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## Do I *Have* to Be Happy?

*Rachel Braun*

**S**ukkot is *zman simchateinu*, the season of our joy, the holiday when we are commanded to be happy. I never thought too much about the oddity of being commanded to be happy until Sukkot 1993/5754. I had just two months earlier gone into clinical remission from non-Hodgkins lymphoma, and in three odd ways during that experience, Sukkot had crept into my subconscious.

The first time was immediately after I was diagnosed, in March 1993. I returned home from the initial doctor's appointment, and spent the next two days organizing my affairs. I filed bills, laid out life insurance forms in obvious places, balanced checkbooks and organized credit card receipts. I brought the photo album up to date, a practice I maintained over the next five years on the eve of every semi-annual CAT-scan. (Rabbi Eliezer says, "Repent a day before your death" but I maintain, "Update your photo album a day before your death.") Then, I went to Victoria's Secret and bought a pair of satin pajamas. I walked away from the cash register thinking "Well, I started off doing Yom Kippur, and now I've just done Sukkot." I couldn't verbalize what satin pajamas had to do with Sukkot, though at the time the parallels seemed obvious to me.

That spring, a woman I knew who was being treated for Hodgkins disease finished her course of chemotherapy, a few months before I did. I took her out for lunch, and was puzzled to see her mood so agitated rather than celebratory. I asked her why she wasn't happy about her remission. For me at the time, getting past chemo would surely be a joyous triumph. "Look," she badgered me. "Why should I be happy just because I don't have cancer anymore? I'm thirty-four years old. I wasn't SUPPOSED to get cancer in the first place." Her hostility surprised me, and I responded with a wry, "Well, I'm 35, that must explain it!" She glared at me and I thought I should say something quick. At the time, I was benefitting greatly from a support group

sponsored by the Lymphoma Foundation of America, so I suggested to her that she might attend as well, or find another suitable group. Among the ones I listed for her was the organization “Make Today Count.” Her reaction was instant and angry. “I don’t want to ‘make today count,’” she growled. “I want to waste today, just like everyone else gets to do.” Instantly I got a flash of thinking about Sukkot.

Next, when I went into clinical remission that summer, I started calling the Jewish bookstores in July, asking what prices they were offering on pre-made *s’khakh* [organic roofing for the sukkah]. The owner said, “Lady! It’s July! Why are you worried about *s’khakh*? Call me in September.” I didn’t have a good answer for him. I imagined explaining to him that perhaps I would be dead in September, so I needed to order the *s’khakh* now. I imagined him responding, “Lady! Nu, so why would you need the *s’khakh* then, anyway?” So I sheepishly agreed to call back in September, and quietly hung up. That Sukkot seemed to resonate so much that season puzzled me.

Satin pajamas are luxurious. Is Sukkot? Well, certain aspects are. It’s a week of relaxing into the evening with good foods and friends, after a tough ten or forty day season of *teshuvah*. Finally, it seems that we get to waste a little time after all that work of self-examination. From a kid’s point of view, it’s downright fun. We build a funny booth, sleep and eat outdoors, decorate it, and parade around in shul during *hoshanot*. Secure in the sukkah with a wafting steamy stew and bundled in tightly with friends, we sense the same cloud of protection that God used to guide us through the wilderness.

But like any good Jewish symbol, the sukkah has two-sided imagery. Matzah, for example, is both the bread of affliction, *lechem ’oni*, yet also a symbol of our freedom. What about Sukkot? Sitting in a sukkah, you symbolically experience God’s protection, yet you sit vulnerably outdoors under an open roof. The stew is thick and steamy, but dried leaves from the *s’khakh* are falling in. We recall celebrating the harvest together as pilgrims in Jerusalem, yet we are also reminded of the Exodus, of taking the risk of fleeing to the wilderness.

So being happy is not so apparent. It’s psychologically demanding to be happy precisely when your physical protection is the most fragile. With a certain resignation you learn to be content with the harvest you have, when the work is behind you, finished, and past second-guessing.

It’s a bit like being congratulated on having just survived cancer, while meanwhile you’re wondering how soon you’ll have the nerve to waste a day, just like everyone else gets to do.

Is Sukkot is the logical choice of festival to follow Yom Kippur? Here you’ve been holed up in shul, contemplating how you’ve lived your life, and now you have to go out into the world and make life happen again, informed by the paradigm of the day. But part of you resists. You seemed to be getting along just fine before Yom Kippur; why did living have to become so urgent? It’s like going into remission, and trying to figure out how to resume life again. You weren’t supposed to get cancer, after all, as my friend said, so why should life have to be different now?

Yes, Sukkot is a guide for life after Yom Kippur, precisely because it represents so many different images. The food is warm and plentiful; the booth is flimsy and open to the elements. You waste a little time in the evening; in the morning Hallel you declare *zeh ha-yom asah Adonai—this is the day God made*. You are secure under the protection of the Cloud of Glory that was said to cover the sukkot of the wandering Israelites; yet you are wandering through enemy territory over harsh terrain. The work of the harvest has been accomplished, but it now must last you through the oncoming, unknown winter. In the megillah reading for the festival, Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) promises that you’ll have a time to laugh; he warns darkly that there is a time to weep. It would be delusory giddiness to rejoice only in that which is fun and secure; it is happiness to recognize that what makes the festival is both the warm stew and the dried leaves that fall in it.

It’s not natural or easy to submit to that distinction. It helps to be commanded.



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