Inside and Out / Outside and In:

Some Eco-Theological Thoughts for Tishri

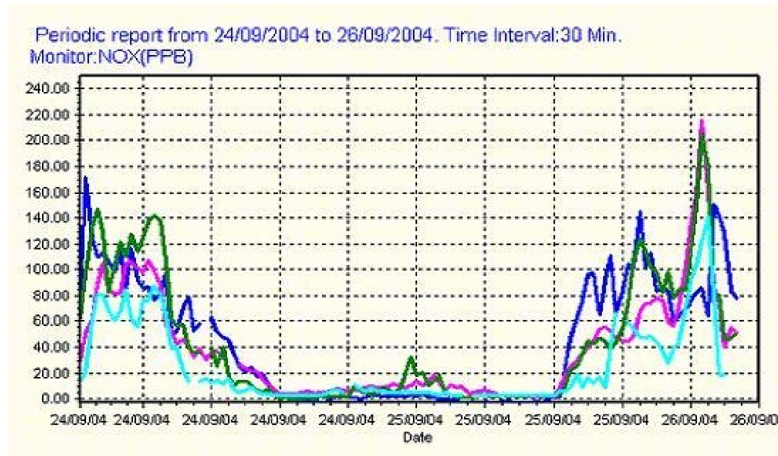
By Jeremy Benstein

Some holidays—like Yom Kippur—seem to focus exclusively on inner processes and truths, while others—notably Sukkot—seem to draw us outdoors, highlighting aspects of nature and our relationship to it. Yet both of these peaks in the Jewish calendrical landscape have much to teach about both inner and outer, about our responsibilities to ourselves, to each other and the world.

As is well known, virtually all Jewish holidays have strong connections with nature, and in particular with solar and lunar cycles. The month of Tishri particularly stands out in this regard. Coming at the time of the fall equinox in the solar year, this month is blessed with four major holidays, each at a different phase of the moon: Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot come at the new and the full moon, while Yom Kippur is situated close to the first-quarter waxing moon, and Shmini Atzeret, following the end of Sukkot, falls at the fourth-quarter waning moon. These holidays are seemingly paired: Rosh Hashanah leads to Yom Kippur via the Ten Days of Repentance, creating the period known as *bein keseh l'asor*, between the new moon and "the tenth," of the month. Shmini Atzeret, literally, "the eighth day of solemn assembly" is indeed its own holiday, but is seen as a continuation, and culmination, of the seven days of Sukkot.

Rarely, though, do we think of the connection between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. How different they seem: one is about atonement, the other gathering the fall fruits; inner (and spending all day indoors!) vs. outer, eating and sleeping in a hut under the stars. But these poles are closer than they seem, each expressing and integrating a vision of a better world, both inner and outer.

Regarding inside and out: while the Yom Kippur that happens inside an American synagogue may not be all that different from the Yom Kippur inside an Israeli one, the Yom Kippur that's going on *outside* is a world apart. Yom Kippur in Israel, while by law a "buy-nothing day," by popular choice is also a "car-free day," where the entire urban environment is transformed, and the normally car-choked streets are returned to the people.



Nitrous oxide (NOx) pollutants in the Tel Aviv area, in parts per billion: Yom Kippur began September 24th eve (1 column = 6 hrs). Source: Israeli Ministry of Environment website.

Though only for a single day, this magical change manifests itself in tangibly less pollution, less noise, and feelings of expansiveness and community. The city becomes a village again, as people walk and children ride bikes, enjoying one another and their surroundings in ways that are impossible during the rest of the year.

But, you say, aren't these physical changes merely peripheral "perks"? Isn't the day about something else entirely? Not really. The sins for which we seek atonement have bruised the relationships between ourselves and others, offended, hurt, abused their trust, and in so doing also ruptured the connection with God. Penitence and forgiveness demand we rebuild, reconnect (*re-ligate*, the root of 'religion'), strengthen the ties that bind us to others, bolster our communities which suffer from the selfishness and lack of integrity expressed in what we call "sin." So on Yom Kippur, it's no accident that we create an urban environment that makes us all fellow citizens, that allows us to rediscover and reinforce the relationships in the most local of the concentric circles of our lives. We celebrate commonality and trust, not competition and selfish consumption.

This commonality is expressed in the more traditional themes of the day as well. Despite the emphasis on personal soul-searching and *teshuva*, repentance, the main features of the Yom Kippur liturgy, such as the oft-repeated *vidu'i*, confession, and the *Avoda* service, are all phrased in the plural, for several reasons. One is to reinforce our empathy for other people. Sharing our imperfect humanity with one another through collectively confessing our individual sins comforts us, and encourages us to pardon others seeking our forgiveness for wrongs they have committed against us.

Moreover, though, while individual *teshuva* may be sufficient for personal wrongdoing, there are collective transgressions which require a shared process of atonement and remediation. Threats to health, justice and well-being are the results of structural societal patterns that need to be changed economically and politically. And when we degrade the

earth, we harm others more vulnerable, and those that will come after us, who will inherit the problems we're piling up for them.

Specifically "environmental sins" like over-consumption and pollution abuse things which are everyone's, and thus are a form of theft. But it is especially difficult to ask forgiveness from other communities or nations (not to mention the unborn), and make restitution to them for these: "Robbing the public is a graver offense than robbing an individual, for one who robs an individual can appease that person and return what he stole, but one who robs the public cannot appease the public and return to all of them what was stolen from them" (Tosefta Bava Kamma 10:8).

Indeed, environmental wrongs shed new light on an old theological conundrum. The Torah (in the Decalogue Ex. 20:5, and also Ex. 34:7) states categorically that there is inter-generational reward and punishment: the sins of the parents will be visited upon the children, even the third and fourth generations. That's a long time to pay. Later prophets (Jeremiah 31:29-30, and Ezekiel chapter 18) repudiated this seemingly unjust doctrine in no uncertain terms, saying descendents shall not suffer for the wrongdoings of their forebears. But with toxins such as persistent organic pollutants (POPs), which last for generations in the environment, and other long-term threats, the question of children bearing the consequences of parents' sins isn't theological or metaphysical, it's ecological and very physical. And with the threats of unstable climate, drought, human health issues and more from continued global warming, the very climate has become a moral instrument of our lifestyles and norms.

Similarly, the *u'netane tokef* prayer, with its heartrending passages on who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water, who by hunger and thirst, and who by poverty, needs to move us to action to change those "fates" created by societal injustice. Prayer may not change the world, but it can change people, who change the world. Just as we collectively make our local environments more healthy and friendly for this one day a year, we can make the world more sustainable through our political and economic choices. As Heschel pointedly remarked: "In a free society, only some may be guilty but all are responsible." And that means responsible for one another, individually and collectively: "If you can stop your household from committing a sin, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of your household. If you can stop the people of your city from sinning, but do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the city. If you can stop the whole world from sinning, and do not, you are held responsible for the sins of the whole world" (Shabbat 54b).

Quite a tall order. So it's no wonder that in moving from Yom Kippur to Sukkot, a scant four days later, we come down from these weighty questions of sin, repentance and retribution to the joys of the local harvest and its fruits. Indeed, we are meant to connect between these two seemingly disparate experiences by banging in the first nail of the *sukka* right after we break the fast at the end of Yom Kippur.

Yet here too are lessons to be learned about the interdependence between inner and outer, outside and inside. The sukka signifies a minimal or even meager version of one of our fundamental needs - shelter, yet is rich in complex, even contradictory, layers of symbolism. The temporary sukka dwelling is emblematic of the period of wandering in the desert (Leviticus 28:42-3), even as it signifies the 'harvest hut' of the settled farmers sleeping out in the orchards after working long days to bring in the fruit (such as the sukka mentioned in Isaiah 1:8).

Sukkot then is both a holiday of harvest, of ingathering (*Chag Ha'asif*), and thus rootedness in place, as well as the commemoration of the period of landless, nomadic exile. But like so many oppositions in Judaism, these are not irreconcilable dichotomies, meant to exclude one another, but rather dialectic poles, which we are meant to grasp simultaneously, and synthesize into a religious consciousness that embraces both modes. When in Exile, we are to retain and sustain a dream of Home, tasting the homeland in the form of a thatch-roofed lean-to, redolent of the harvest. And when we feel safely ensconced at home, it is incumbent upon us "to remember the long way" (Deuteronomy 8:2), the experience of the wandering and the homelessness that has characterized so much of our history. What better way than by leaving our sturdy permanent dwellings and living in the self-same rickety booths, just as the Israelites did in their generation of wanderings?

This dialectic can help us understand another paradox about Sukkot: it is the holiday par excellence (*he-Chag*) which is to be "nothing but joy" (Deut 16:15). And yet there is no small amount of attendant anxiety, even melancholy, whether about the upcoming rains, or the general vulnerability and ephemeral nature of life, as expressed in the book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) traditionally read on Sukkot. Sukkot is indeed *zeman simchateinu*, the time of our rejoicing, with the many fruits of our labors before us, but we are also stubbornly reminded of the transitory nature of that material wealth, abundant though it seems, and so enjoined to live in a shack, which by definition is impermanent (*dirat ara'i*), exposed to the elements, meditating on vanity, and the vanity of vanities.

Or more accurately: to reflect on the spiritual choreography of the eternal and the temporal, human achievement and divine and natural gifts. The natural world is indeed palpably evident in all aspects of the *chag*. Even though it is Tu Bishvat that has become the "Jewish Earth Day", Sukkot is really the holiday with the most connections to nature and natural cycles. As noted, it falls on the full moon following the autumnal equinox, merging cycles of moon and sun. We lovingly use the four species (*arba'at haminim*), our own sensual, cultic flora, and of course, build the sukka, with its characteristic natural thatching, the *schach*. Otherwise bookish Jews suddenly become botanists and carpenters. And if you really fulfill the mitzvah, you're meant to sleep outside in the sukka every night. As an outdoorsy non-Jewish friend of mine once said: “Any tradition that has you sleep under the stars for a week a year as a religious duty can't be all bad…”

In the structure of the sukka itself is an amazing metaphor for how best to fashion our relationship with the natural world. While Jewish tradition doesn’t say much about the

types of walls one needs in the sukka, it is very particular about the roof and roofing materials. The schach has to be natural in origin, but no longer part of a growing plant, and it has to be dense enough to shield us from the hot Mediterranean sun, creating more shade than sunlight at midday (*tzila meruba mechamata*) – but without blocking out the moon and the stars at night. So we are to be protected from the elements—the sukka is after all a shelter, even if austere—but not insulated from them. Shielded from their power to harm, yet exposed to their ability to inspire. This is another dialectic balance—here expressing a sharp critique of our lives today. In remembering the wandering and the fragility, we are not called to radical ascesis, and while enjoying the harvest, and sheltering ourselves from the ravages of the outside, we are not to resort to shutting ourselves up indoors in our own personal fortresses, with no lifeline to the outside.

It is ironic that people who propose modesty in material consumption (reducing 'stuffocation'), attaining a modicum of gracious simplicity in their lives, and renewing a relationship with the nature world above and around us—i.e., essentially fulfilling some of the very values of Sukkot—are often branded as primitive, and anti-progress, wanting to send our technical society back to the caves. But aren’t our own contemporary homes so much more reminiscent of caves? Shut up indoors, fearful of what's taking place outside, often in semi-darkness, we stare at flickering images on the walls…

Inner, outer / inside, outside: our health and well-being, perhaps our very survival, individual and collective, physical and spiritual, depend on the deep dialogue and interdependence between these aspects of our lives. How do our values shape our space? How are our communities sustained or stunted by that space? To what extent do we allow ourselves to be exposed enough to Creation to be inspired by it? The holidays of Tishri last a few weeks, but with proper reflection and commitment to action, their spirit can inform our lives the rest of the year.

May you be inscribed for a year of blessings, of sustaining and sustainable abundance!

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