

## Shemini Atzeret – 5776

Strosberg / Scheier

When I was 18 years old, I had the privilege of spending some time in Jerusalem yeshiva called Ateret Cohanim. My brother in law was enrolled there at the time, as was my closest friend, Adam Scheier.

Ateret Cohanim was a very serious yeshiva; the students were very serious about their studies, the teachers were renowned for their scholarship and for the love of Israel. For me, it was an intense and beautiful encounter with Israel. There were 100 students in the Yeshiva; 97 were Israeli, and then there was Adam, a retired guy from Alabama, who used to sit in the corner of the Beit Midrash listening to Torah tapes all day long, and in the afternoons, there was me. I spent my mornings attending Mechina classes at Hebrew University; then I used to hop the Arab sherut, for a shekel, drive through East Jerusalem, get dropped off at the Damascus Gate, and then find my way to the Yeshiva.

The yeshiva was perfect, except for one very complicated factor: location, location, location.

Ateret Cohanim is located in the heart of the Muslim Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. When you awoke in the dormitory, you awoke to the sound of the early-morning *muazin*. You never walked alone in the streets, as per the security recommendations of the time. And we had a front-row seat to violent riots and clashes about five years before the Second Intifada.

But I never felt that I was in harm's way. We walked in groups, often with an armed guard – we shopped in the Arab shuk, and we had good relationships with our neighbors, but we lived with great caution.

This past Saturday night, there was a murder near the yeshiva. A man, his wife, and their young son were walking through the neighborhood when they were attacked by a Palestinian terrorist. The man, Aharon Bennett, was killed. His wife and child were injured. A resident of the neighborhood, Rabbi Nehamia Levi, heard the commotion. He was a rabbi at Ateret Cohanim, where he had studied for many years; we were there together in the '90's.

Rav Nehamia was killed as well, leaving behind a wife and seven children.

How can we celebrate yontif under these circumstances? How can we enjoy our Simchat Torah?

In an attempt to comfort the yeshiva community, the head of the yeshiva, Rav Shlomo Aviner, cited a Midrash about the Persian ruler, King Darius.

“The Midrash relates that before his death, King Darius requested: Do not mourn me until a person comes and speaks ill of me. And no one came. Likewise, we can say with

confidence, that although there will be much pain over his death, no one will come and speak ill of Rav Nechemia.”<sup>1</sup>

Part of our pain is the way the world has seen these attacks. The unbalanced headlines, like the BBC which said, “Palestinian shot dead after Jerusalem attack kills two,” confusing the murderer with the victims. And so much more.

How can we ever expect peace? It’s a concept that, at certain moments, seems so far off.

But peace is a central part of our prayers on Sukkot. In our prayers that we recite every Shabbat, we connect the concept of a sukkah with peace. We say, “Hapores Sukkat Shalom alena v’al kol amo Yisrael,” God spreads the Sukkah of peace over us and over all of Israel.

What is the connection between Sukkah and Peace?

My good friend, Adam, suggested to me that the Sukkah is unique amongst the commandments in that it can be imperfect. A sukkah should have four walls; but if you only have three – or even two and a small bit – then it’s good enough – it’s still kosher!

In contrast, if a pair of tzitzit has only seven strings, and not the required eight on the corner of the garment, it’s not kosher. If the Tefillin is missing one strap, we can’t use it. And to take an extreme example: A Torah scroll contains 304,805 letters. If one letter is missing, the entire scroll is unfit for use!

But a Sukkah – it can be missing an entire side! It’s allowed to be imperfect. And we connect the concept of Sukkah with peace because peace, too, has to take imperfection into account.

Years ago, during a time when there were regular terror attacks in Israel, a friend traveled to the Northern city of Tsfat. He was standing with some tourists in one of the city’s squares when a group of yeshiva students came through and started dancing. As my friend described, “They asked the rabbi, Aaron Liebman, how they could dance in such difficult times.”

"Jews have danced during much worse," he replied.

Jews keep on dancing. Even in difficult times, we find reason to dance, to move forward.

There is a powerful story in the Talmud, in tractate Sukkah (23a). The Gemara records a debate between two of the greatest rabbis: Rabbi Akiva and Rabban Gamliel. They discuss whether or not one can build a sukkah on a boat. Rabbi Akiva permits it, and Rabban Gamliel prohibits it. Amazingly enough, one year Rabbi Akiva and Rabban

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ravaviner.com/2015/10/in-name-of-ha-rav-nechemia-lavi-this.html>

Gamliel found themselves on a boat together, on Sukkot! Rabbi Akiva, of course, built a Sukkah. Rabban Gamliel did not.

Unfortunately, a strong wind comes and blows the sukkah away. The Talmud records the conversation that ensued: “*amar lo rabban gamliel, Akiva, heichan sukatech,*” Akiva, where is your Sukkah?

Interestingly, the conversation ends there. The Talmud does not record Rabbi Akiva’s answer.

I once heard a beautiful interpretation to Rabbi Akiva’s silence. He didn’t respond to Rabban Gamliel because he wasn’t there to respond. He was busy. He had already gone to rebuild his Sukkah.

Because that’s what Jews do. We don’t expect perfect. We simply know that we have to do our best to live lives of virtue, to soldier on when times are difficult.

As we gather for Yizkor, we remember the relationships of the past. And we acknowledge that not every relationship is perfect. Not every moment is harmonious. We remember the good, and we seek to make peace of that which wasn’t perfect.

Because Judaism doesn’t demand perfection; it demands our fullest effort, it demands sincerity, it asks us to try our hardest to do good.

There is a fellow who owns a jewelry store in Eretz Yisrael.<sup>2</sup> One day, not long ago, a nine year old girl walked into the store and said, “I am here to buy a bracelet”. She looked through the glass cases and pointed to a bracelet that cost three or four thousand dollars.

The man behind the counter asked her, “So you want to buy that bracelet?”

And she said, “Yes.”

He said, “Wow, you have very good taste. Who do you want to buy it for?”

She said, “For my older sister.”

He said, “Oh that is so nice! Why do you want to buy your older sister this bracelet?”

The little girl explained, “Because I don’t have a mother or father, and my older sister takes care of us. So we want to buy her a present, and I’m willing to pay for it.” She pulled out of her pocket a whole bunch of coins that totaled seven shekel, eighty agurot, which is a little less than two dollars.

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<sup>2</sup> story from rabbanan.org

The store owner said, “Wow! That’s exactly what the bracelet costs!”

He wrapped up the bracelet and said, “You write a card to your sister while I wrap the bracelet.” In a short amount of time, he finished wrapping the bracelet, he wiped away his tears, and handed the little girl the bracelet.

A few hours later, the older sister came in and exclaimed, “I’m terribly embarrassed. My sister should not have come here. She shouldn’t have taken the bracelet without paying!”

The storeowner said, “What are you talking about?”

She asked, “What do you mean? This bracelet costs thousands of dollars! My little sister doesn’t have thousands of dollars, she doesn’t even have ten dollars! So she obviously didn’t pay for it.”

The store owner responded, “You couldn’t be more wrong. She paid me in full. She paid seven shekel, eighty agurot, and a broken heart. I want to tell you something. I am a widower. I lost my wife a number of years ago.

People come into my store every single day. They come in and buy expensive pieces of jewelry, but all these people can afford it. When your sister walked in, for the first time in so very long since my wife had died, I once again felt the meaning of love.”

He gave her the bracelet and wished her well.

That’s the message of Sukkot – we might not always be able to pay the full price, we might not have perfection, but if the intent is there, if the heart is devoted to the task, then good intentions and good effort are certainly good enough.

The joy of Sukkot is not the joy of perfection; it’s the joy associated with our striving to do good and to achieve piece.

May the memories of our loved ones inspire us – not to achieve perfection, but to keep growing, to forgive the shortcomings of others, and to understand that life is a journey; it’s a journey we take together, one step at a time, marching hand-in-hand in the direction of hope, faith, and joy.

Chag Sameach.