Transience and Permanence: Thoughts for Succoth

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Angel for Shabbat: Succoth

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Sometimes it takes a crisis to remind us of the transience of life. It might be an illness, the death of a loved one, an accident, a shocking and tragic news report. At these crisis moments, we suddenly and starkly remember that we are mortal, that life on this earth is temporary.

When people confront their own mortality, they often come to the realization that time is precious; that life is too valuable to be frittered away on nonsense; that it is self-destructive to engage in petty feuds or egotistical competitions. It can take a crisis to help us live on a higher, happier level. Facing the transience of life, we take our living moments more seriously.

Succoth is a festival tuned in to the issue of life's transience. The succah is a temporary structure, reminiscent of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness in ancient times. It doesn't have a roof, reminding us that we are subject to the vicissitudes of nature. The lulav, etrog, aravot and hadasim remind us of the harvest, of the recurring cycles of nature, the cycles of birth, growth, decline and death.

Interestingly, Succoth is known in our tradition as Zeman Simhateinu, the time of our rejoicing. On one level, this refers to the rejoicing of the harvest. On a deeper level, though, it may be alluding to the joy and inner freedom we attain when we confront the transience of life.

If we sulk in gloomy thoughts of the ephemeral quality of life, we can become grim and depressed. Succoth teaches that thoughts of life's transience actually lead to happiness—not self-pity. It is our very mortality which provides the intensity and excitement of life.

That being said, we are strengthened when we turn our minds from human mortality to God's eternality. There is an all-encompassing, undying Power that embraces and transcends all time and all change.

In Psalm 121, the Psalmist muses: "I lift my eyes unto the mountains, whence comes my help? My help is from the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth." Why does the Psalmist look to the mountains? What do mountains have to do with the Psalmist's call for help?

Most natural phenomena reflect change. The sun rises and sets. The moon goes through its phases. The stars sparkle at night, but are not visible during the day. Oceans, rivers and lakes are in constant motion. Mountains, though, are steady and unchanging (at least to the human eye). The Psalmist is crying out for help, and is seeking an image of something with

permanence, something that can be depended upon: mountains.

In a similar vein, one of the names attributed to God is “Tsur”—Rock. In turning to the Lord, we seek an image of something powerful and unchanging.

While Succoth highlights the transience of life, it also turns our thoughts to the Eternal God who is not transient. The succah recalls the wanderings of the Israelites—but also the Divine Providence that watched over them for forty years. The lulav and etrog remind us of the changing seasons; but also of the Eternal God who created nature and the natural rhythms. We wave the lulav and etrog in all directions, as a symbol that God’s presence is everywhere, all-encompassing, and complete.

Succoth reminds us to keep things in perspective, to appreciate the transience of life and the Eternity of God. It is the time of our rejoicing in the beauties of life, and the meaning of life.

Moadim leSimha.

Angel for Shabbat