

## Continuity as the Secret to Joy - Rabbi David Ingber on Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot 5780 (10 18 19)

I know if people leave before I speak, then at least it wasn't my fault. So here's the thing. I had a profoundly altering and jarring experience that helped give me an insight into one of the mysteries about the Homoed Sukkot that has always troubled me and always confounded me. And it had a lot to do with being a tourist.

So, for whatever reason, the day after Yom Kippur, I found myself in a completely different culture, a different country. And it's impossible, impossible not to note that what was ubiquitous at one point in human history is now absurd. The ubiquity of memory recording, the ubiquity of going somewhere and wanting to take a piece of it with you and bring it back home, wanting to say, here I was, now has become literally a moment-to-moment recording experience. It is impossible to be in another culture, another place, to be amongst those who are visitors here and not see sometimes multiple camera angles on one's own experience. There's the Eiffel Tower from this side, and there it is from this side, and it's literally a running reel of moment-to-moment memory. The anxiety of, shall we say, lack of absorption. This might go, and I won't have it with me. This might go, and probably will, and I won't have it with me. But I have it here. Oh yeah. I'm not going to give a cynical sermon on the beauty of that moment.

I remember just by contrast, in 1982, when I was bar mitzvahed, in the Land of Israel, in Yerushalayim, not in Haifa, but I had a bar mitzvah in Yerushalayim, and of course my father, the American at the time, wanted to record our bar mitzvah in the Holy Land, and that was all great until we got to Masada. Big mountain. And in 1982, the recording devices did not look like this. My father lugged a video camera the size of a state in the United States. It was like this. Like my dad had this thing on his back, up Masada. And we still have those tapes. Thank goodness. Oh my God. That's what I really want to hear, is myself at 13, leaning. But anyway. The ubiquity, and again, as I said, absurdity, of every moment being recorded, it just spoke to me of the sense of the fear that absorption doesn't happen.

And of course it happened within the context of a foreign place. And so as I walked around in this city, some two days after the height of Yom Kippur, and for those of you who were not with us on Yom Kippur, you know, we were with you somewhere, because it was so beautiful, so glorious, so high, so, for me, I'll speak for those who have reached out to me, last or Wednesday night, the end of Yom Kippur, I don't think anybody wanted to leave. There was food up on the fifth floor, but we didn't care.

If Yom Kippur is intending to transform us into angels, with its rigorous asceticism, depriving ourselves of food and drink, it was remarkable. And to be in the sanctuary on Yom Kippur, and then within two days to be walking around in a completely foreign land, someone who loves to see new things and to visit new places, someone who loves, right, being in new airports and figuring out things, and all I could feel and think was, wow, this really is jarring. I don't feel at home. It's a beautiful place, it's glorious, it's aesthetically stunning, I wish I could remember every moment and had my camera with me, but all I wanted to do was to go home. But I couldn't. And for me, those three days, and my ability and my need to be home, but also to locate myself in this location, to find myself in the unfamiliar, to root

myself in a moment of unrootedness, of being deeply alienated and lost, it answered the question for me about really what the nature of Sukkot is.

Because I grew up, like many of you, and they told us it was *man simchateinu*, it was the time of rejoicing, and all I knew was it was freezing. They told us it was the time of, right, celebration, and all I knew was we were out in the rain. It was supposed to remind us of the *Anei HaKavod*, these beautiful clouds of protection that we had in the desert, but anyone who's ever been in a Sukkot knows that it really doesn't protect you, in fact, it's not aiming to protect you. And so I fundamentally understood that really what Sukkot is all about is the fall from Yom Kippur. That Yom Kippur, the day of enlightenment, of at-one-ment, of being in bliss, of not needing to eat or drink or be embodied in any way, and then the fall, if you will, the incarnation, the journey from the formless to the form, from the *nigun* to the string cheese, and back again. This whole, full catastrophe of living. This birth, this precious, precious, precious birth. This thing that our rabbis teach us we didn't want to do but were forced. Kicking and... No! Well, here we go.

Man, I'd like to be at that moment. *Mutavlo la'adam shelonivra*. It was better had we not been born, says the Talmud, in an argument. They had an argument about this. I love it. It wasn't a sutra. It was an argument. Should we have been born? Should we have not been born? Macbeth. Should we have been born or not have been born? The rabbis say, you know, better not. But now that we have...

There's a rebbe. When I was in my early 20s, I went to yeshiva in Flatbush called Chaim Berlin, known as the Harvard of the Lithuanian yeshivot. I write that on my resume. 4.0 in *Rishonim* and *Akhronim*. This yeshiva was made famous not only for its rigorous Talmudic study and its rigorous programming and its regal, majestic qualities, which it did indeed have, no tongue in cheek. Absolutely regal. But for one great rebbe, whose name was Yitzhak Kuttner, the great *Pachad Yitzhak*, who wrote books that combined many different styles of learning. It was a genre unto itself. Yitzhak Kuttner, the *Pachad Yitzhak*, has a piece on Sukkot that I want to share with all of you that will hopefully tie this in.

It began with a verse that we were just singing. Those who didn't know we were singing it, we were singing, *Or zarua lat tzaddik*, light or zarua is sown. It is planted *lat tzaddik* for the righteous. *U li yishrei leiv*, and for those who are *yashar*. What is *yashar*? Straight. Those who are upright of heart, *yashar leiv*. What's the word? *Simcha*. Light is sown for the righteous, and for those who are *yashar leiv*, straight of heart, *simcha*. And the way that I always read that verse, the way that it is chanted before *Kol Nidre*, it always makes it seem as though the righteous and the ones who are straight of heart are really one typology, one type. But Rabbi Hotner says, no, there are two types. There's the righteous one who is given light or, for the *tzaddik*, for the righteous. And then he parses the sentence and says, no, there's another category, another type, *yashar leiv*. Can you all say that? *Yashar leiv*. *Yashar*, straight. And by that I mean only straight like straight. Like on the straight. And doing what's straight. They merit *simcha*, joy.

He says, why would those who are straight, what does a geometric figure have to do with joy? Why does a line, a *kav*, have to do with joy? And he says something remarkable. He says, you know, how when you're working on a problem in your life or you're working on something and you're working, working, working and you're expending energy and you still

haven't figured it out yet, and then you go to bed, and then he writes in Hebrew, and there's an incubation. Somehow you wake up in the morning and you still are working on the problem and you figured it out because you went to sleep with it. He said, in life, a straight line for him in the geometry of relationships means that I take what came before and I bring it with me. And I keep going. There's a continuity, he says, in a line that, unlike a circle, doesn't break. A line has perpetuity. It has persistence. A line, he says, and by the way, I'm not partial to lines over circles, lest I get an email from somebody who thinks that I am micro-addressing against circles, I promise.

But in the Jewish world of circles and lines, a circle like the Ouroboros, the great mythic figure, anybody else coming up? The Ouroboros, the great mythic figure that eats its tail, the circle that has no goal except to complete itself. The line has both telos, it has a purpose, it has an end, but it also brings what came before with it. Or as Aruah al-Tzaddik says, Rabbi Huttner, light is sown for the righteous. But to those who know the mystery, he says, of the continuity of practice, that you bring what you had with you and you don't break it even when you sleep, simcha, that's joy. Not the joy of the circle dance on Hakafot where we're all dancing together, it's all beautiful. But when there is a sense of loss, when there is a sense of going from Yom Kippur to somewhere different, what it is to be incarnated is to enter the world of lines, of direction, of a yearning to bring with us our attachments, to not leave them behind, not to have a break, but to live in our incarnated life with presence. That is, for Rabbi Huttner, simcha. And if that's the case, everybody, then it makes complete sense to all of you here, I know it makes sense to you, that we read the book of Ecclesiastes, of all things.

Tomorrow morning we'll read the strangest book in the entirety of the Bible. A book that is in and of itself a rejection of the Bible in which it is canonized within. A book that says over and over again, there is no change in the world, nothing under the sun for every season. Circle, circle, circle, turn, turn, turn. There's no lines anywhere, there's no progression or processing. It's just one circle. There's Big Ben, and there's Parliament. Around and around it goes, it doesn't end. And that we stand together, all of us, with that beautiful straight line called the lulav, in the middle of the circle. And we say, circles are beautiful. We come back to the same place, but the line, the line, I see your circle, and I raise you a line. The line turns a circle into a spiral. We come back to the same place we were, but we know it differently, a little bit more added to it.

We're not trapped in the world of circles, we have lines and circles. And so we gather together, Monday night, and we're going to make seven circles. We're going to open up the great story that begins and then has an end in a circle. And we, the lines, we Israelites, known by Yashar El, that's the word Yisrael is, Yashar El, we are the ones who know that the secret to joy is living our lives with continuity, with whatever comes our way, thrown as we are into this foreign land called a body and a world. So at the end, tomorrow, we'll sing a song. The last verse in the book of Kohelet says, Sof davar. In the end, all things are circles. But you, me, all of us here, we are straight. At least in this way.

The promise of Sukkot is that as we make our way into the world, and into the week, into the year ahead, that we remember whether we're waking or we're sleeping, that continuity of presence is joy. It will be happy sometimes. Some other times it might not be, but you will still be besimcha. You will still be in joy. If you remember. Sof davar kol nishma. In the end of

all of the circles. Et elohim gira. Remain attached to what is true. Zet mitzotav shmor ki zek kol adam. That's what it is to be online, everyone. And that's what it is to absorb.

So I bless you with the year of being online, of being in line.

Let's rise.