



Sermon Tidbits

SEPTEMBER 21, 2015

Parashat Ha'azinu, Sukkot

Learning from Our Elders

Your elders, and they will tell you (Deuteronomy 32:7)

זקניך ויאמרו לך (דברים לב:ז)

Did you know that America's Founding Fathers used to powder their wigs white in order to look older and wiser? Back then, society considered youth a liability. Today is nearly the exact opposite. We try to look younger, feel younger, and too often think younger. Many believe that our constant access to information provides us with all we need to know. Why ask an experienced expert when you can find the answer on Google or YouTube? Yet, while our elders may not have Twitter accounts and they probably don't have the latest iPhone, they have attributes far more valuable, which took years to accumulate: experience and wisdom. And when we make the mistake of ignoring them, we do so at our own peril.

Moses made precisely this point when he conveys the song of *Ha'azinu*, the final message admonishing the people to adhere to the Torah while simultaneously warning them of the consequences should they fail to do so. "Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations," Moses told the people. Remember the lessons of the past, so you are not condemned to repeat them. And, if you cannot remember them yourselves? Moses continued, "Ask your father, and he will declare to you, your elders, and they will tell you." (32:7) Ibn Ezra writes that Moses told us, "If you forgot what your parents told you, then ask them." It is incumbent upon us to inquire from our elders and gain from their knowledge. In matters of religion and faith, while our parents teach us much, we often turn specifically to our grandparents for guidance both directly and indirectly. So much of Jewish learning takes place outside of school: at the Shabbat dinner; sitting together in shul or sharing a Yom Tov meal. Our grandparents not only remember their parents and grandparents, but serve as role models for us and our children to emulate. Today, grandparents serve as true teachers for their grandchildren as well, in study, ritual and in faith. But, our elders have experience far greater than ours in other areas as well.

Thank God, many Americans today—especially younger Americans—cannot remember a time when Israel faced a truly existential threat. Those under the age of 45 don't recall the feelings of dread and fear at the outset of the Six Day war, as Arab armies converged on the tiny Jewish State promising to drive the Jews into the sea. We don't remember the peril of the Yom Kippur War, as Syrian tanks quickly overpowered Israeli battalions on the Golan Heights and threatened to cut Israel in two. Anyone under forty cannot remember the Iran hostage crisis and how the Ayatollah Khomeini used kidnapping and terrorism to weaken the United States and consolidate his power and control over the Islamic Republic. Perhaps this is why, when CNN in a [recent poll](#) asked Americans whether Iran represents a very serious threat, a moderately serious threat, just a slight threat, or no threat at all, just 27 percent of adults between the ages of eighteen to 34 considered Iran a "very serious threat." That number jumped to 57 percent of adults aged 35-49, while fully sixty percent of Americans aged 50 and above consider Iran a "very serious threat." The older the respondent, the more he or she considered Iran a very serious threat. Perhaps this is because older adults have the benefit of experience. They remember the past and understand in a more tangible way the very real threat that a radical Iranian regime presents not only to the United States and to Israel, but to the world.

Moses appreciated the value in consulting with our elders. He warned the people not to forget their roots, their core identity, and the dangers that would threaten them in the future. And should the nation forget? "[Ask] your elders and they will tell you." When we ignore our elders' experience and wisdom, we doom ourselves to repeat errors we

should and could avoid. As the United States moves towards the enforcement phase of its agreement with Iran, we must heed the warnings of our elders and the serious threat that Iran poses to America's future. ■

Sukkot and the Land of Israel

And you shall take for you (Leviticus 23:40)

ולקחתם לכם (ויקרא כג:מ)

Judaic sources point to a number of connections between the mitzvot of Sukkot and the Land of Israel:

- **Dwelling in the Sukkah:** The Gaon of Vilna noted that both the commandments of sitting in the Sukkah and dwelling in the Land of Israel represent the only two commandments performed with one's entire body
- **The Four Species:** Maimonides (Guide to the Perplexed 3:43) writes that we take the Four Species on Sukkot as a symbol of joy and thanks for entering the Land of Israel: "And it seems to me that the Four Species of the Lulav, are [symbols] of joy for leaving the desert which was 'Not a place of seed or of fig or of vine' (Numbers 20:5) to a place of fruit bearing trees and flowing rivers..."

As we fulfill these commandments with joy over the coming Sukkot holiday, we should also focus on the connection that they bring us to the Land of Israel. As we celebrate by sitting in the Sukkah, we must also commit ourselves to dedicating ourselves wholly to protect and defend Israel. And, as we wave the fruits connected to the Holy Land, we can take joy from the fact that our work helps spread the benefits of the fruits of Israel to people around the world. ■

Keep Building

You shall dwell in booths (Leviticus 23:42)

בסכת תשבו (ויקרא כג:מב)

While most people build and then disassemble their Sukkah each year, some people actually use the same structure year after year. In warmer climates some actually build a pergola with a built-in "reusable" Sukkah. Yet, Jewish law renders this Sukkah a "*Sukkah yeshanah*"—an "old Sukkah"—unfit for use during the holiday. According to Shulchan Aruch (636:1), in order to refresh and renew an "old Sukkah" for use during the Sukkot one must, "renew some aspect of the body of the Sukkah for the sake of the holiday." Mishnah Berurah suggests adding a small amount of *schach* in one area of the roof. Even a small act of construction, as long as it represents a productive act of building, renders the Sukkah kosher for use on the holiday.

The law requiring us to refresh and renew our Sukkah each year carries a powerful message. Building the Sukkah reminds us that we cannot allow ourselves to rest on our laurels and hope to maintain our spiritual lives from year to year without effort. If we lead rich spiritual lives full of vitality and action, we cannot permit ourselves to sit in an "old" Sukkah. Rather, we must constantly search to add something new to reinvigorate and revitalize ourselves.

This idea also carries a powerful message to Americans devoted to a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. We take great pride in the "Sukkah" that we have built, which brings a great degree of strength and protection to the Jewish State. Yet, we can never allow ourselves to sit in the "Old Sukkah" in which we sat last year. Every year brings with it new challenges that demand our work and attention. This year, as we do every year, we must work especially hard to strengthen the sense of unity and bipartisanship critical to continued support for Israel. The United States and Israel will need to work together to address new and different threats than those that they faced last year. And finally, while we spent the last year working with new members of Congress, we must continue to build and develop the relationships crucial to the support Israel needs both in the halls of Washington and around the world.

Just as we must add to the "Old Sukkah" before we sit in it each year, we must continue to build on the strong already standing structure to ensure continued vibrant support for the Jewish State in the coming year. ■

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