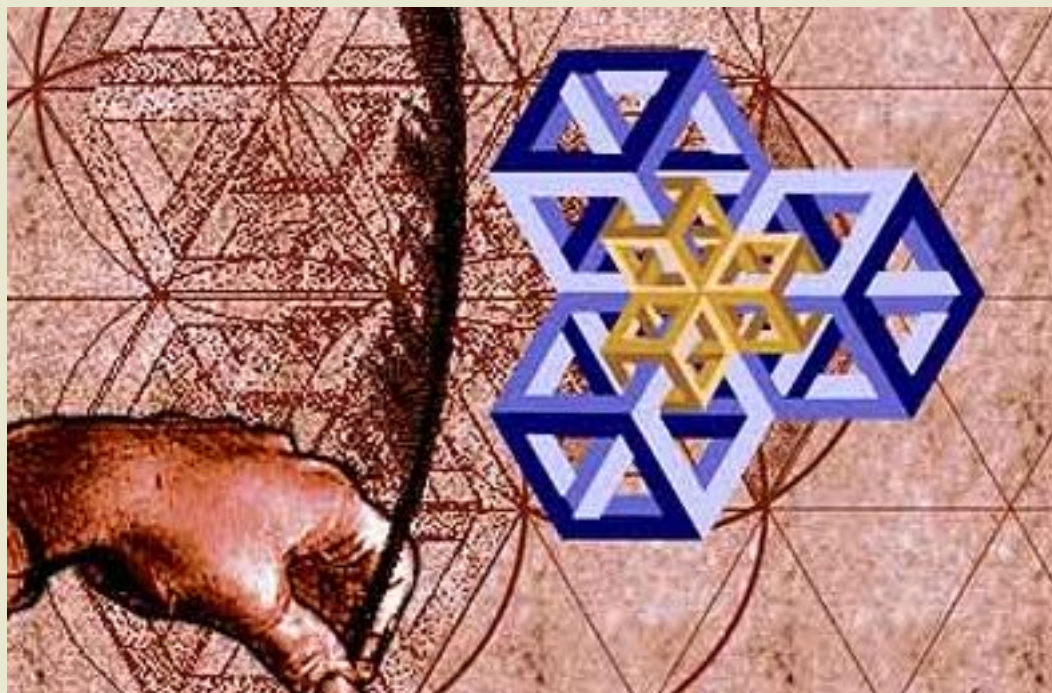


**FrameWorks SpiralNotes Series**  
**The Sukkot Ushpizin**  
**Part One: Avraham**



**...סוכת אברהם...**  
**Living in Eternity's Sunrise**

transcribed and edited by Geoffrey Dworkin  
based on The Ushpizin Series shiurim, 2001

**In this essay**, we begin the journey of going through סוכות from the point of view of each of the אושפזין. The זוהר comments that for performing the מצוה of סוכה, we merit having the שכינה visit us throughout סוכות and enjoy the privilege of welcoming each of the seven shepherds into the סוכה, each of which represents and expresses another of the Sefirot. By exploring the unique vision each of the אושפזין has to offer, we should be able to get a broader picture of the holiday from varying perspectives. The first day we welcome אברהם, the Av who built the first סוכה...

## סוכת אברהם... *Living in Eternity's Sunrise*

אברהם, even on the simplest level, has quite a bit to say about סכות, because סכות is the time when we bring the שבועים פרים, which are unique, as they represent each of the various nations of the world.<sup>a</sup> אברהם, of course, is the one who is called אב המון גוים, the father of the nations, and is our connection to the nations of the world. And we can appreciate that there is a certain universality in אברהם's point of view. אברהם's search is a universal search, he only arrives at levels that are uniquely Jewish after going into ברית מילה. So it makes sense that he is a beginning and is a universal beginning. But what isn't generally recognized is that אברהם was the first in history to build a סוכה!

The מדרש points out that when the guests came to אברהם to inform him of שרה's pregnancy and the impending doom of סדום, he invites them in and offers the guests to lean down against a tree:

וַיִּשָׂא עֵינָיו, וַיִּרְא, וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים, נֹצְבִים עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָא, וַיִּרְץ  
לְקִרְאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, אֶרְצָה. וַיֹּאמֶר: אֲדֹנָי,  
אִם-נָא מְצֵאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ--אֵל-נָא תַעֲבֹר, מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ.  
יָקַח-נָא מַעַט-מִיַּם, וַיְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם; וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ, תַּחַת הָעֵץ.

(בראשית יח:ב-ד)

*And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, three men stood over against him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed down to the earth, and said: 'My lords, if I now have found favour in your eyes, do not pass away, I pray, from your servant. A little water will be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree.*

The מדרש comments that this very extension of hospitality ultimately was rewarded with ה' assuring אברהם that he would provide his children with their own place to lie down:

א"ל הקב"ה לאברהם אתה אמרת והשענו תחת העץ חייך שאני פורע לבניך במדבר בישוב ולעתיד, במדבר פרש ענן למסך בישוב בסכות תשבו ולע"ל וסוכה תהי' לצל יומם.

(מדרש רבה, בראשית, מח, ט)

*Said the Holy One to Abraham: you said "and recline yourselves under the tree," by your very life, I promise that I will repay your children in the desert, in their dwelling and in time to come. In the desert as it says, "he covered them with a cloud", in their dwelling as it says, "in huts you shall dwell" and in time to come as it says, "a hut will provide shade for their days."*

Moreover, there is also a רמז in the וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ as that is the same word as הוֹשָׁעֲנָא, which itself is something that is stressed profoundly throughout our experience of סכות. But perhaps the most striking relationship of אברהם to סכות is the following מדרש:

פרי עץ הדר, זה אברהם שהדרו הקדוש ברוך הוא בשיבה טובה,  
שנאמר (בראשית כד): ואברהם זקן בא בימים, וכתוב  
(ויקרא יט): והדרת פני זקן.

(מדרש רבה, ויקרא ל')

*"Fruit of a beautiful tree": this is Abraham, as the Holy One dignified him with fine, old age, as it says "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age" and it is further written, "honour the face of the old man."*

In its discussion of the various מצות of סכות, the מדרש notes that פרי עץ הדר, the אתרוג, refers to אברהם, and it refers to him for a strange reason – because he was the first person to grow old. One must admit that it is a little bit of a push to try and read אברהם into the elements of סכות in this way, especially since we don't typically identify a סוכה with concepts of old age. Indeed, in terms of the הלכה, things need to be alive on some level. An אתרוג, for example, should be fresh and green to the extent that white hairs, which themselves are an allusion to זקנה and שיבה, would disqualify it. So to say that פרי עץ הדר is אברהם is a bit counterintuitive, especially when our associations with the holiday, with its emphasis on plant life and fruit, are of fertility and freshness.

The truth is that סוכה is referred to as תקופת השנה. The תקופת השנה, of course, relates to the הקפות, but more literally, it actually refers to the turn-around of the year, which is the time when the year goes into a dormancy stage, a period in which everything is dying. תקופת השנה is the fall. The סוכה itself is built out of the פסולת גורן ויקב, specifically the dead remnants of what was collected during the course of the harvest season. Harvest is seen as a time of death because if one looks outside in the field, everything is dead and dried out, everything is finished – the year is over. In a strange way, סכות expresses universal elements of harvest festivals, of which Halloween is an example with which readers may be familiar. Note how the harvest festival revolves around death in its entirety. Children walking around as skeletons, the playing of spooky music, dead pumpkins, people going around with things that, even terms of the תורה, represent that which is no longer living, that which is dead.

These issues of death, as macabre as they might be, are, in a sense, embedded in the nature of סכות as well. For instance, we read ספר קהלת, which some think, with its serious subject matter, to be a contradiction to סכות, utilized as a device to mute or temper the sense of שמחה the holiday enjoins upon us.<sup>b</sup> But it is very self-evident that the elements of ספר קהלת are themselves directly related to סכות on every level. The holiday is referred to as חג האסיף, but אסיפה means death, as in עמיו אל עמיו, and "he was gathered amongst his brothers." Indeed, the very word קהלת means "a gathering of things" and is therefore just another synonym for אסיפה. So if we are talking about אסיפה, it is not that we're simply pulling in the things from the fields and that's our harvest festival. We're talking about the nature of the completion, the running down of the year, תקופת השנה is completed now – it's over, the year is dead.

What emerges, then, is that the analysis of what the תורה is telling us about אברהם and זקנה begins to fit very beautifully. Somehow or another, הדר, despite its demand for our אתרוג to be green and not יבש, needs us to relate to it and achieve a conception of not simply beauty but הדר as a particular type of honor that we extend, והדרת פני זקן. This is not merely recognizing that it is a nice thing to grow old, but rather having a certain sense of dignity and appreciation of the nobility of old age. So on some level, what סכות is really talking about is the הדר of זקנה itself. And that is strange. Why would סכות, our זמן שמחתנו, ask us to look at this as a time of happiness.

If we look at קהלת, he seems very much to complain about all of this. Note the relationship of תקופה to הקפה (circle) to the opening of קהלת which expresses the futile cyclic nature of things, הבל הבלים, specifically in the very natural terms this time period deals with:

הולך, אל-דרום, וסובב, אל-צפון; סובב סבב הולך הרוח, ועל-  
 סביבתיו שב הרוח. כל-הנחלים הלכים אל-הים, והים  
 איננו מלא; אל-מקום, שהנחלים הלכים--שם הם שבים,  
 ללכת. (קהלת א:1-2)

*The wind goes toward the south, and turns about unto the north; it turns about continually in its circuit, and the wind returns again to its circuits. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full; unto the place whither the rivers go, there they go again.*

To קהלת, it's all a bunch of circles. Which is something that we do on סכות – we go around in circles all the time, and that's not coincidentally related to the תקופת השנה and not coincidentally related to what קהלת is talking about, whether it is the הושענות, הקפות, המזבח, or waving of the לולב – in each, we are clearly sketching out for ourselves the idea of תקופה and the idea of cycle and are actually acting out circles. That itself should induce enough of a sense of futility and hopelessness of things not going anywhere. This certainly does not add up to joy, and yet again, this is an expression of זמן שמחתינו?

Further, the end of קהלת discusses old age in very graphic and difficult terms. He talks about the gradual breakdown of the body in old age, the teeth fall out, the loss of desire, the inability to walk:

ביום, שיזעו שמרי הבית, והתענותו, אנשי החיל; ובטלו הטחנות כי מעטו, וחשכו הראות בארבות. וסגרו דלתים בשוק, בשפל קול הטחנה; ויקום לקול הצפור, וישחו כל-בנות השיר. (קהלת יב:ג-ד)

*Your limbs will tremble with age, and your strong legs will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to do their work, and you will be blind, too. And when your teeth are gone, keep your lips tightly closed when you eat! E ven the chirping of birds will wake you up. But you yourself will be deaf and tuneless, with a quavering voice.*

All of these things only lead to a breakdown in our appreciation of life and contribute to a loss of joy. And yet, here we are still saying this is זמן שמחתינו.

Therefore, if the תורה is telling us that אברהם, in his old age, is the key to understanding this element of the שמחה that is involved in סכות, then we need to look at it and say, it can only mean what it is saying. It can't mean the opposite of what it is saying (see Endnote 2). The elements of futility that are being identified here, the fact the we are celebrating death, that קהלת can talk about מיום הנולדו, מיום המות, טוב שם, משמן טוב; ויום המות, מיום הנולדו, that he can go through the עתים, the seasons, one after another and talk about ללדת, ועת ללדת, or that he can say, טוב מוסר, מוסר, but because it's nice, מלכת אל-בית אבלי, מלכת אל-בית משתה, כי-ברע פנים, ייטב לב, the fact is that one will end up with a happier and more מנוחה vision of life and an understanding of what joy actually means to him. The only way that all of this could be saying what it is, is by teaching us the lessons of the value of הזה עולם itself.

To understand all of this, we must first go back and recognize that אברהם was not a religious man. אברהם began his entire revolution as being profoundly anti-religious. He went out to undo any kind of belief system that people had invested in, had projected in, in order to be able to establish truth. His given was that the only thing that we can trust is what it is that we find the world to have evolved as. This, by the way, was why he was so profoundly against ברית מילה. The moment that he was told to do the ברית מילה, it was the one thing he rejected and only did because people said to him, you went this far, you might as well go all the way. As the מדרש tells us, he literally fainted dead away. This was so because ברית מילה was such a departure from nature. And everything that אברהם had done was based on the assumption that what you see is what you get, and that "what is" is the only thing that can be defined as good, because it is all that there is. Which means that the search of אברהם has to be seen as a search within עולם הזה, it cannot be seen as a search outside of this world, because that would be an assumption of elements that he has no basis to assume. He would have to apply *lex parsimoniae* (i.e. Occam's razor<sup>d</sup>), which he always did, in order to be able to strip things away to their most simple and evident reality. And therefore, what קהלת is speaking about, from the point of view of אברהם, has to be that it's in the transience of עולם הזה that there lies the only meaning that we can have in it, as opposed to dreams of immortality.

So what קהלת is teaching us, and what אברהם's חסד itself ends up establishing, is that it's in the uniqueness of life, and it's in the uniqueness of moment, and it's in the recognition of death, not as simply as a terminate of life as a whole, but rather that the reality that death is built into each instant of עולם הזה, so that any experience is as rapidly dead as it is lived and that it can never be recaptured, it can only be remembered. But therein lies the very uniqueness and the source of our connection, commitment, understanding, appreciation and joy of living in such a world. And that idea is simply the concept of uniqueness. If in fact we would live forever, in the sense of infinity, then we have to understand that infinity is exactly what it is. In an infinite universe, there would be nothing to prevent every event from occurring an infinite number of times. So that any element that would be part of our life, would be part of our life again and again and again, *ad infinitum*. Which means that no moment is meaningful, and all connection, all uniqueness, all poignancy, all attachment, would dissolve, because there is no specific anything.<sup>e</sup>

All of this, by the way, is מרומז in אברהם's tree, as the זוהר points out, אברהם's tree wasn't just for sitting down under a tree. Rather it was a way of establishing the relationship that the individual who came into his house had with nature and the world.

ובהוא אילנא הוה ידע מאן דאתאחיד ביה בקודשא בריך הוא ומאן דאתאחיד בע"ז, מאן דאתאחיד בקודשא בריך הוא אילנא הוה פריש ענפוי וחפי על רישיה ועביד עליה צלא יאה ומאן דאתאחיד בסטרא דע"ז הוה אילנא הוה אסתלק וענפוי הוה סליקין לעילא, כדין הוה ידע אברהם ואזהיר ליה ולא אעדי מתמן עד דאתאחיד במהימנותא דקודשא בריך הוא והכי מאן דאיהו דכיא (ד"א ל"ג הכי) מקבל ליה אילנא מאן דאיהו מסאב לא מקבל ליה, כדין ידע אברהם ומדכי לון במיאי.

(זוהר בראשית, פרשת וירא דף קב עמוד ב)

*And by this tree, he knew who was attached to the Holy One and who worshiped idols. For if a person cleaved to the Holy One, the tree spread out its branches, covered his head, and formed a pleasant shade for him. But if a person was attached to idolatry, the tree raised its branches high. Then Abraham knew*

*that he worshipped idols. Abraham reprimanded him and did not let him go until he cleaved to faith in the Holy One. In addition, whoever was pure was accepted by the tree. But whoever was impure was not accepted. Abraham then knew whether a person was impure. If this was the case, he purified him with water.*

So that if the person that אברהם brought into his house to sit under the tree was a pure soul, the tree would fall around him and envelop him. And on the other hand, if the person needed תיקון (and in אברהם's terms, that תיקון could only be in terms of the universe), then the tree would lift itself away from the person and אברהם would recognize that he needed to talk to the person and explain life to this person and be מטהר him. The idea is that his initial commitment to חסד relates to the flow of life directly as it was in a vision of a universe which was completely מושלם and that now is reduced to experiencing itself in terms of the moments that it has that need to be brought back into an entirety. Each one of those moments needs to be unique. And the truth is, in our lives, we find this so much to be so. The only things that we truly experience with a wholeness of heart are those things we cannot experience again. The more we know that we cannot experience things again, the more powerful, the more poignant, the more committed, the more involved is our experience of it. Anybody that is scared for a loved one who is dying knows what this means. Never again will I be able to bring this woman this cup of water again in the middle of the night. And that is something that becomes infinitely powerful in its emotional energy and emotive power.

So that concept of the uniqueness of each moment allows us to experience life in a way that is only to be understood as הדר. It gives a tremendous sense of nobility and respect, just as it means והדרת פני זקן. That which was given to אברהם, that which was unique, was the recognition that he was aging, and he was the first person to age, in fact אברהם even asked for this,<sup>f</sup> he asked to be old, he wanted old age, and God said you are the one that we will start with, if that's the case, and אברהם said that's wonderful. That blessing of being able to have people experience what it would mean to have an individual who would not be there forever, an individual who in fact is aging and has incorporated within himself the experiences of so much of life, that there is only so much time that one can have. To be able to be מהדר אברהם, that idea is in fact given us over in the סוכה, which creates הדר and all of the elements of אסיפה, that we now come to recognize as being themselves immensely valuable and the key to a real appreciation and love of the world. And this now becomes אברהם's essential חסד. William Blake captures this notion of attempting to hold onto time and how it destroys joy, שמחה, so powerfully:

*To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And E ternity in an hour...*

*He who Binds Himself to a Joy  
Does the winged life destroy  
He who kisses the joy as it flies  
Lives in E ternity's sunrise*

(William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*)

This is exactly the point. The way to destroy joy is to bind yourself to a moment and thinking that you could hold onto it. That concept of holding onto moments, just as

holding on to children or things that are worn out, if there is one thing that destroys us all the time or the moments or our children, it's because instead of allowing an experience of life, it allows only an experience of our interpretation or projection of life. אברהם's message and search of his entire lifetime was to never experience projections – that is the essence ע"ז. The nature of חסד to him was always to experience what *is* rather than what you think *ought to be*.

And so, the element of סוכה that most relates to him is in fact universality, its immense openness. Because nothing could be more open than such a point of view in which anything is what it is and therefore can only be experienced as what it *is* rather than what I would *have it be* or make of it. It is that which turns אברהם into an אב המון גוים and allows ישראל during this period to actually appreciate, not from a distance, but to be dedicated to the growth and survival and the continued success of the particular גוי that all year round it may ignore. To have an appreciation of other cultures and what they achieved in their time – because it was only something they could do with their commitment and their language and point of view, and that we are only the richer for their existence. And so, in that universal vision, we forgo what we wish we would make of the world, and support its life and its potential and distinctions and uniqueness whole-heartedly to the point where חז"ל say when it comes to שמיני עצרת, that God says you have been so busy with the others, we haven't had a moment for ourselves.<sup>8</sup> Unless someone experiences סכות in this universal way, this sounds strange. But if one appreciates how it is that we busy ourselves with the שבועים פרים, which represent our deep involvement with universalism, our concern for everyone else; that our vision is not simply focused on our own needs, but focused on mankind, then the need to have a day to address our own unique relationship with הקב"ה is quite clear. אברהם's tree, his סוכה, provides us with this universal vision and appreciation.

This, of course, leaves us with a little bit of a problem: We are *not* allowed to use a tree in the סוכה, that is, we specifically can not sit under a tree when we are in a סוכה. To understand why, we need to wait for יצחק...



**This transcription is based upon R.M. Weinberg's discussion of the topic in Jerusalem, Israel, 5762 (2001)**

<sup>a</sup> See:

פרי החג שבעים הם. כנגד שבעים אומות שמתמעטים והולכים, סימן כליה להם, ובימי המקדש היו מגינין עליהם מן היסורין: (רש"י במדבר פרק כט: יח).

<sup>b</sup> This idea of muting people's happiness is somewhat of a convoluted reason for reading ספר קהלת. If this is the time we are not just happy but experiencing a time when we discover the meaning of joy and are provided with an access to שמחה, why would we need to keep it under control? Should we place a check on our experience of freedom during פסח in an effort to prevent ourselves from getting too good of a taste of freedom.

<sup>c</sup> Consider usage of this phrase as it applies to death throughout the book of בראשית:

אברהם: "ויגוע וימת ... ויאסף אל עמיו" (בראשית כה: ח)  
ישמעאל: "ויגוע וימת ויאסף אל עמיו" (בראשית כה: יז)  
יצחק: "ויגוע ... וימת ויאסף אל עמיו" (בראשית לה: כט)  
יעקב: "ויגוע ויאסף אל עמיו" (בראשית מט: לג)

<sup>d</sup> That is, the explanation of any phenomenon should make as few assumptions as possible, eliminating, or "shaving off," those that make no difference in the observable predictions of the explanatory hypothesis or theory (see: [Occam's razor](#)).

<sup>e</sup> Consider: Death is there to keep us honest and constantly remind us we are free. Dan Fogelberg, "Ghosts," *The Innocent Age*.

<sup>f</sup> See: סנהדרין קג.

<sup>g</sup> See:

ומדרשו באגדה לפי שכל ימות הרגל הקריבו כנגד שבעים אומות וכשבאין ללכת, אמר להם המקום בבקשה מכם עשו לי סעודה קטנה כדי שאהנה מכם: (רש"י, במדבר כט: לה)