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Sukkot
October 2 (Sundown) - 9 (Evening) 2020
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By: Rabbi Elliot Dorff
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The Significance of Aesthetics in Judaism

We appreciate our Jewish heritage for a long list of reasons. Among them are these:

1. It is ours, giving us a sense of identity.
2. It links us to our community, past, present, and future.
3. It spells out what is moral and motivates us to act morally.
4. It marks events in our lives, including the passing of each day and of the days of the week and year, and the life cycle events in our lives, thus giving a sense of differing meanings to those times.
5. It gives us a sense of God, that is, the transcendent aspect of human experience.
6. It makes life a work of art, giving us music, art, dance, and drama.

In this commentary, I want to focus on the last of those because it is not what many Jews think of when they think of their connections to Judaism. Let me begin with a text from *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* that demonstrates that the Rabbis were aware of this aesthetic aspect of Judaism, a text in which some of the elements of Sukkot are explicitly part of that awareness.

“You are beautiful, my love” (Song of Songs 1:15). You are beautiful through the commandments, both positive and negative [that is, what one is to do and what one should avoid doing]—beautiful through good deeds;...beautiful in the field through gleaning, the forgotten sheaf, and the second tithe [gifts the Torah requires be left for the poor]; ...beautiful in the law of circumcision; beautiful in prayer, in the reading of the Shema, in *mezzuzot* and *tefillin*, in the *lulav* and *etrog*; beautiful too in repentance and in good deeds; beautiful in this world and beautiful in the world to come.

One reason to obey the commandments, then, is to make life beautiful. Along these lines, Jewish law requires that we adorn our *sukkah* to make it beautiful and that we intentionally choose our *lulav* and *etrog*, both to make it ours, in accordance with Leviticus 23:40, but also to ensure that the ones we pick are pleasing to our aesthetic sense so that the holiday is thereby more beautiful in our eyes. As the Talmud says (B. *Shabbat* 133b):

As it was taught: “This is my God and I will glorify Him [*v’anveihu*]...” [Exodus 15:2. The Sages interpreted *anveihu* homiletically as linguistically related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the verse in this way:] Beautify yourself before Him in mitzvot. Make before Him a beautiful *sukkah*, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful ritual fringes [on one’s *tallit*], beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.

Although a large part of my attraction to Judaism as I was growing up included the songs that I was taught at Camp Ramah and the gorgeous Levandovsky melodies that the adult and youth choirs at my synagogue sang each Friday night and, especially memorably, on the High Holy Days and Festivals like Sukkot, it was not until I met Dr. Shelomo Bardin, may his memory be blessed, that aesthetics became a conscious part of my understanding of Judaism. During the 1970’s I spent one day in each July and August at Brandeis Camp Institute to describe Conservative Judaism in the morning and then engage in an extended discussion with the college and graduate students in the evening. One afternoon I asked him why he insisted that the participants spend one hour each day in a mandatory session to learn Israeli songs and another mandatory hour each day to learn to dance Israeli dances. He said: “Because Judaism is caught, not taught.” That is, we are attracted to Judaism emotionally, not intellectually.

As a person who became a serious Jew because of a series of weekly philosophic discussions at Camp Ramah when I was fifteen, I want to say that I think that Judaism is both caught and taught. If we are really to do what the Shema requires – that we love God “with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our resources” – then that commitment must not be limited to our emotions or our minds: it must appeal to, and emerge from, the whole of our being and all of our relationships. Moreover, our varying experiences with Judaism in all of these parts of our being reinforce each other, for none of us is only a body, mind, set of emotions, or will, and none of us lives on an

isolated island by ourselves. So I am glad my upbringing in my home, my synagogue, and Camp Ramah involved all of those parts of my being in shaping my Jewish commitments.

That said, on this Sukkot especially, when we are all isolated in our homes and feel depressed and deprived for not being able to do the many social and professional things that give meaning to life, the aesthetic part of Sukkot may be just what we need to lift our spirits. So take time this Sukkot to build a *sukkah* if you can and to make it beautiful with decorations that please you, and pay attention to the shape, color, and scent of the *etrog* that you choose. Definitely do not be embarrassed about focusing on the aesthetics of these acts, for that aspect of these traditional parts of the observance of Sukkot does not diminish, but rather enhances the religious significance of the holiday. Indeed, as demonstrated in the two texts quoted above, aesthetic concerns have been part of Judaism for hundreds of years. Furthermore, we are beckoned to feel joy on Sukkot, which Jewish liturgy declares is *zman simhatenu*, “the time of our joy,” and experiences of beauty can help us do that.

May this Sukkot be a time of joy for all of us, and may the sheer beauty of this holiday enable us to feel that joy.

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