, pp. 416–428, adapted by Yanki Tauber, Once upon a Chassid, p. 35

Among the followers of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, was a Jew who worked the land in a small farming village near Mezeritch. The Baal Shem Tov had a special empathy for these simple rural Jews, whom he held in high regard for their wholesomeness, integrity, and unequivocal faith in G-d. So whenever the abovementioned villager would come to spend a Shabbat with his Rebbe, he would be accorded a most gracious and affectionate welcome.

At the conclusion of one such visit, the Baal Shem Tov requested of him: “Please, on your way home, stop by Mezeritch. I want you to give my regards to one of my closest and most illustrious disciples, the scholarly and pious Rabbi DovBer.”

The villager was overjoyed to be of service to his beloved Rebbe. As soon as he arrived in Mezeritch he began to inquire after the great Rabbi DovBer, but no one seemed to know of a “great Rabbi DovBer” among the town’s scholars and mystics. Finally, someone suggested that he try a certain “Reb Ber,” an impoverished schoolteacher who lived on the edge of town.

The villager was directed to an alley in the poorest section of town. Along both sides of the muddy path stood row upon row of dilapidated hovels, leaning upon one another for support. There he found the schoolteacher’s “house,” an ancient, rickety hut with broken panes occupying the better half of its tiny windows. Inside, a scene of heartrending poverty met his eye:

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TEXT 4

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A middle-aged man sat on a block of wood, at a “table” consisting of a rough plank set upon other wooden blocks. Before him sat rows of cheder children on “school benches”—also ingenious contraptions of planks and blocks. But the teacher’s majestic face left no doubt in the villager’s mind that he had indeed found his man.

Rabbi DovBer greeted his visitor warmly and begged his forgiveness—perhaps his guest could return later in the day, when he had finished teaching his students?

When the villager returned that evening, the hut’s classroom furniture had disappeared: The planks and blocks had now been rearranged as beds for the teacher’s children. Rabbi DovBer sat upon the lone remaining block, immersed in a book which he held in his hands.

Rabbi DovBer thanked his guest for bringing word from their Rebbe and invited him to sit, pointing to a table-turned-bed nearby. At this point, the villager could no longer contain himself. Outraged at the crushing poverty about him, he burst out: “Rabbi DovBer, what can I say? How can you live like this? I myself am far from wealthy, but at least in my home you will find, thank G-d, the basic necessities—some chairs, a table, beds for the children . . .”

“Indeed?” said Rabbi DovBer. “But why don’t I see your furniture? How do you manage without it?”

“What do you mean? Do you think that I *schlepp* my furniture along wherever I go? Listen, when I travel, I make do with what’s available. But at home—a person’s home is a different matter altogether!”

“But aren’t we all travelers in this world?” said Rabbi DovBer gently. “At home? Oh yes . . . At home, it is a different matter altogether . . .”

TEXT 5

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Igrot Kodesh
5, pp. 59–60*

איך בין צופרידן וואס איר האט געפונען א דירה,
און איך האף אז איר און אייער פרוי תחי' וועלן זיך
דארט גוט פילן, און איר וועט קענען אויסניצן די
צייט אויף ריכטיק צו פארשטארקן דעם געזונט,
בריאות הגוף כפשוטו, וואס בא אידן ברענגט עס
אויך צו בריאות הנשמה, ווי דער מעזריטשער מגיד
האט געשריבן זיין זון ר' אברהם המלאך, וועלכער
האט זייער געהאלטן פון תעניתים וסיגופים און איז
בכלל געווען אפגעטראגן פון דער גשמיות'דיקער
וועלט. זיין פאטער, דער מגיד, פלעגט מיט אים
אפט איינטענה'ן און וועלן פועלן, אז ער זאל דינען
דעם אויבערשטן ניט אויף דעם וועג. שרייבט דער
פאטער צום זון אז "א קליינע לעכעלע אין גוף
מאכט א גרויסע לעכל אין דער נשמה".

I'm happy that you have found a suitable home, and I hope that you and your wife will feel good there, using the time appropriately to improve your health situation. For a Jew, bodily health leads to soul health. The Magid of Mezeritch's son, Rabbi Avraham "the Angel," strongly advocated a lifestyle of fasting and punishing the body and was generally detached from the material world. His father, the Magid, would often take him to task and try to persuade him against serving G-d in such a way. The father wrote to his son, "A small hole in the body creates a gaping hole in the soul."

TEXT 6

I Kings 8:66

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי שָׁלַח אֶת הָעָם, וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ
וַיֵּלְכוּ לְאַהֲלֵיהֶם שְׂמֵחִים וְטוֹבֵי לֵב עַל כָּל הַטּוֹבָה
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְדָוִד עַבְדּוֹ וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ.

On the eighth day he dismissed the people,
and they blessed the kings and went to their
tents, rejoicing and delighted of heart for all
the goodness that the L-rd had wrought for
David His servant and for Israel His people.



The people experienced so much G-dliness that they were able to appreciate that their mansions were, in fact, only “tents”—fleeting and temporary structures without inherent value or lasting power.

TEXT 7

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak
Schneersohn, Likutei
Diburim, vol. 1, pp. 427–428*

עס איז זייער ריכטיג אז אין דער צייט פין שלמה
המלך'ס מלוכה איז געווען די גליקליכסטע צייט
פאר דעם יידישען פאלק, אלע זענען געווען זייער
רייך און ניט איינגעארדענט מיט די פעסטע
ווירטשאפט.

זייענדיג אין בית המקדש און זעהענדיג געטליכקייט
— ווי עס ווערט באריכות דערציילט אין מאמרי
רבותינו זכרונם לברכה — איז ביי יעדען ייד און
יידענע געווארן א פעסטע מיינונג אז גשמיות איז
קיין היים ניט. די געבויטע הייזער און די גוט
געפונדעוועטע הויפען מיט די גוט איינגעארדענטע
ווירטשאפט איז מעהר ניט ווי צייטווייליגער
געצעלט.

King Solomon's reign was the most fortunate
period the Jewish people ever enjoyed.
Everyone was wealthy and comfortable, both
materially and spiritually.

That said, accustomed as they were to being
in the Temple and witnessing G-dliness—as
is related in detail throughout our sages'
statements—the firm consensus of every
Jewish man and woman was that physicality
isn't a true "home." All of the majestic
buildings and sweeping courtyards were but
temporary "tents."

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TEXT 7

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דער גאנצער עולם הזה מיט אלע זיינע גליקליכסטע
דברים הגשמים, הייזער, האב אין גוטס, איז מעהר
ניט ווי ציטווייליגער געצעלט, א אהל וואס
וואנדערט פון איין ארט אויף דעם צווייטען ארט,
וואס מען שטעלט אויף צוליב דורכשלאפען נאכט
אדער אפרוהען א טאג צוויי.

עולם הזה איז קיין היים ניט, א היים איז עפעס גאר
אנדערש, און צו דעם פערשטאנד זענען צוגעקומען
דער עם ישראל אין דער צייט פון שלמה המלך'ס
מלוכה. זייענדיג רייך און געזונד און אין רוהיגער
גליקליכקייט, איז זייענדיג אין בית המקדש האט
מען ערשט יעמאלט דערקאנט דעם אמת, אז
גשמיות איז מעהר ניט ווי ציטווייליגער געצעלט.

This entire physical world with all of its material pleasures is just a fleeting “tent” that moves from place to place; a temporary structure erected for just one night or, maximum, a few days. It isn’t a true house.

A house is something else entirely. And the Jews came to that understanding during King Solomon’s reign. Though they were rich and healthy, when they came to the Holy Temple, they realized the truth: physical comfort is but a fleeting tent.

TEXT 8

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Hayom Yom,
Entry for 6 Cheshvan*

כשרצה רבינו הזקן לברך את ר' יקותיאל ליעפלער
בעשירות, אמר שאינו חפץ בזה, שלא תטרידו
העשירות מלימוד החסידות והתעסקות בעבודה.

וכשרצה לברכו באריכות ימים, אמר: אבער ניט
מיט פויערשע יאהרן, וואס "עינים להם ולא יראו,
אזנים להם ולא ישמעו", מען זעהט ניט קיין ג-
טליכקייט און מען הערט ניט קיין ג-טליכקייט.

When the Alter Rebbe wished to bless R. Yekusiel Liepler with wealth, the latter replied that he had no desire for it, lest it interfere with his study of *Chasidut* and involvement in Divine service.

When the Alter Rebbe then sought to bless him with long life, he replied, "But not peasant years. Not years of those 'who have eyes, but do not see; who have ears, but do not hear' (Psalms 115:5–6)—who neither see nor hear G-dliness."



It's not just that materialism doesn't get in the way of our spiritual life, it is actually an integral part of it.

TEXT 9

Genesis 13:1–2

א. וַיַּעַל אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם, הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ
וְלוֹט עִמּוֹ הַנְּגִבָה.

ב. וַאֲבָרָם כָּבֵד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנָה בַּכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב.

1. And Abram came up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that was his, and Lot with him, to the south.

2. And Abram was very heavy with cattle, with silver, and with gold.

TEXT 10A

Genesis 12:13

אָמְרִי נָא אֶחָתִי אָתָּה, לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לִי בְּעַבְדֶּיךָ וְחַיְתָּה
נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְלָךְ.

Please say [that] you are my sister, in order
that it go well with me because of you, and
that my soul may live because of you.

TEXT 10B

Rashi, ad loc.

"למען ייטב לי בעבורך": יתנו לי מתנות.

"In order that it go well with me because of you." They will give me gifts.

TEXT 11

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Sefer
Hasichot 5751:1, p. 128,
footnote 22*

העשירות דאברהם בכסף ובזהב, שבזה מודגשת
הפעולה בבירור ניצוצות הקדושה שבעיניני
העולם.

Abraham was very wealthy, with much gold
and silver. This highlights his activity with
transforming the holy sparks that are
embedded in the material stuff of this world.

What matters
is not how
much money
you have, but
what you do
with it.



TEXT 12

*Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak
Schneersohn, Sefer
Hasichot 5702, p. 150*

עשירות איז איינע פון די גליקליכסטע און
אומגליקליכסטע זאכען וואס ה' יתברך האט
באשאפען אויף דער וועלט, דאס איז דער
גרעסטער נסיון פאר דעם מענטשען.

ווען מען ווייסט וואס צו טאן מיט דעם און מען
פארנוצט דאס אויף החזקת התורה און צדקה וואס
על פי התורה, איז אשרי לו בזה ובבא. אבער ווען
מען ווייסט ניט וואס צו טאן מיט די עשירות און
מען פארנוצט דאס אויף וואס מען טאר ניט על פי
תורה, איז אוי ואבוי לו.

Wealth is something that can be either the greatest or most disastrous thing that G-d created in this world. It presents one of the greatest tests one can experience.

When one knows what to do with it and uses it to strengthen Judaism and give to Torah-endorsed charities, then they are truly blessed in this world and the next. But if they don't know how to use it appropriately and use it for matters not aligned with the Torah, woe is to them!

TEXT 13

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
9, pp. 92–93*

דער כללות עולם הזה איז דאך ניט קיין "קבע" —
נאר מער ניט ווי א פרוזדור און "עולם לאכסדרה
הוא דומה" — ג' רוחות, בדוגמת א סוכה וואס איז
פון ג' דפנות. און אין דעם באשטייט די עבודה פון
סוכות:

א איד דארף וויסן, אז די עניני העולם מצד עצמם
זיינען בלויז אן ענין של "עראי" . . .

אבער דורך דעם גופא, וואס די ענינים הגשמיים
האבן ביי אים ניט קיין תפיסת מקום און דאך נוצט
ער זיי "לשם שמים", אדער אין אן אופן פון "בכל
דרכיך דעהו", איז ער "עושה סוכתו קבע", ער
מאכט סוכתו — קבע; ער מאכט פון די עניני
העולם [וואס מצד עצמם זיינען זיי בלויז "סוכתו",
אן ענין של עראי] א דירה לו יתברך, ובמילא ווערן
זיי "קבע".

This entire world is not a permanent thing,
rather a corridor leading to something better.
Or, as the Talmud states, “The world is akin
to a porch” (Bava Batra 25b) with three walls,
a temporary structure—like a sukkah that
needs to only have three walls. This visual
indicates the “sukkah-style” religious service:

A Jew must know that the world and its
trappings are but fleeting and temporary. . . .

This very attitude compels a Jew to view the
world and its trappings as insignificant and to
use them exclusively for Divine purposes. And
in so doing, a Jew makes the temporary
sukkah of this world into something
permanent. In other words, they transform
the material world that by default is akin to a
temporary sukkah into a home for G-d—
something very permanent.



We're temporary
dwellers like a
sukkah, making a
permanent impact.

TEXT 14

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of
Liadi, Likutei Torah 74c*

וענין עקירת הרצון היינו מה שכתוב "בא אחיך
במרמה", פירוש שלא יהיה האחוה והדביקות
בעניני עולם הזה אכילה ושתיה בהתקשרות
אמיתית, כי אם במרמה . . . שיהיה זה ירידה אצלו,
אלא שמכוין רק בכדי לברר בירורים, והיינו
שאוכל בכדי שיתפלל בכח האכילה כו'.

What does it mean to “deflate desire?” Using the verse, “Your brother took a cunning approach” (Genesis 37:25), we can explain it like this: A Jew’s attachment to worldly activities such as eating and drinking is not with a true bond, rather with cunning. . . . A Jew ought to perceive such activities as a step down, something they’re doing only so as to transform the physical world. For example, they’re eating only to be able to pray with the energy the food provides.

TEXT 15

*Rabbi Yanki Tauber, “The
Material Jew”,
www.chabad.org/1279*

In his spiritual life, Israel is an uncompromising prince of G-d. He stares the mocker in the eye and lays all his cards on the table: these are my beliefs, these are my standards, these are my ethics; this is what I am, this is what I stand for, this is what I am here to teach the world. . . .

But when it comes to his material existence, Jacob plays the field but keeps his true objectives close to his chest. He will be scrupulously honest in his financial dealings, but he'll be utterly dishonest as to why he's in the business. He eats, drinks, earns money—for all intents and purposes, he's a full-fledged participant in the give-and-take of physical life. But he's unwilling to relate to the material on its—the material's—terms; refusing to care, refusing to become involved, refusing to pursue it for its own sake.

The Jew . . . seeks the dew of heaven and the fat of the land, only to manipulate them to serve a higher end. First he buys out his brother's stake in the spiritual, divorcing the mundane from any pretensions to import or significance. Then he disguises himself as a materialist, and claims materialdom's choicest bits for his own purposes.

KEY POINTS

1. According to the legal standard, the sukkah has elements of a permanent and temporary structure.
2. Various anecdotes and stories from the past seem to demonstrate conflicting attitudes toward material comfort and bodily pleasure.
3. One way of reconciling these elements is that when one is focused on spiritual pursuits, material comfort doesn't distract or obstruct because they see it is lacking true value.
4. Another deeper approach sees material comfort as a necessary pathway toward G-d, for it is only through engaging and transforming materialism that G-d's true desire is implemented.

KEY POINTS

5. A Jew must adopt a “cunning” approach when engaging with this world: entirely present and engaged, but entirely uninvested, because his or her eyes are on the prize—transformation.
6. The sukkah’s character of being both a temporary structure and a place in which permanent-like activity takes place is a perfect visual of this duality and healthy tension.

