INSIGHTS INTO SUCCOS
Contributed by members of the Ohr Somayach faculty

Total Mitzvah

It is said in the name of the Vilna Gaon that there are only two opportunities among all the 613 mitzvos to physically "enter the mitzvah." One is the opportunity to live in Eretz Yisrael, and the other to be in the succah you have constructed for the Festival of Succos. When you cross the border into the land of Israel, or walk into the succah, you have "entered" the mitzvah. What is the connection between the succah and the Land of Israel? Judaism is unique to the world in that Jewish national and religious destinies are identical. The concept of a successful Jewish nation in the Land of Israel is fundamental to our religious destiny. Other nations have holy places and live elsewhere, but for us, our land is our home, our holy soil and the necessary setting for the ideal fulfillment of mitzvos. Accordingly, the Torah includes both civil and religious law, instructing us in our everyday behavior and our acts of worship, both of which are equally holy. The way we live in the Land is part of our service to Hashem. Thus we see in the Book of Joshua, that the first decisions that Joshua made when the Jews entered the Land of Israel were for urban planning, as important to their spiritual lives as the transportation of the Holy Ark. Living in Israel gives the Jewish people the opportunity to sanctify every little act that they do, Jewishly. Merely going to the corner store to buy a carton of milk is part of the fulfillment of the Jewish destiny when it is done in the Land of Israel. Similarly, during the festival of Succos, a Jew has a chance to make every little act he does a holy act by being in the succah. Eating a celebratory meal or even sleeping in the succah is a mitzvah, a symbol of the total fulfillment of G-d's plan for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Nota Schiller

Twin Mitzvos

A further comparison can be made between the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel and the mitzvah of sitting in the succah during the festival of Succos. Both mitzvos require us to merit the opportunity to perform them. Many times it is written in the Torah that if the Jewish People sin they will be expelled from the Land of Israel. Similarly, the performance of the mitzvah of succah also requires special merit, as we find in Tractate Succah, Chapter 2, Mishna 9. The laws of Succos state that the mitzvah to sit in the succah is negated by heavy rain. Our mishna reads: "Rain falls ... to what can this be compared? To a servant who comes to pour a drink for his master and the master throws the flask in his face." If the Jewish People don't follow G-d's ways, then He brings rain so they won't be able to perform the mitzvah. Why must one merit the opportunity to do these two mitzvos? The answer involves another similarity between the two. Both mitzvos involve our deserving to receive the entire Torah. That is why Rashi, in the beginning of Bereishis, explains why the Torah begins with the creation of the world rather than the first mitzvah, kiddush hachodesh the sanctification of the new moon. Since G-d created the world, it is His right to give Eretz Yisrael to the Jewish People. If Eretz Yisrael belongs to us then so does the Torah for they go hand in hand. As we have
learned, Eretz Yisrael is the optimal place for the performance of all of the mitzvos. The Talmud in Avoda Zara relates how G-d compares the Jewish People with the other nations in their willingness to fulfill the mitzvah of succah. G-d tests the eligibility of the other nations to receive the Torah with the simple mitzvah of sitting in the succah on a hot day. Unable to withstand the heat, the nations of the world leave the succah and even kick it in anger upon leaving. This explains why merit is the key to both the mitzvah of succah and yishuv Eretz Yisrael, because they unlock for us the entire Torah. Why are the Jewish People worthy of receiving the Torah through their observance of the commandments to sit in the succah and yishuv Eretz Yisrael? Because it is the ability of a Jew to totally immerse himself in mitzvos that makes him deserving of the entire Torah.

Rabbi Michael Schoen

Clouds of Glory

We refer to the three festivals of Pesach, Shavuos and Succos as the 'time of our freedom,' the 'time of the giving of the Torah,' and the 'time of our rejoicing.' We understand that Pesach is the time of year we were freed from Egypt and Shavuos the time of year we received the Torah at Mount Sinai, but why is Succos called the time of simcha? What special event took place at that time? Why do we celebrate Succos in the month of Tishrei? Since the festival of Succos commemorates the clouds of glory that surrounded the Jewish People for 40 years from the time of the exodus from Egypt, Pesach would seem to be a more appropriate time. Perhaps the answer lies in the words of the Vilna Gaon. After the sin of the golden calf, the clouds of glory disappeared, and returned only after the Jewish People were commanded to build the Mishkan. On the day after Yom Kippur the 11th of Tishrei Moshe told the people to bring donations for the building of the Mishkan. They brought them for two days, and on the 14th of Tishrei the makers of the Mishkan gathered the materials. Finally, on the 15th they began their work, and the clouds of glory returned. Perhaps this is the simcha of Succos, the time of the reunification of Hashem with the Jewish People, represented by the return of the clouds of glory. Each year, after experiencing the introspective month of Elul and the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, the 10 Days of Repentance, we come to Succos with simcha; because, through our repentance and teshuva we have drawn closer to Hashem, and arrived at z'man simchaseinu.

Rabbi Yehuda Samet, based on Mayana Shel Torah

Why Eight Days?

Regarding Succos the Torah writes, "On the first day it shall be a day of rest and on the eighth day it shall be a day of rest." But we know that the mitzvos of Succos last seven days, not eight. What is the significance of the eighth day? The number seven represents the physical world, eight the spiritual. For seven days the succah shows us that the world is temporary. Just as we rejoice in the Succah which is a temporary structure so too must one rejoice with the notion that life is temporary. Life is temporary? How can we rejoice? The answer is the eighth day. On the eighth day Simchas Torah we do not take the four species and we do not sit in the succah. It would seem that the festival of Succos is over. But it is not so. Simchas Torah, which begins anew the yearly cycle of reading the Torah, is a Yom Tov. This shows us that the Torah extends through the physical realm and beyond. Torah is the source of all creation and life, existing forever. So if one understands that the eighth day, Simchas Torah, gives meaning and life to the other seven days, then one rejoices. True joy comes when one discovers the real meaning of life.

Rabbi Shlomo Zweig, based on Sfas Emes and Michtav M'Eliyahu
Dancing in Prayer

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi divides the Torah into two parts: One of fear and awe, and one of love, joy and happiness. Some mitzvos lead us to Hashem through fear, and others through joy. Come holiday time, we have a healthy dose of both. On Yom Kippur we afflict ourselves with fasting and supplications, to clarify for ourselves the awesomeness of He who created us, and the dread of His impending judgment. On Succos, we sing, dance and eat festive meals outside in the succah, and enjoy the blessings of the new year. In each way, we must fulfill the commands of Hashem with deliberation, intent, and a whole heart. When we are in shul on Yom Kippur during hours of the most intense prayer of the year, our heartfelt intent to approach Hashem is evident. When we are in the succah, we approach Hashem through the joy of our celebration, and we should do it with the same intent. But how does one serve Hashem with joy, with the same intent as Yom Kippur? One should be happy because Hashem has given us His commandments. It is as if He has invited us to enter His holy palace, sit at His table and share in His goodness. When our thanks to Him for this incredible opportunity express themselves in singing and dancing, we should jump up and dance with our whole heart.

Rabbi Mordechai Perlman, based on Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

The Lonely Branch

There is a well known Midrash that the four species represent the four different kinds of Jew. The esrog, having both smell and taste, is representative of those who learn Torah and practice maasim tovim; the lulav comes from a fruit-bearing tree but has no smell, and represents those who learn Torah but do not practice maasim tovim; the hadassim have a sweet smell but no fruit, and represent those who practice maasim tovim but do not learn Torah; the aravos represent those Jews that have neither Torah nor maasim tovim, as they neither give fruit nor possess a fragrant smell. On Hoshana Rabbah, the last intermediate day of Succos and one of the holiest and most awe-inspiring days of the year, we lay down the four species that we have used throughout the festival and pray that the world should receive enough water for all its needs. At this most climactic moment, as our entreaties to Hashem soar heavenward, we pick up a bundle of aravos and beat them on the floor. Of all the species, why is it that we take the only one that symbolizes a lack of Torah and maasim tovim? It is an unfortunate trait of human nature that a person feels it is sufficient to have done only a part of what was required of him. However this is not enough. Hoshana Rabbah represents the culmination of a process that begins on Rosh Chodesh Elul and encompasses Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Succos. It is the process of teshuva. It is a time that is supposed to bring us nearer to Hashem. On Hoshana Rabbah, as this time draws to a close, we take hold of the aravos alone, with no smell and no taste, in order to emphasize that very often, it is those who are the furthest removed that have the greatest sensitivity to their faults and are prepared to try and rectify them.

Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

Protected by...

Every Shabbos Chol Hamoed Succos we read the Haftorah (Yechezkel, Chapter 38) about the final confrontation at the end of days between Gog and the nation of Israel. How does Succos connect with Gog, Magog and the end of days? It is ironic to note that after the exodus from Egypt, while travelling in the desert, a place that offers absolutely no natural security or protection, the Jewish people experienced their greatest sense of true security, protected from their enemies and entirely provided for by G-d. Every year, when the Jew leaves his home for a week to eat, sleep and live in a succah; an often flimsy structure with a roof made of bits of wood, reed, bamboo, etc., he actualizes this idea that ultimate care and protection come only from G-d. By virtue of the closeness to G-d he has achieved during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, he can now experience a sense of true security. The word "Gog" in Hebrew means roof. Modern man, divorced from a belief in G-d, deeply believes that a...
good job, a big bank account, a solid economy, a high tech army, in short, a strong solid "roof over his head," is the source of true security. These two world views cannot co-exist forever. We are told by the prophets that Armageddon is inevitable, a final confrontation that will witness the destruction of mankind's false faith. Succos teaches us that our apparently flimsy roofs will ultimately be triumphant over modern man's misguided sense of security.

Rabbi Chaim Salenger

The Torah (Leviticus 23:39-40) commands us to "take for ourselves" four species; the lulav (palm branch), the esrog (citron), the willow branch and the myrtle branch, on Succos. What is the significance of this commandment, in which we take the above species and wave them during our prayers? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in Horeb, Chapter 31, points out that each of the species has different qualities. Together, they symbolize all the physical blessings that G-d has given us. The esrog symbolizes sustenance and aroma; the palm branch, sustenance but no aroma; the myrtle branch, aroma but no sustenance, and the willow branch neither sustenance nor aroma it is just wood. These four indicate clearly that everything has been created by G-d for man, to benefit him through nature. If we look at them in greater detail we see that each represents a different category of our benefits from nature. Rabbi Hirsch divides our blessings into the following categories. The first group includes things in nature that require no finishing touches by man. For instance, the air you breathe, the light which shines for you, the beauty which makes you happy, the sweet-smelling scent which refreshes you, etc. This category is symbolized by the myrtle, which has a pleasant aroma, and the esrog, which has aroma and sustenance. The second category comprises things in nature that are inherently beneficial to man, but out of which man has to extract the benefit, i.e. all means of sustenance, which are represented by the lulav, a branch of the date-palm. The third category includes things whose consummation depends entirely upon the hand of, upon which man exercises his power as their master and from which he extracts all the usefulness that is in them. Nature supplies only the raw material. For instance, his dwelling, clothing, utensils, etc., represented in general by wood, i.e. the willow branch, which has no aroma or sustenance. In the words of Rabbi Hirsch: "Take these four to represent all that G-d offers you as gifts of nature. Take them as your very own before Hashem, your G-d. Acknowledge and acclaim that it is G-d who vouchsafes unto you all that is good in life. Cling to them only as the means of living in the presence of G-d according to His will. Rejoice in them before your G-d as the means of fulfilling your duties." This commandment is a way of acknowledging that the purpose of all our physical blessings, strengths and capabilities, is to "take them before G-d" and to dedicate them to a spiritual purpose. Do not ignore the physical you may enjoy it and benefit from it but do so with the purpose of reaching beyond the physical world and into the spiritual world.

Rabbi Mordechai Becher

"OK Mugsy, the game's over, come clean with your hands up." "Hey Jake, that don't look like Mugsy! Clean shaven, business suit and tie." "Your name's Moshe? Jake, did the boys stake out the wrong joint again? Rip up the warrant and let's go see what's going on here." Hoshana Rabbah is called the last chance to do teshuva. But how can teshuva help if the books of judgment are sealed after Yom Kippur? Isn't it too late? Teshuva creates a new person, distinct from the old individual. When the angels assigned to bring the decree of Yom Kippur arrive on Hoshana Rabbah looking for Mugsy, they find only Moshe and must rip up the decree.

Rabbi Pinchas Kantrowitz