# Benjamin Disraeli and Succoth

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Thoughts for Succoth
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Interesting insights about Succoth have come from the pen of Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the First Earl of Beaconsfield. Disraeli was of Jewish birth, whose family had been associated with the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation in London. Although his father had Benjamin baptized to Anglicanism at age 12, Disraeli never denied his Jewish roots. He rose to become the first—and thus far only—British Prime Minister of Jewish ancestry.

Anti-Semites never forgave Disraeli's Jewishness and constantly identified him as a Jew in spite of his conversion to Anglicanism. In response to a vicious anti-Semitic comment made in the British parliament, Disraeli famously retorted: "Yes, I am a Jew, and when the ancestors of the Right Honourable Gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon."

Disraeli writes about Succoth in his novel, "Tancred," originally published in 1847. Tancred was a young British nobleman who had a spiritual longing to visit the Holy Land. When he arrived, he spent time with a Jewish family and became acquainted with Jewish religious life. His visit coincided with Succoth, and he was told that this is a great national festival celebrating the harvest. He was shown the lulav and etrog, symbols of the autumn harvest. Tancred was deeply impressed.

Disraeli writes: "The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persist in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!"

Disraeli notes that it is easier for "the happier Sephardim, the Hebrews who have never quitted the sunny regions that are laved by the Midland Ocean," to observe the festival, since they can identify with the climate and setting of the early generations of Israelites who celebrated Succoth. "But picture to yourself the child of Israel in the dingy suburb or the squalid quarter of some bleak northern

town, where there is never a sun that can at any rate ripen grapes. Yet he must celebrate the vintage of purple Palestine! The law has told him, though a denizen in an icy clime, that he must dwell for seven days in a bower….”

He continues with a description of the ignominies which Jews suffer in their ghettos in Europe “living amid fogs and filth, never treated with kindness, seldom with justice….Conceive such a being, an object to you of prejudice, dislike, disgust, perhaps hatred. The season arrives, and the mind and heart of that being are filled with images and passions that have been ranked in all ages among the most beautiful and the most genial of human experience; filled with a subject the most vivid, the most graceful, the most joyous, and the most exuberant…the harvest of the grape in the native regions of the vine.”

The downtrodden Jews, in observance of Succoth, find real joy in life. They decorate their Succahs as beautifully as they can; their families gather together to eat festive meals in the Succah. The outside world may be cruel and ugly; but their inner life is joyous and noble. Their external conditions may not seem too happy, but their internal happiness is real.

The Jews, while remembering the glories of the Israelite past, also dream of the future glories of the Israelites when their people will be restored to their ancient greatness.
Disraeli points to an important truth: happiness is essentially an internal phenomenon, a matter of one’s attitude and interpretation of reality. External conditions are less vital to genuine happiness than one’s internal state of mind.

By celebrating Succoth over the many centuries of exile, the Jewish people was able to maintain an inner strength and happiness, a vivid sense of the past and a powerful vision for the future. We are fortunate today to be living at a time when the sovereign State of Israel has been re-established. We may celebrate Succoth with the added joy of knowing that our historic dreams have begun to be realized.

We have regained our vineyards…we must aspire to the day when we may enjoy our vineyards in peace and security, free from the threats and hatred which continue to be aimed against our people. “A race that persist in celebrating their vintage…will regain their vineyards.” A people who persist in dreaming of a messianic era will ultimately see that dream fulfilled.

Angel for Shabbat