

Simchat Torah



David Mandel

The Man from Google

Daniel Slater was a very lucky young man. All of his friends from high school had been desperate to get a summer job, to earn some money before starting college. But Daniel had landed the best job of them all, at the Googleplex, the Californian headquarters of the massive technology company.

On the first day of his new job Daniel arrived bright and early, and was introduced to the Human Resources manager. The manager offered to show him around the complex and Daniel gladly accepted.

They went to the first room, a massive hall filled with hundreds of cubicles in an open-plan layout. Already many people were hard at work. There were mathematicians working on the logarithms that powered the Google searches. There were accountants, graphics people, secretaries and an in-house legal team. Daniel was impressed by the sheer scale of things.

Moving along the manager showed Daniel another hall, this one filled with the gleaming supercomputers that were processing millions of searches that very minute. Technicians worked quietly among the machines, the only sound being the low hum of the powerful computers.

Coming into the canteen, Daniel saw an industrial-sized kitchen where chefs were preparing the thousands of meals that Google

employees were going to eat that day. Seeing that Daniel looked overwhelmed, the manager said "You know, Daniel, I like you. So I'm going to show you the nerve centre, the heart of Google. Come with me."

Following the manager down a long corridor, they passed through a series of security doors deep into the complex. Daniel turned left, and stopped at the end of a small passageway at the entrance to a room. Inside the room was a man sitting behind a desk working quietly.

The manager turned to Daniel and whispered "Few people have ever seen this sight. This man is the heart of Google."

Daniel couldn't believe it. "Are you telling me that out of the thousands of people we saw – mathematicians, secretaries, technicians – this man is the main thing? How can that be?" he wondered.

The manager answered: "You don't understand Daniel. Google is a company. It's there to make money. The way we do that is by staying one step ahead of the field, constantly developing new technologies. That man is Google's genius. He is the one coming up with all the ideas that make us money. He really is the heart of the company."



The same is true of the importance of the Torah. In many places in the Talmud we find statements that seem surprising. For example,

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When Heaven Meets Earth

Thoughts on Sukkot

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The Really Modern Era

The word modern is a funny thing. For hundreds of years now, people have talked of the modern world or modern times. When the train was invented in the 19th Century, we were living in modern times. When the telegraph allowed long-distance communications it ushered in, we were told, the modern era. Then the Internet revolution came and this time, we're really living in a modern world.

The Sukkah

Gedalia Guttentag

All of which creates a linguistic problem. If modern is elastic enough to describe anything from steamships to smartphones, what does the word actually mean? In *A History of Risk*, Peter Bernstein gives an interesting definition of modernity – one that provides an insight into the message of Sukkot. The modern era, he writes, began when people learned to manage risk. For much of history, Man was defenceless against the elements. If rain didn't fall crops would be ruined. A storm at sea would sink a ship. If a person fell ill there was not much to do other than pray.

Then came the modern era. Science, writes Bernstein, has negated the risks that once threatened us. If rain doesn't fall we have irrigation techniques. Our ships are strong enough to survive any storm. The wonders of medicine mean that we live longer, healthier lives than ever before. The modern era, it seems, has

freed us from our dependency on G-d. Where once we had prayer, we now have technology. Reading this analysis, I was struck by the connection with the sukkah. In this world of man-made security the Torah tells us to construct a building which is the epitome of fragility. According to the Talmud, the sukkah has to be of temporary construction. Its' roof is made of unprocessed material such as wood, not a strong material such as stone. It can't be too tall because that is typical of long-term building. The sukkah must be strong enough to stand in normal conditions but not in unusual winds – another expression of impermanence. What is the significance of this insecurity? Why is a sukkah only good if it is temporary? The 19th Century commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains the symbolism of the sukkah's fragility. We build roofs and walls to protect ourselves against wind and rain, and attack from the outside. Without a roof a person is exposed and vulnerable. With a roof over our heads, we're secure. The idea of a roof is not limited to a few tiles placed atop of a building. A roof represents the human attempt to make ourselves self-sufficient, less vulnerable. It includes any defence against misfortune that people construct. Health insurance, life insurance – these are all types of roofs because they insulate us from life's troubles. The danger is that we insulate ourselves with so many roofs that G-d recedes into the distance. We fool ourselves into thinking that He belongs to the pre-roof days, when we needed outside help. Our world is undoubtedly a roof society. Over the last few decades medicine has eliminated one disease after another. Agro-technology produces ever-better harvests. We can insure ourselves against anything and everything. As Peter Bernstein

notes, we are masters of our own fate and we have left G-d far behind. The counterweight to this kind of hubris is the fragile sukkah. Its' roof is insecure, barely protecting against the elements. By moving into the sukkah we are making a statement. It is not our roofs – our engineering and ingenuity – that protect us. It is G-d himself who gave us the ability to help ourselves. Acknowledging that we need G-d does not mean losing our initiative; it means that we gain the precious gift of a relationship with G-d. Those who were trying to fly out of Europe in April 2010 will remember the frustration as all flights were grounded by the eruption of an unpronounceable volcano in Iceland. I myself managed to escape on the last flight from London before the chaos began, but it caused a rare moment of journalistic introspection. A leading newspaper waxed lyrical about "the blue skies bereft of the silver needles that sew the world together." It noted that "one of the things that went missing in the shadow of that volcanic dust was the sense of human power." This, in journalistic prose, is the idea of the sukkah. We construct all kinds of roofs, sophisticated ways to diminish risk as a factor in our lives. But looking deeper we see that above our roofs it's G-d who is actually directing events. So whether we're sitting in a sukkah in the balmy climes of Israel or shivering in some less-hospitable location, the message is the same. Sitting under the fragile sukkah roof, we say that although with our smartphones we've really reached the modern era, our roofs do not remove G-d from our lives.

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Fragility

Security

The message of the sukkah is that without G-d's protection the strongest structure is fragile. With it, the weakest building is secure.

The Four Species



Dovi Colman

All Together Now!

Some of my most vivid and amusing childhood memories centre around the Festival of Sukkot and working at my father's Arba Minim (Four Species) emporium. From an early age, I was drafted in to serve at the shop, open for around 10 hectic days a year. We workers would always marvel at some of the more eccentric characters who used to come to the shop. There was the fellow who came in every day for a number of hours, poking

around with his magnifying glass. Then there was the man who insisted on his lulav (palm branch) being bound in 18 elaborate rings, so that it resembled a giant centipede.

With my father selling thousands of sets a year, we got to meet many different types of personalities. People came from literally all walks of life, young and old, men and women. There were knowledgeable Jews and Jews who needed help distinguishing their lulav from their matzah. All would (and still do) stream into the shop with the same items on their shopping list.

This scene often served as a reminder of one of my favourite ideas pertaining to the four species. If you examine these four species, you will find that they each represent a different type of plant. The etrog (citron) is a fruit which is edible and has a

pleasant fragrance. The haddas (myrtle) smells nice, but is inedible. The lulav has no smell, but its branches produce fruit. The poor old aravah (willow) is both inedible and scentless. These four species can be said to represent four different types of people. Every Jew in the world has different qualities which are unique to him. The lesson of the four species is that all Jews, no matter what their level of religious knowledge is, are valuable and can make an important contribution to the Jewish people. Just like the willow branch, devoid of smell and taste, is still a crucial part of the four species, so too, as the teaching in Ethics of our Fathers says, "There is no man who doesn't have his hour."

This idea can be taken further. Not only is each person an important and vital cog in the story of the world, but everything that G-d created in His world also has its place and serves a function. King David once asked G-d, "What is the point of a spider?" G-d's response was to use a spider to save David's life. When on the run from King Saul, who wanted to kill him, David sought refuge in a cave. A spider came and spun a web at the mouth of the cave, thereby convincing Saul that nobody could have entered the cave recently. G-d showed David that although we may not always understand it, everything in the world has a purpose. We might look at something which appears to have no purpose, such as a spider or the fruitless willow branch, and wonder – what is the point of it? By taking the four species together on Sukkot we are proclaiming that everything that exists in the world was created by G-d and is part of His intricate plan for the universe.

Living with this mind-set can help us to overcome frustration and anger when things do not always turn out the way we would like them. Sometimes there is a "willow branch" in our lives; something tragic that happens, something that doesn't go our way. We are left wondering, why did G-d allow this to happen?

Let's look at this question from a different perspective. An ant was crawling on the floor, and was getting increasingly depressed with every step it took. The whole floor was made up of many different small stones, and each one of them was black! What was the point of such a dull floor, wondered the ant. The ant was startled when a little child came and lifted it up high in the air. At its new vantage point, the ant looked down at the floor and was amazed to see a beautiful mosaic; thousands of small stones of all different colours contributed to a whole scene. The black stones were indeed a crucial part of the picture.

So it is with many tough situations in life: It's a question of perspective. When we absorb the message of the four species, we are able to realise that everyone and everything has a place and function in the world.

Dovi Colman lives in Manchester, UK. He is the director for Northern England of the Ezra boys' education organisation.

Q&A

Yehonatan Salem



Q. My neighbour invited me this year to eat in his sukkah. Seeing as it's my first time, could you give me a bit of background?

A. Sure, let's start from the beginning. We sit in a sukkah because all those years ago, when the Jewish People left Egypt, they led a miraculous existence in the desert for 40 years. One opinion in the Talmud is that they lived in huts, and another opinion is that they were surrounded by a cloud that protected them from the desert conditions. We recall this desert journey by sitting in the sukkah – even though it's not always warm in our countries.

Because the sukkah is based on a temporary hut it has to be built in a temporary way. You can make the walls out of anything you like, but the roof – called sechach – must be made of something that grows from the ground and is unprocessed. So you'll see evergreen branches and bamboo being used.

Q. Besides eating, what are we going to do there? Are there any special customs that I need to know about?

A. Well depending on your neighbour you might be surprised by a few things you see. The sukkah is meant to be a home away from home on Sukkot. Where possible many people not only eat in the sukkah, but sleep there as well! In fact,



normal life transfers itself to the sukkah for the duration of the Festival. Another thing to watch out for is the special blessing said at the beginning of the meal in the sukkah.

Q. I spend many hours on the road each day. Can I make a sukkah using the car sunroof?

A. There are actually many interesting ways to make a sukkah, but the sunroof is not one of them because the car walls are too far from the sides of the sunroof. The funny thing about a sukkah is that you don't actually need four walls – two and a bit is enough. So when you're stuck, a car and a nearby wall will form a sukkah [provided you have the sechach]. But before trying any new sukkah engineering project, check with a rabbi.

Q. In my local shopping mall someone approached me and asked if I wanted to shake the four species. I said yes, but I'd like to know more about it.

A. The four species consist of a lulav [palm branch]; etrog [a special form of citrus]; hadassim [three myrtles]; and aravot [two willow branches]. We bind them together with the hadassim on the right of the lulav, and the aravot on the left. The etrog stays separate but is held together with the lulav bundle when shaking them.

There are many explanations for shaking the four species, but one approach is that they symbolise different types of Jews who combine together to create the entity called the Jewish People [see article All Together Now!]

Q. This year I want to have my own set of lulav and etrog.

What do I need to look for? Are they all the same?

A. They're definitely not all the same. It's the same as buying whiskey: a good whiskey looks the same as a regular one unless you know what you're looking for. There are too many details to write here, but there are some basics to watch out for. The lulav should be straight and the middle leaf [ask someone in the shop to check] should not be split. An etrog sometimes comes with a pitam, a protrusion on the top [the narrower end]. If this falls off, the etrog is invalid so be careful. The alternative is to buy one that grew without a pitam.

Q. What is Simchat Torah all about, and what does it have to do with Sukkot?

A. Simchat Torah means to rejoice with the Torah. The yearly cycle of Torah readings ends on Sukkot and we immediately begin again [see The Man from Google]. All the Torah Scrolls are removed from the ark and are carried around the synagogue seven times accompanied by singing and dancing.

Sukkot is anyway a time of happiness. One of its names is the "time of our joy". Sukkot follows hard on the heels of Yom Kippur, when we as individuals try to strengthen our relationship with G-d. The joy of Sukkot is a spiritual joy – the feeling of fulfilment when coming into contact with our spiritual essence. Sukkot definitely has its' share of good food and good times, but the happiness is that of connecting to a more meaningful part of us.

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► The Man from Google continued

the Sages say that when one studies Torah as it's meant to be, "it was worth creating the entire world for him." This sounds like a total exaggeration. What is so important about study that it was worth creating all the billions of people, the trade, industry, travel and sports for this one person?

But the truth is that like Google, the world was created for a reason. That purpose is not financial, but spiritual. G-d created the world so that people could reach out from their mundane lives and connect to Him. One of the main ways to do that is by studying G-d's wisdom, contained in the Torah.

So yes, when we study Torah it was worth creating all of the world, the trade and industry, travel and sport, because that is the thing that it was all created for.

On Simchat Torah the universal custom is to dance around the synagogue with the Torah scrolls, joyfully celebrating the completion of the Torah. But then something unusual happens. Having just completed a year-long cycle of Torah reading, we immediately begin again. Why is that?

Perhaps the symbolism is that we're showing that Torah is not a normal intellectual endeavour, which can be studied and completed. The Torah contains G-d's wisdom, and by studying it we are connecting to something unending.

On Simchat Torah we celebrate the gift of something unique: Like the man at the heart of Google, studying Torah is at the heart of the world. It is the opportunity to reach out from our mundane world and connect to the depth of G-d's wisdom.

David Mandel works at the Shalom LaAm Centre and lives in Jerusalem.