

**CHOL HAMOED SUKKOT**  
**SEPTEMBER 21, 2013**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

In Moses' great song that we read two weeks ago in the Synagogue, as he prepares to take leave of the children of Israel, he speaks to them in rather stark language. He prophesizes of the time when the children of Israel will express their ingratitude to G-d for all the wonderful things that G-d had done for them. G-d had taken them out of Egypt, saved them at the Reed Sea, brought them to Mount Sinai where they received the Torah and, according to Moses: "He set him atop the highlands, to feast on the yield of the earth; He fed him honey from the crag, and oil from the flinty rock." All of this was before they entered the land of Canaan as part of G-d's promise to the ancestors of the Israelites.

And then something occurs: "So Jeshurun grew fat and kicked – he grew fat and gross and coarse – he forsook the G-d who made him and spurned the Rock of his support." Once the children of Israel had entered the land, established their cities and villages, seemed secure in their habitations, they would forget all about G-d and, according to Moses, would rebel against His kingship. As Rabbi Kushner comments in the Etz Hayim Humash: "The ultimate ingratitude. G-d will bless Israel with a measure of prosperity, and that prosperity will lead them to become arrogant and to neglect G-d."

This Shabbat occurs during the holiday of Sukkot, the holiday of Thanksgiving for the harvest and for G-d's redemptive saving of the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai. We celebrate it in a most interesting fashion. We leave our homes and enter frail huts. We walk out of our firm and secure foundations and abide in temporary dwellings.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz comments: "When the people of Israel entered the land and settled in it, their lives changed dramatically from an unattached, up-in-the air existence to a life of permanence and relative security. Such a life affords the possibility of planning for the future, establishing a permanent place of residence, and building permanent living quarters." He states that the time of harvest and the recollection of the history of the holiday of Sukkot usually bring a sense of security.

He reminds us that, "Precisely at this time, everyone is obligated to leave their home and dwell in a Sukkah – to return to the wilderness and to the transience of a nomadic life." Rabbi Steinsaltz suggests that once a person builds a permanent residence, he begins to feel that his dwelling in this place is everlasting and that he cannot be uprooted from it. He becomes complacent, smug, and carefree. These qualities prevent a person from perceiving dangers and threats, whether external or internal. Living in a Sukkah is exactly the opposite. It is a fragile existence, it is uncertain and unstable. There are always doubts about survival and what may occur.

What I think Rabbi Steinsaltz is suggesting is that when things go well, we believe that it will always be that way. We feel a sense of permanence in that security. Sometimes we need to be jolted into reality and to recognize that life is not that way. We should not be like the ancient Israelites who exhibited ingratitude when all was going well. Instead, it is important for us to

recognize the possibility that life may change very quickly and if things are going well at this present moment we should be grateful for it. Moving from a permanent residence into the frail existence of the Sukkah reminds all of us of the transience of human life.

I believe the same lesson is taught a number of times throughout the Jewish year. It is rather interesting that we recite the Yizkor memorial prayers four times a year on the major holidays of our tradition. The pilgrimage festivals - Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are times of great rejoicing. From an agricultural point of view we celebrate the spring, the first fruits, and the harvest. From an historical point of view we recall our Exodus from Egypt, our revelation at Sinai, and our protection during our wilderness experience. In the midst of all that joy come the Yizkor prayers to bring us down to earth with somewhat of a thud, to recognize that nothing is permanent, all is transient. We may rejoice today, we may mourn tomorrow. Only a few days ago, we recited Yizkor on Yom Kippur. In our tradition, Yom Kippur is considered a white fast, a day when we feel close to G-d and on a spiritual high. It is not a time for mourning; it is seen as the opposite. Thus, perhaps Yizkor is recited on this day for exactly the same reason. It teaches us not to take anything for granted.

The same lesson is taught today. In Chol Hamoed Sukkot we read the scroll of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, the most cynical of biblical books. It is the author of Ecclesiastes, which tradition attributes to King Solomon, who informs us: "A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under Heaven: a time for being born and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted." The author attempts to find meaning in life and unfortunately in his search becomes rather cynical as he says, "Utter futility! said Kohelet – Utter futility! All is futile!"

On the most celebratory of all the holidays, the holiday of Sukkot, which is known as the time of our rejoicing, we read the scroll of Ecclesiastes. Perhaps the Rabbis wanted us to recognize that even at a time of great joy we are to recognize that we cannot always remain on that high plane.

As you all know, at one of the high points in the Jewish life cycle, a wedding, our last act is to break a glass. The traditional view is that it reminds us of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. Even at the time of our supreme joy, the marriage of two people under a Huppah, now establishing a new home and hopefully a new family, our joy is still tinged with sadness or at least anxiety. We remind this young couple that life is transient, that love cannot be taken for granted. They must work at their relationship, express their gratitude that they have found a partner in life, for they can never be sure what tomorrow may bring.

Bruce Feiler is a well-known author who has written ten books, including *Walking the Bible*. In 2008, he had dinner with his publisher, and recognizing his great notoriety and success, decided that he would spend the next ten years retracing the journeys of American history and would walk America.

The next morning he went for a check-up to receive a full-body bone scan. In some previous routine check-ups his internist had found that there was something wrong with his alkaline phosphatase number. After going through the scan the doctors found that he had an

abnormal growth in his leg. It was the same leg he had broken when he was five years old after falling off his bike. An MRI was taken again, and after doctors examined it they said to him, “The growth in your leg is not consistent with the benign tumor.” At that moment, Feiler recognized that he had cancer. He writes that he, of course, was distraught, dismayed, and concerned: “One thing, however, I already knew. I had spent my life dreaming, traveling, and walking. Now I might never walk again.”

His book is about how his young daughters might know who he was, especially as he expected not to be around as they would grow up. Though his daughters would have plenty of resources in their lives, they wouldn’t have their father.

He reached out to six men whom he knew and trusted from all that occurred in his life, and asked them to be there, to take his place, to stand in for him throughout his daughters’ lives. The group of men would become the Council of Dads, and that became the title of his book. One day he was fine and the next day he contemplated his death. Thankfully, he was able to overcome his illness and has returned to his chosen career.

A few months ago Dr. Erica Brown, scholar-in-residence for the Jewish Federation of the Greater Washington area, published a book entitled *Happier Endings: A Meditation on Life and Death*. Her book emanated from a particular experience. It started one day of September 2009. She writes, “On that day, my cousin Alyssa died at age 40. It is unexpected and traumatic. The silence that surrounded death in my family was suddenly broken for the worst possible reason; we were staring out in front of us with wide, gaping mouths, not knowing what to do or what to say. I performed my first and only funeral two days later, documenting the haunting experience in my journal and decided that it was time to end the family’s silence and begin the journey to understanding.” Erica Brown began to learn more about how one prepares for death, wrote an ethical will, and began to interview people who either were experiencing a terminal illness or their caregivers who had experienced that illness with them.

By talking to many people, Erica Brown learned that life should never be taken for granted, that every day is special, that we should show gratitude to those around us, and to G-d as well, for the many gifts that are present for us. She tells the story of Josh, who was twelve and his mother was about forty, when doctors discovered cancer and presented her with two options: aggressive chemotherapy or acceptance of death by the cancer. She opted for chemotherapy, however, it did not work and her doctor told her that her death was imminent. According to Brown, she pulled Josh aside and told him that from that point forward, she intended to live each day as if it were a bonus. She would laugh harder, give more, and do more. As of the writing of the book, she was 78. By Erica Brown’s count, she had at that time 13, 870 bonus days, and by her son Josh’s account, she treated each one as a surprise.

I believe that one of the reasons we leave our permanent homes at the height of the harvest season, when all things seem to be right with the world, is to recognize that there is no permanence in life. Everything is transient. The leaves will fall and the winter will come. People who are well today may be sick tomorrow. Individuals, who seem on top of the world now, can fall with a deafening thud only a few days from now. Philosopher Horace Kallen marked his 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday by writing, “There are persons who shape their lives by the fear of

death, and persons who shape their lives by the joy and satisfaction of life. The former live dying; the latter die living.” Ecclesiastes reminds us that life is temporal, it is finite. Nothing is permanent, everything is transient. We can either live with that fear that our lives will end soon or make the most of all the days that we have.

All of these examples point to the need for all us to recognize the blessings that we have and never take them for granted. Perhaps the impermanence of the Sukkah, the fragility of the domicile, tells us the story. We need to leave the permanent and engage the transient; we need to exit the firmly constructed and enter the temporal. When we return seven days later, hopefully, we will have learned the lesson and be appreciative of the blessings we have been granted, the joy that is ours, and the special gifts with which we have been presented. May our lives be filled with blessings, but more important, may we recognize those blessings and be grateful for them.