

Sukkot, Simchat Bet Hashoeva

- Nisson Shulman.

Sukkot, Simchat Bet Hashoeva, originally a shiur but adaptable to a drasha. How Hillel the gentle and humble could say IM ANI KAN, HAKOL KAN. Pharisees and sadducees.

SUKKOT: SIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA

(Originally a shiur, but can be adapted to sermon style and size [Ed])

1. One of the most interesting Sukkoth observances is the SIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA, the celebration of the water libation.

Till this day, on any of the intermediary days of the holiday, religious organizations or schools or groups might join in celebration with feast and song to observe the SIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA.

When the Holy Temple stood, it was joyous indeed. It took place tonight, on the second night of the festival. "Men of good works", ANSHE MAASE, and pious people would lead processions of multitudes, happy crowds, accompanied by Levites playing musical instruments, torchlight parades, dancing, singing on their way to the Temple gates and courtyard. The sages themselves would dance and sing. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to juggle with eight lighted torches at once. The Talmud tells us that MI SHELO RAA SIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA LO RAA SIMCHA MIYAMAV.

What was the occasion for the celebration? The libation of water! It took place once a year on the Sukkoth holiday. But was this a sufficient occasion for such a celebration? There were many other offerings on Sukkoth! There were 70 bullocks offered, one for each of the nations of the world. Furthermore, in Jewish tradition, wine symbolized joy. YAYIN MESAMEACH ELOKIM VAANASHIM; YAYIN YESAMACH LEVAV ENOSH. We make kiddush with wine, havdala, the four cups of freedom on Passover, all heralded with wine. There was a libation of wine on the altar every day of the year as part of the daily offering. Yet there is no wine-libation celebration. What is so special about the water libation?

2. We all know the great sage Hillel and that there are many beautiful traditions about him. We know of his scholarship, his wonderful dedication to learning, his patience, his modesty, his humility. Yet it is written about Hillel that at the SIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA he had a favourite saying: AMRU ALAV AL HILLEL HAZAKEN, KESHEHAYA SAMEACH BESIMCHAT BET HASHOEVA, HAYA OMER KEN: IM ANI KAN, HAKOL KAN. VEIM EYN ANI KAN, MI KAN? "If I am here, everyone is here. If I am not here, who is here?"

What a strange thing for patient and humble Hillel to say! Does this sound like our mild, unassuming Hillel? Why did he say this? And why particularly at the water-libation festival?

3. To answer these questions, we must understand something about Jewish life in the first century of the Common Era, and the movements into which our people were then divided. If we

can learn from this bit of history and apply it, we shall be the richer for it, and perhaps gain some insights for our own time.

There were many splinter groups that divided Judaism at various times in our history. There were the Karaites, who in the Middle Ages fought the Oral Tradition and sought to accept only the written Bible. A very few are still alive today in Israel and Egypt. There were the German Reformers that sought to accept only those areas of our tradition that made sense to them in the modern world. There were the MASKILIM who emphasized culture at the expense of our religious tradition.

So it was during many periods of our history; followers of Shabbatai-Zvi and the Frankists; even the Marannos of Spain could be said to form a group apart for a time. Compromise was their answer to the Spanish Inquisition. Of course in the Bible we had Korach. His fate portended what would happen to splinter groups in later times. Many of them would die out in the course of time. They were temporary manifestations.

One of the most famous of all these groups, and historically the most powerful, was the Sadducees. It arose at the time of the Hasmoneans, and lasted until after the destruction of the Second Temple, a period of more than two hundred years. They broke away from the mainstream of Judaism and their leaders, who later historians called Pharisees.

We know the Pharisees, because we are of their tradition, followers of Ezra, Men of the Great Assembly, and those who came afterwards. They taught the Torah, transmitted the heritage of earlier years called Mesorah, interpreted and applied laws of the Bible by means of rules of logic. In fact, their thirteen principles of logic are recited by every Jew who takes part in the daily morning service.

The Sadducees denied the oral tradition of our people. They were the first splinter group to seek to apply only the written word of Torah. As Josephus said, "The Sadducees hold we are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers as long as it is not clearly commanded in the written word".

There were other differences too, but this is the most important one. Thus, we can regard Sadducees as Jewish Fundamentalists. The written word was all-in-all. The Pharisees, on the other hand, stressed that the written word could not be understood without the oral explanation that came from Moses and Sinai side by side with the written word. Thus, the Bible tells us to live in Sukkoth. The oral explanation teaches what a Sukkah is, how it is to be built, and what we do in it. The Bible teaches we take the beautiful fruit of the beautiful tree in our hands on this Yom Tov. The oral explanation teaches that this refers to the Esrog, teaches what makes it kosher and what makes it pasul. This is part of the oral tradition.

Obviously, the Pharisees depended on an unbroken line of tradition from Moses time, as well as their rules of logic of Bible interpretation. Let but one generation be skipped, and all the Mesora, the tradition, would be lost! The Sadducees, on the other hand, didn't need history and tradition at all. The Bible could stay on a shelf for a thousand years, be picked up and read, and their version of Judaism could be created anew.

The Pharisees were loved by the populace, and followed by the majority of Jews. Eventually, they won the day. We are their descendants.

4. In Hillel's time, the struggle waged furiously between the two groups. Alexander Yannai, the King, himself a Sadducee, is said to have killed all the Sanhedrin but one, who escaped. The High Priest before Yom Kippur had to swear an oath that he would not deviate from the Rabbi's teachings about the service. We are told that the Rabbis who administered the oath and the High Priest, began to weep together, that conditions of strife were such as to require such an oath from both. Yohanan the High Priest served 80 years faithfully, and in the end became a Sadducee.

The Temple service was at the center of the struggle, and Sukkoth the center of the controversy. And no observance was more disputed than the libation of the water. For the Rabbis derive the command to perform this ceremony purely from the oral tradition, and through the logical rules of Torah exegesis, demonstrate that it is hinted at in the Torah itself. Neither the tradition nor the logical rules were accepted by the Sadducees.

So that when Yohanan Kohen Gadol changed his allegiance to the Sadducees, he was able to hide this, somehow, until the libation of water. When he refused to do this, and poured the water on the ground at his feet instead of onto the altar, the shocked populace immediately realized he had defected, and pelted him with their Etrogim!

So when the Rabbinic or Pharisaic Judaism finally was accepted, they celebrated by emphasizing this very observance, which was at the vortex of the controversy. The Rabbis led the celebration.

5. Hillel rose to become the Nasi, because of the struggle between Sadducees and Pharisees. Picture the scene. The elders of Beteyra, the leaders in Jerusalem, discussing a ritual question. In case the eve of Passover fell on Sabbath, is it permissible to sacrifice the paschal lamb? Which takes precedence; Sabbath or Passover? Nobody seems to know the tradition. It has been forgotten.

Hillel, introduced as a former student of the great leaders of the previous generation, Shemaya and Abtalyon, is invited to join the discussion and give the decision.

He first approaches the issue by means of one of the rules of logic, proving that the Passover offering is made, despite the fact that it is Sabbath. He fails to convince the audience that his method is valid. He sits and expounds to them the whole day long, but they don't accept his teaching. Finally, in despair, he exclaims, "But this is the way I learned it from Shmaya and Abtalyon! I myself received the tradition from them!"

They not only accept his ruling, but appoint him their master, their NASI. The tradition, bolstered by the rules of logic, Hillel's method, wins the day. The oral tradition was assured. And Hillel was the master who symbolized its transmission through that generation to the next.

6. Now picture the Simchat Bet Hashoeva, celebrating the triumph of the followers of tradition. Hillel rises, and declares with humility: "I should not have been your leader. I was chosen, only

because I represented a certain kind of teaching, the teaching that depends on the traditions of our forefathers. Every word we teach is based on those sacred traditions. IM ANI KAN, If I am in this position as Nasi, then HAKOL KAN, then all the predecessors of our sages stand in this place with me and live in our pronouncements; Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Mordecai, Ezra, Shimon Hatzadik, Shmaya and Abtalyon.

VEIM EN ANI KAN, And if this method and tradition which I represent have no validity; if the Sadducees are right, then MI KAN? Then where are all these previous generations? Of what value is their tradition and teaching? Then there is no continuum of Judaism. Each generation is an island in time, isolated without a past and therefore without a future."

7. This is the meaning of the Simchat Bet Hashoeva. It teaches that Judaism is not dependent on a book alone; that its people, we ourselves, are part of the historical process. If a link is missing, Judaism is lost. And therefore there is an awesome responsibility that rests in each and every one of us.

We are part of history. But mesorah, tradition, makes that history live. It means that our great forbears are with us, with each word of the tradition we teach. IM HILLEL KAN, HAKOL KAN. Just as Hillel is here, they are all here. And if they aren't here, then our own existence is just a dream that files away. We aren't really here either.