Thoughts for Succoth 5769

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Angel for Shabbat--by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

The Talmud (Succah 11a) records the well-known debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiba about the nature of the succoth in which the Israelites dwelled while they were in the wilderness. Rabbi Eliezer said that the Israelites were protected by the "clouds of glory". Rabbi Akiba argued that the Israelites dwelled in actual huts, like nomads. Rabbi Eliezer's view highlights the miraculous intervention of God in the protection of the Israelites. Rabbi Akiba's view, while recognizing God's providential care, underscores the Israelites' own efforts to build themselves shelters.

The fact that we observe Succoth with real temporary dwellings implies that Rabbi Akiba's view is the one that prevailed. We don't simply think of the miraculous clouds which God spread over the Israelites to shield them. No, we actually build succoth and eat our meals in them. We vicariously relive the experiences of our ancestors in the wilderness--in actual succoth.

Rabbi Akiba's opinion calls on us to appreciate the providence of God, but at the same time to take an active role in protecting ourselves. Our survival surely depends upon God--but it also depends on our own efforts.

The succah is a reminder of how temporary and frail life is; how much we depend on God for our sustenance. It is also a reminder of how important our own individual action is. We are not to be passive wayfarers but active participants in life, doing what we can to improve our lots and the lot of our society.

With all the problems and injustices in our world, we cannot afford the luxury of a meek quietism that expects God to save us miraculously and make everything better. Rather, each one of us needs to feel a personal responsibility to stand up and be counted. Let us each build our "succah", however imperfect and temporary it will be. Let us not surrender personal responsibility by assuming that God or other people will solve society's problems.

The Kotzker rebbe was once asked if he had the power to revive the dead. He answered: "Reviving the dead is not the problem; reviving the living is far more difficult." In this season of spiritual renewal, let us strive to revive ourselves and

our loved ones so that we live as spiritually alive and responsible people.

***The Angel for Shabbat column is presented as a service of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, www.jewishideas.org. Please stand up and be counted by becoming a member of the Institute, fostering an intellectually vibrant, compassionate and inclusive Orthodox Judaism.