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"THE ILLUSIONS WE LIVE BY"

The Halakhah is generally rich in the use of illusions, ^{and} especially [^] in its treatment of the laws of Sukkot.

There is, for instance, the law of lavud. This means that even if there exist empty spaces in the sekhakh or the covering of the Sukkah, if these spaces are less than three tefahim (about fifteen inches), then we consider the empty space as if it did not exist, but was covered by branches or other sekhakh. Lavud means that we accept the illusion that any distance less than three tefahim does not exist; it is as if it were attached.

Another example is the law of dofen akumah. This means that if four cubits or less of an invalid type of covering or sekhakh was placed on the roof of the Sukkah contiguous to the wall, we do not regard it as invalid, thereby disqualifying the entire sekhakh, but rather imagine as if the wall were bent over and inclined for that distance, thus causing us to regard the Sukkah as kosher.

A third example would be that of tzurat ha-pesah. This means that if a Jew does not have sufficient material to build the requisite number of walls, then it is sufficient to place two poles on either end and a beam across them. We consider this a tzurat ha-pesah, the figure of a doorway, and imagine that the doorway constitutes both an entrance and a wall. We accept the illusion that this empty space is really a complete wall.

One of the great and most distinguished scholars and preachers of modern Israel, the late Rabbi Amiel ^{6"5} of Tel-Aviv, [^] (in his famous Derashot el Ami), has discovered a hint of this propensity for the use of illusion in Sukkot, in the Talmud's statement concerning the

nature of our dwelling in the Sukkot. The Torah teaches us, ba-sukkot teshvu shiv'at yamim -- you shall dwell in the Sukkot for seven days. And the Talmud adds, teshvu k'ein taduru - you shall "dwell" as if you truly "resided" in the Sukkot^{ah}. We do not really change our address from home to Sukkah; nevertheless, in our minds, in our practice, in our will, in our intentions, we dwell in the Sukkah as if we really lived there. All of Sukkot is a tribute to the power of a noble illusion.

Thus, the Halakhah as a torat hayyim, a Torah of Life, tells us something about the importance of illusion in daily life. Normally we use the word "illusion" in a pejorative sense, as a term of derision, as something which is contrary to fact, to reality, to common sense. But my thesis this morning is that that is all wrong. In many of the most significant branches of human endeavor we make use of illusion, and could not get along without it. Thus, for instance, in law we use legal fictions -- as, for example, when we consider a corporation not as a collection of many people, but as an individual, collective personality. In science we abstract "ideal systems" from reality -- and that is creating an illusion. The mathematician deals with such concepts as infinity and imaginary numbers. Philosophers speak of the philosophy of "als-aub," the philosophy of "as-if." Men of literature describe and criticize life and society by means of creative illusions.

Indeed, we live our regular lives by certain illusions -- not only in the intellectual disciplines, such as law and science, but in the deepest recesses of our individual and ethnic consciousness. Without the proper illusions, life can become meaningless and a drudgery. The future is bleak, the past a confused jumble, and the present depressingly dull, without the necessary illusions.

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What we must know is this: that illusions are not opposed to fact. Illusions are what the facts add up to in the long run, what give us the ability to understand and interpret facts. Illusions are frequently more consonant with reality than narrow and isolated facts. Illusions are the framework of facts, that which give them sense and meaning.

Pity the man who prides himself upon possessing "common sense," who "sticks only to facts," and who has nothing to do with sentiment or illusion. What a miserable, cold, dull, impersonal, and boring life he must lead! I do not envy the scientist who carries the laboratory, via his mind, into his home and society; who sees men as objects, as chunks of protoplasm, who thinks only in terms of numbers and size, and reduces all relationships to ^Rimpersonal equations. I do not envy the businessman who, when he returns to the bosom of his family, still thinks in terms of profit and competition and marketability. He considers his wife a Junior Partner, or perhaps Vice President in Charge of the Home, his children as deductions, and the gifts he occasionally distributes to his family as bonuses to be reckoned in a budget. S^uch a family exchanges services as in a commodity market -- and that is all!

Such people sterilize all beauty and sweetness out of their lives by ignoring such real and marvelous illusions as dignity and love and hope and purpose and happiness and humor. Such things cannot be weighed or measured or examined under a microscope or analyzed in a

test tube or quoted on the stock page. Yet life is dull -- and desperate[^] without them. To remove them is to take the poetry out of living.

Indeed, the poet John Ciardi, in the latest issue of Saturday Review, voiced this very complaint. "It is always a mistake," he writes, "to discuss poetry with a man who insists that it must make sense... For the trouble with being sensible is not the sense it does or does not make, but the life it never really manages to get to... [It] always manages to shut as many doors as it opens... And one of the doors it always shuts, and always with a slam, is poetry." If you look only for a straight, factual message, and ignore image and illusion, then you have destroyed poetry. You cannot read Shakespeare or ^RW^A Wodsworth the way you read the Wall Street Journal. And the same holds true for music or painting or sculpture or literature.

Or take that much abused word, Love. In our sophisticated, post-Freudian, fact-ridden society, there is no great difficulty in talking about sexuality; but love is taboo, and considered only a comforting illusion. Yet such "illusions" are part of a larger reality. You cannot see or touch it, but^y or sell or psychoanalyze it, but it exists between devoted couples who have long transcended physical attraction; amongst people who genuinely love books or music; with committed citizens who love country or people; for authentic ^{EW}J^{res} who love God and Torah.

A narrow factualism regards integrity and honesty as illusions, because "they don't pay." An idealistic appreciation of illusion, however, considers that in the long run there is justice. Maybe the thief will prosper in his business; but like a worm boring its way into a luscious fruit, this same dishonesty must ultimately enter into the innermost recesses of home and family and mind, and destroy these most precious things that a man possesses: peace of mind,

domestic bliss, and personal reputations.

Of course, there are some illusions that are harmful and dangerous, such as the illusion of race-superiority or that might makes right. But these are myths; they are false, and substitutes for facts. Illusions do not ignore facts; they build upon them and see them from a broader perspective.

What are some of the noble illusions that Judaism teaches? What are some of the outstanding examples of the principle of Sukkot that teshvu k'ein taduru?

One of them is the illusion that man is basically good, that, in the words of David, va-tehasrehu me'at me'lohim, he was created but little lower than the angels; in other words, that man has a neshamah, a soul. The man who has a nose only for hard facts will not see a soul in the human personality; for this you must have an eye for larger illusions and a heart for great ideals. How silly was that Russian astronaut who, when he returned from orbit, reported that he looked through the heavens and found no God. It is as ^{childish} ~~silly~~ as ^{the sophomoric comment} ~~that~~ of the surgeon who announced that he had conducted a thorough search of the anatomy and discovered no soul. The best answer was provided by the wise man who replied that he took apart a violin and found no music! Of course, man has a neshamah; without it his life is meaningless and makes no sense.

Or take the halakhic principle that every Jew has a hezkat kashrut -- a presumption of being decent and honest. A narrow view of the facts will tell you that most people are unworthy and irresponsible. But without the illusion of man's kashrut, there can be no trust, no loyalty, no faith. And therefore, there can be no transactions, no marriage, and no happiness. Teshvu k'ein taduru -- without the proper illusions, life is unliveable.

Alvin

A narrow view of the facts will tell you that Jews do not constitute one people. The Yeminite and the American Jew, the Russian Jew and the Bene Israel of India, the German Jew and the Jew from China, are completely different types. What matters it~~is~~ that they share a common history or aspiration or faith? -- these things cannot be measured and established as hard facts. Yet Judaism accepts that all Jews are one people, that they constitute Kenesset Yisrael. As in the Sukkah, we accept the principle of lavud: even if there are gaps, and discrepancies, and big holes, and lacunae of all kinds, we assume that they are solid, attached, covered up. The Jewish people is one people. It is by virtue of such illusions that history was turned and redirected, and the State of Israel created!

Finally, there is another law of Sukkot that beautifully expresses the noble idealism that informs the Jewish mentality in its use of illusion. The Halakhah states that if a man builds his Sukkah and makes the walls from atzei asherah, from the wood of a tree which was used as an idol by idol-worshippers, than the Sukkah is invalid. The reason that is given is ketutei mikhtat she'ureih -- since an idol must be destroyed, ^ethan we consider this wood as if it had been totally ^{demolished} ~~destroyed~~ and therefore there is no sheur, the wall is not big enough -- since it does not even exist! Here is a heavy, solid wall before me -- and the Halakhah says: it is non-existent! What a ^{marvelous} beautiful expression of the great Jewish illusion that evil does not really exist, that all that is wicked and cruel and unseemly and anti-human can be considered as unreal because, ultimately, it will be destroyed in the great triumph of ^{the} good over ^{the} evil and the holy over the profane and the pure over the defiled! The halakhic principle which accepts the illusion that idolatry is already non-existent is the basis and expression for the great Jewish optimism that has kept us alive throughout the centuries. Teshvu k'ein taduru!

The Kabbalists of centuries ago devised a special recitation to be read before performing any mitzvah, such as sukkah or lulav. It reads: yehi ratzon she'tehei hashuvah mitzvah zu k'ilu kiyamtiha be'khol perateha ve'dikdukeha, "may it be Thy will that this mitzvah which I am about to perform shall be considered in Your eyes as if I had observed it in all its details and particulars." Indeed so! If we harbor the right illusions about life, if we live life according to the noblest ideals, and observe them faithfully, then God will return the compliment, and accept the illusion k'ilu kiyamtiha, as if our noblest thoughts had been put into practice, as if our most cherished aspirations were realities, as if our errors and sins did not exist, as if our lives were lived on the highest level of humanity and Jewishness.

Teshvu k'ein taduru -- what a wonderful holiday is this Sukkoth which teaches us this noble and beautiful and precious exchange of illusions! No wonder it is called zeman simhatenu, "the time of our happiness." May it indeed continue to be so for us, ~~and~~ for all Israel, and for all humanity.