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Thoughts for Succoth

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Most of our religious observances are indoors--in our homes, in our synagogues.We generally do not like to create a public spectacle of our religious experiences, but we behave modestly and try not to call attention to ourselves as we perform mitzvoth.

There are some exceptions to this. On Hanukkah, it is a particular mitzvah to publicize the miracle by placing our hanukkiyot where they can be seen by the passers-by. Succoth also has some aspects of taking our religious observances into the public square. The Talmud records the custom in ancient Jerusalem where people carried their lulavim into the street when they went to synagogue, when they visited the sick, and when they went to comfort mourners. Even today, many Jews carry their lulavim in public. When it comes to the succah itself, this structure is generally in view of the public: it's built on a patio, or yard, or courtyard etc. i.e. where Jews and non-Jews can see it

Although so much of our religious life is indoors--in the private domain of family and friends--we are sometimes obligated to make a public demonstration of our religious commitments. On Hanukkah, we want to remind the entire world that the Jews heroically defended themselves against the Syrian Hellenists and won independence for the Jewish people. We want everyone to know that, with God's help, we were victorious against powerful and far more numerous enemies.

On Succoth, we also want to convey a message to the general public. The lulav and etrog are symbolic of weapons; they indicate that we are proud of our faith and we are prepared to fight for the honor of our Torah and for our people. The succah is a symbolic statement that although we wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, God's providence protected us, and we ultimately entered the Promised Land. The public demonstration of these mitzvoth indicates our pride and commitment in who we are and what we represent. If we have respect for ourselves and our traditions, we can expect that the nations of the world will also come to respect Judaism.

Sometimes it is necessary for us to stand up in public on behalf of our faith and our people. When Jews betray their faith and their people in public, this undermines the entire Jewish enterprise. If Jewish storekeepers open their shops on Shabbat and holidays, why should non-Jews respect our Sabbath and holy days? If Jews ignore the laws of kashruth, why should non-Jews respect our dietary laws? If Jews don't live up to the high standards of Torah ethics, why should non-Jews admire the Jewish way of life? If Jewish political figures hold press conferences and public meetings on Jewish holy days, why should non-Jews show any deference to our holy days?

Succoth is an important reminder that being Jewish also entails a public stance, the courage to be who we are and stand for our traditions without embarrassment or apology. We need to remind ourselves and others that our holy days and traditions cannot be trampled upon and cast aside in a rubbish bin. If we do not stand up for ourselves, who will stand up for us? And if we do stand up for ourselves, we will be worthy heirs of a great people who have given so much--and have so much more to give--to our world.