If you think about it, the succah is a peculiar thing. We take great pains to deck out the succah so that it becomes our home away from home. We take into it our finest tableware and furnishings. We bedeck it like a princess with all manner of jewelry and decoration. And yet look up at the roof and what do you see? Rubbish. Dead palm fronds. “The chaff of the vineyard and the granary.” It’s difficult for us to visualize spiritual realities. We know that on Yom Kippur, if we merit it, all our sins have been forgiven. We emerge from shul as white as snow (and not from lack of food!)

In the four days between Yom Kippur and Succot, we rush around building our succot and getting our arba minim (four...
species. Our involvement in these activities guards us from sin. We know that Hashem has forgiven us, that the slate has been wiped clean...but where are all our mitzvot?

Our negative actions have been erased, but that just leaves us with a blank white sheet of paper. Where are all the mitzvot that should have been written on our report cards?

When a person does teshuva, when he returns to Hashem out of love, not only are his sins forgiven, but they are turned into mitzvot!

So why is then that if you’re in New York or London or Paris, you’re still keeping two days of Yom Tov? If the calendar is fixed and we know exactly which day is Yom Tov and which isn’t, why can’t we all keep just one day?

The answer is that our Sages made a law that we should continue to observe the two days of Yom Tov as was the custom of our forefathers.

However, when our Sages mandated the continued observance of the two-day Yom Tov in the Diaspora as a continuation of the traditions of our forebears, they deliberately omitted a two-day Yom Kippur because it would be dangerous for some people to fast for such a long period.

However, the Mir Yeshiva in Kobe was faced with a different situation: The omission of the Sages’ decree to fast two days of Yom Kippur was because we are certain on which day Yom Kippur occurs. However, Japan is close to the International Date Line, (a longitudinal line which lies 180° from Greenwich) and thus there was a real doubt as to which day it was. For this reason, there were those of the Mir Yeshiva who felt compelled to fast for two days. And even others who were less strong, while they could not observe the fast itself, commemorated all the other aspects of this holiest day(s) of the year.

This is a very difficult concept for us to grasp, and maybe even as we sit in our succot, we may feel a twinge of sadness. Where are all my mitzvot?

It is at that moment we can look up and see a perfect visual-aid representation of sins being turned into mitzvot. The schach — the rubbish which is the ceiling of our succah — is the succah’s essential part. Waste and rubbish has been turned into a mitzvah of incomparable spiritual beauty, outshining by far the brightest decoration and adornment. Now we can understand. Through teshuva that comes from love, we have turned our ‘rubbish’, our sins, into mitzvot.