

Derech Ha-Rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

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First Shabbat Meal

Investing in Mitzvot and their beautification banishes evil spirits and impure influences

The following teaching has immense significance and we write it in awe and fear of the Almighty on the eve of Sukkot.

During this special period between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, the Heavens are open and Hashem pours out goodness to the world for the entire year to come; we plead to Hashem to grant blessings and goodness from the Heavens above.

In Sukkah 37b, Rabbi Yochanan teaches that we wave the Four Species along the cardinal directions and heavenward and earthward to affirm and publicize Hashem's reign on our world. Rabbi Hama Bar Ukva taught in the name of Rabbi Yossi Bar Haninah that we wave the Four Species in every direction to counter evil winds and up and down to counter destructive dew.

The sages teach that we must be pure and focused when performing the Mitzvah of Lulav and Etrog lest its spiritual influences will be captured by the Evil side. Additionally, one is obligated to invest and honor this particular Mitzvah of the Four Species as much as one is capable of.

To understand the significance of valuing and honoring Mitzvot, we refer to the following Halacha regarding the burial of a corpse. When a person passes away, the Halacha requires that the corpse is treated with great respect and honor. Upon deeper contemplation, this may seem awkward as what benefit is there to the person that is to be buried? The person's soul is already in heaven and thus it seems inappropriate to respect and honor the body which remains.

In truth, there is great spiritual benefit to the soul that the body in which it once resided is treated with respect. All the rituals of respect that are given to the corpse serve to scatter and scare away evil spirits who wish to bind themselves to the body and torment the soul that once resided within.

This idea explains the reason behind the obligation to respect and value objects of Mitzvah. By investing, valuing, and expressing respect towards the Mitzvah of Lulav and Etrog, we banish all the evil spirits which try to attach themselves to the mitzvah and draw energy from it. Regarding the mitzvah of Etrog, the Torah expressly requests that we seek an Etrog of quality as much as we can afford. The benefits of performing the Mitzvah of Etrog to the best of our ability not only protects it from evil influences but also all the other Mitzvot we perform.

This can also be a reason why we must respect Torah scholars, because the honor we grant them will banish evil influences from around them. And the greater the sage, the more he must be honored, as the Talmud teaches

(Sukkah 52a) that the greater the sage, the greater their evil inclination. Thus, the honor that is granted to sages is there to protect them against their evil inclination and evil influences in general.

Consequently, a sage who flees from all respect and honor is considered a sage above others and thus merits that "honor chase after them (Pirkei Avot)," so that they be protected from evil influences. The idea that honor granted to a person protects them from evil spirits is found in the episode where Yitro presents himself to the Jewish people and requested that Moshe and other people come out to meet and greet him. This behavior may seem at odds with Yitro's righteous personality and intent to come closer to the Jewish people and their Torah ideals. In truth, Yitro was requesting that he be honored because he was aware that all the evil forces would prevent him from achieving his mission of converting to Judaism, as it would present such a momentous influence on all the nations of the world. Therefore, he sought out protection from evil spirits and influences by means of honor that would be granted to him the entire Jewish Nation. In another story recounted in Sukkah 41a, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azarya and Rabbi Akiva found themselves at sea on Sukkot and Rabban Gamliel purchased a Lulav for an exorbitant sum of 1000 coins. There too, Rabban Gamliel's intent was to ward off evil influences by means of expressing great honor for the Mitzvah.

Sukkot is the Festival of Joy, which influences one's joy for the entire year to come and many other spiritual elements; this can only be achieved by first warding off all evil influences from our midst. Therefore, the investment we make into beautifying the mitzvah of Lulav and Etrog serves to forge a spiritually uplifting path for ourselves, spared from evil spirits and influences.

As we approach the holy festival of Sukkot, we must remind ourselves of the respect we owe to our sages, we must invest and beautify the Mitzvot and increase our respect towards the Torah. These serve to forge a path clear of harm and evil influences for the entire year. Additionally, we must distribute charity, and this will merit one protection against evil spirits.



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Soul Of the Rif

Hillel the Elder would say "If I am here, all are here. If I am not here, who is here (Sukkah 53a)?" This means to say that if I know how to refine myself and do not look at others and am not concerned by them, or for that matter, if I am concerned but do not attempt to imitate another person, nor become angry with them or argue with them, all will be fine. However, if I interfere with what they are doing, or wish to do as they do, or that they should act as I do, such an outlook will make your entire life bitter.

A person needs to know that every individual has their setting which Hashem gave them, and each person is born into this world with tools. These work tools are their Middot (character traits), their actions, their points of tension and the Tikkunim (remedies) which will refine them. You are yourself - If I am here, everyone is here, meaning if I know how to repair and refine myself, then all forms of repair are whole and complete.



2nd Shabbat Meal

The Influence of the Sukkah on a person

It is necessary that one be aware of the fact that the elevated status of the Sukkah is exceptionally special. In every Mitzva that a person performs, it is necessary that they have intent for the given Mitzva. However, in the case of Sukkah, even if a person does not intend to fulfill the Mitzva, they receive reward and this has a tremendous impact on them. The same is true of all matters of sanctity, even if a person did not engage in the matter to achieve sanctity, the very fact that a person is in the midst of holy things greatly impacts and influences a person.

The Midrash (Bereishit Rabba 65:22) tells the story of Yosef Meshita, who lived during the time that the Romans destroyed the Beit HaMikdash. The Romans wanted a Jew to enter the Beit HaMikdash to plunder its spoils, and only after that would they be willing to enter. They told all of the Jews that whoever wishes to enter first will be allowed to keep whatever they take first, but on condition that they lead the Roman soldiers in. There was a man named Yosef Meshita who was a great Rasha, and he told the Romans that he would help them enter. He led the Roman legions in and they began to plunder the Beit HaMikdash. He saw the Menorah there and took it before departing.

After he left, the Romans said to him, "This Menorah is a significant item for important people, you are not significant enough to have it. Do not take it, return inside and take something else instead." He said to them, "Is it not enough that I have angered my G-d once, do I need to do so again?! I will not enter again." They warned him that if he did not enter again as instructed that they would kill him, he responded that he would rather be killed than enter again. Our Sages say that they killed him with a gruesome death and although he suffered greatly, he remained steadfast in his refusal to go back in.

The commentaries ask how he had the strength to withstand the excruciating pain of torture; he has already rebelled against Hashem by entering and helping the Romans get in. Why was he suddenly unwilling to enter a second time? The answer they give is that once he had entered the Beit HaMikdash, this influenced him tremendously and led him to return in Teshuva. The power of the Sukkah influences us, just as Yosef Meshita was impacted by his time in the Beit Hamikdash. Even if a person did not have intent, and gave no thought to what they are doing, already on the first occasion that they enter the Sukkah, it has a strong spiritual impact on a person.

The same is true of every matter of sanctity. Even if a person did not prepare for it, they still receive great reward for their actions.

In contrast, in regard to the study of Torah, there is a great difference. If a person learns the Written Torah, even if they did not have intent, they will receive reward for this. For example, if a person reads Torah, Tehillim or Nevi'im (the works of the prophets), even without deliberate focus and intent, they will receive reward for this. However, in regard to the Oral Torah, a person must have intent to learn and understand that which they are learning. If someone learns the Oral Torah without intent, there is an issue with this study. The Shulchan Aruch Harav (Hilchot Talmud Torah) brings that if a person verbalizes their learning, even without understanding the meaning of the words due to their lack of knowledge, a person has still fulfilled the Mitzva of learning Torah. However, this is only so in regard to the Written Torah; in the case of the Oral Torah, if a person does not understand what they are learning, this is not considered to be study of Torah at all.

A person must know the whole of the Written Torah, the Torah which is read in synagogues, Tehillim, the book of Devarim etc. The very act of just reading the Torah causes a person to be rewarded even if they lack any level of understanding. When learning the Oral Torah, such as Gemara, a person must understand what they are learning; if they do not, they will still receive reward for it, because in the future, when Mashiach comes, or when a person ascends to heaven, everything that they have learnt and did not understand in this world will be explained to them in Heaven.

In any case, when a person enters the Sukkah, even if they do not understand what it is or its significance, they nevertheless receive immense reward. Therefore, there is clearly great power which one can derive from simply being present in a Sukkah and being subject to its powerful spiritual influence.



Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rabbi, if a person earns money and is due to give a tithe to charity. Is it best for him to give to Yeshivot and Talmidei Chachamim, or to his parents, who are not Talmidei Chachamim but are in more pressing need?

Answer:

A person needs to help their father and mother and support them, and also to support Talmidei Chachamim. They should take a section and use it to help their parents, and also help Talmidei Chachamim, but it is impossible to reject one's parents, who brought a person into the world. A person is obliged to help them. Only after they have helped their parents should they help Talmidei Chachamim.





3rd Shabbat meal

True Simcha (joy) during the festival of Sukkot can bring a person to elevated spiritual levels.

The Mishna (Sukkah 3:9) teaches: Rabbi Akiva said: I was staring at Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua, and all the people were waving their Lulavim, and they only shook them while saying the words, "Please G-d, save now." What is the meaning of this statement of Rabbi Akiva and what is the meaning of his focus on these particular features rather than anything else?

Perhaps, in answer to our question, we can suggest a tremendous concept. The Gemara (Sukkah 53a) cites R' Yehoshua ben Chananya, who says that when we celebrated the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva, our eyes saw no sleep. It would seem fitting to say that either we slept or we did not, what is the meaning of the phrase "our eyes saw no sleep"? There are two types of sleeping people. A person can sleep on their bed and there is another kind of person who is idle and does not do anything, they can be considered like they are sleeping. In light of this, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya said that during the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva, they were not relaxed and inactive for even a moment during that time; rather, they were constantly ascending in sanctity and purity during that time.

It is known that Tzadikim would glean Ruach Hakodesh (holy spirit) from the joy of the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiv. As the Talmud teaches in the Yerushalmi (Sukkah 5:1) that Yonah ben Amitai was among those who ascended to the Beit Hamikdash for the festivals, he entered the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva, and the spirit of G-d rested on him as a result. Yonah the prophet did not have the unique talents which would merit having G-d's holy spirit rest on him, but as a result of the joy he gained from dancing and rejoicing in the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva in the Beit Hamikdash, he gained the ability to reach Ruach Hakodesh. Based on this, the events with Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua can be explained. They did not live in the time of Rabbi Akiva, but a generation before. Rabbi Akiva lived during and after the time of the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash. Rabbi Akiva therefore said "I was gazing" meaning that during the time of the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva, I saw with Ruach Hakodesh how Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua would wave the Lulav and Etrog only during the prayer of "Please Hashem, save now." One who knows how to suckle from the sanctity and joy of the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva can achieve Ruach Hakodesh.

This is a central concept. A person who sits in the company of scorners will descend spiritually. Though a person may be at a level of great sanctity, if they sit with people whose minds are filled with foolish things, this will cause them to descend in terms of their spirituality. Thoughts are like birds, when two people sit and one has holy thoughts, even if he does not share them, these thoughts are like birds which flit from one garden to the next. If a less than refined person sits with lowly thoughts and impurifies his eyes with evil things, the resulting thoughts are like birds which enter your proverbial garden as well as those of others; they pass from one person's head to the next.

Therefore, our Sages teach (Avos 1:7): Distance yourself from an evil neighbor, and do not be friends with a Rasha. When a person is found in a place of lightheadedness and mockery, they can lose out on the good that they have. In contrast, a Sukkah is a place of shade of faith, a place of sanctity. When a

person enters the Sukkah with holiness and purity and works on themselves, they can ascend and reach great and holy heights.

When the Beit Hamikdash was no longer, Rabbi Akiva still rejoiced over the Simchat Beit Hasho'eiva with true joy, with purity, sanctity, and intent for the sake of Heaven. In merit of this, he was able to see Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel, and see how they would wave their Lulav and Etrog.

A person can sit in the Sukkah in great sanctity and gain Ruach Hakodesh, Yonah ben Amitai gained Ruach Hakodesh from the festival of Sukkot. The Torah says "And you shall rejoice on your festival, you, your son, your daughter, your servant and your maidservant, the Levi, the convert, the orphan and the widow who is in your gates (Devarim 16:14)." The Torah mentions joy three times in the context of Sukkot, which correspond to the three Avot (patriarchs) and the minimum of three walls in the Sukkah. A person can draw joy from Sukkot for the entire year, like a bride and groom who rejoice during the seven days following their wedding can remain happy their entire lives. Therefore, just as there is a Mitzva to bring joy to a bride and a groom joy so that they can draw joy for their entire lives, the same is true of the seven day festival of Sukkot. If a person rejoices wholesomely during these days, they can draw Simcha which can provide for them for the entire year.

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Treasure charms from the Rif

On the first night of Sukkot, one should strive to learn the fourth Perek (chapter) of Masechet (Tractate) Kiddushin, and on the second night, the fifth Perek of Masechet Zevachim. On the third night, the sixth Perek of Masechet Chullin, and on the fourth night, the fifth Perek of Masechet Avot. On the fifth night, the fifth Perek from Masechet Middot, on the sixth night, the sixth Perek of Masechet Sukkah, and on Shabbat night, the second Perek of Masechet Ta'anit.

Additionally, one who learns the Zohar HaKadosh in the Sukkah will merit great salvation.



Rabbi Yosef Chaim, the 'Ben Ish Hai'.

Below is a story the Ben Ish Hai related which we can learn from:

There was a wise man, virtuous in his ways, who had a wonderful righteous wife. The man had a friend who was a tough person, with bullying tendencies, yet one day the wise man went to eat a meal at this friend's home. As well as being tough, the friend was also deceitful, and upon hosting the wise man, he gave him wine and got him drunk. While the wise man was inebriated, the deceitful man mentioned that he had a daughter who he wished to marry off. He continued by suggesting that the wise man go ahead and marry her. The wise man, in his drunken stupor, agreed that he would marry the tough man's daughter. The tough man smiled, and seeking reassurance, demanded that the wise man make an oath that he would take the daughter as a second wife. The wise man, in his drunken state, readily agreed and made an oath.

When the wise man sobered up, he realized with horror that he had made an oath that he would marry his friend's daughter. He was distraught - what would he tell his wife?! She was the greatest wife he could ever dream of, how would he tell her this terrible news? He returned home, stressed and miserable, but despite the pressure to do otherwise, he resolved to reveal everything to his wife, telling her the unfiltered truth, withholding nothing. He entered the house, and upon seeing his wife, told her exactly what had transpired with the tough man. His wife listened patiently, and responded: 'Don't worry, you have done the correct thing, you are a righteous person, and I give you permission to marry her. I harbor no ill-feelings against you, you can marry her.' The man was overcome with relief - overcome with gratitude for his wife's understanding.

As the pit in his stomach began to soften, she continued as follows: 'In order not to disturb the ambiance of the wedding, I will go to stay with my father tonight, on the eve of Rosh Chodesh, and will return here in a month, on the eve of the following Rosh Chodesh.' The man could hardly believe his ears, he was astounded by her righteousness and understanding. His wife then added one request, saying: 'The one condition is that for the entire month you remain here, and do not come to my father's house. When the month is up, I will return here, and this other woman will become part of our family, a part of us, and all will be with joy and harmony.'

The man was overjoyed by his wife's understanding and immediately went to his friend's home and said that he was ready to marry his daughter now, everything was in order and he was ready. The friend was thrilled and made a large banquet in his home to celebrate the wedding. After the wedding concluded, the couple went to their room and the man began speaking with his bride, and to his horror he realized that she didn't understand a word he was saying. He spoke again, and she responded in broken sentences - she was severely mentally impaired, and he had married her! His heart plummeted, he had been married to the most exceptional woman he could ever dream of, and had now taken on a further wife, devoid of any virtues - a complete ignoramus!

The man despaired, but in the back of his mind, he thought that although it would be a challenge to forge a conventional husband-wife relationship with her, perhaps she would at least be able to perform domestic tasks to beautify the home. They sat down together, and he again began to converse with her, and at a certain point asked whether she could fetch him some water. She responded by intimating that she was unwilling and he should instead ask someone else. He quickly realized that even domestic tasks would be beyond her - he truly was in an awful situation. The next morning, the man had made up his

mind, and resolved to end the marriage at all costs. For fear of his tough friend, he approached some people and asked them to be intermediaries and approach the tough man and tell him to take back his daughter. He told them to inform the tough man that he would provide her with a Get (divorce document), and in so doing, would give her a substantial settlement sum. The man was convinced that he had to extricate himself from the marriage, whatever the cost, and sure enough, he divorced the daughter.

The man returned to his home and waited for his righteous wife to return. In the meantime he still could not quite believe that she had agreed to him marrying the daughter and wanted to ask what she had been thinking. The month elapsed and she returned, to tears of joy from her husband. After embracing, he asked her how she had so readily agreed? She responded that indeed she could have screamed and berated him for having been so foolish. She could have compelled him to marry her to fulfill his oath and then immediately break it off through paying a hefty divorce settlement. However, had she done that, the following would have resulted. He would have paid the money, but his entire life going forwards, he would have complained to his wife, mentioning that if he'd been given permission to enter into the second marriage, he would have saved the money. Her refusal would have served as a continuing source of friction and resentment in their marriage.

She continued and explained that by giving him her blessing to proceed with the marriage, he had been able to see for himself what the second marriage would be, and indeed had given the Get and settlement sum of his own volition. This meant that he would not have any complaints against her, knowing full well that he had paid the money of his own accord, with no prodding from his wife. Therefore, she explained, she had held back from berating him and insisting on him paying the money, in order to avoid him feeling any resentment towards her in the future. She had prioritized ensuring the long term tranquil love of their marriage, with no friction whatsoever, over her short term instincts. This was true wisdom.

Sometimes in life, one needs to be wise. There will be instances, where if you permit people to do something, they will go ahead and do it, but afterwards they will have a claim against you. However, when you give someone the space to see and feel that their actions were mistaken, then they will be unable to place the blame on you. Rather, they will sense that they brought the bad upon themselves; they will be compelled to attribute all the resulting misfortunes to their own misdeeds.

Therefore, one ought to conduct their life with wisdom, personifying the phrase 'that the resulting outcomes follow one's original intent.' When one conducts one's life with wisdom and contemplation, carefully considering his words and actions, then Hashem will assist a person and only blessings will result.

