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## Edah Happenings:

**Regional Conference in Montreal- Nov. 11th - 13th**

**Regional Conference in Boston- Nov. 18th - 20th**

**Edah at the JCC in Manhattan w/ Dr. Amnon Shapira Nov 9, 16, 30, Dec 7, 14, 21, 7:30 pm**

**Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller @ JCC in Manhattan Nov. 21 7:30 pm**

## The Jewish People and its Covenantal Mission

by Eugene Korn

The Torah begins as a cosmic drama. In its first eleven chapters God creates the heavens, nature, every species of animals, and finally the crowning jewels of the universe, human beings. Adam and Eve are created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the Divine Image, and from these two individuals, all humanity grows to populate the earth. God is concerned with all creation, all people, their lives, their families, their accomplishments and their sins. He makes an eternal covenant with Noah and every human being after him, obligating humanity everywhere to observe the seven commandments of basic morality and civility.

But in chapter twelve the Torah shifts suddenly and dramatically: The horizons of the entire biblical narrative narrow to Abraham and his descendants—the Jewish people. God instructs Abraham to leave the center of civilization for a distant land, where He makes a particular covenant with him and forges an intimate and eternal relationship with the Jewish people. This sets the context for the remainder of the Torah. God “has gone ethnic.”

*Parshat lekh lekha* is concerned with Abraham's personal and family security, his ownership of a specific place, the Land of Canaan. According to Jewish tradition Abraham's life foreshadows the later experiences of the Jewish people. This is most obvious in our *parshah*, where Abraham endures exile, vulnerability, suffering, return and the struggle for survival against hostile neighbors. He is told that his descendants will be enslaved in a foreign land and ultimately return to their promised home. Abraham's experiences in biblical antiquity are indeed a microcosm of the millennia of Jewish history.

But what has happened to the cosmic Creator and the universal human story? Is God now concerned exclusively with His chosen people? Does God's intimate covenant with Abraham reveal Divine indifference to humanity? And we Jews, the people of the covenant, how—if at all—are we to relate to the larger drama of human history?

When we look closely at God's promise to Abraham, we find a universal dimension in His particular covenant with the Jewish people.

“You shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse you who curse you. And all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you. (12:2-3)

The challenge to be a blessing, to radiate influence to all humanity is an essential part of the covenantal mission. God reiterates this promise to Abraham in Genesis 18:18 and 22:18; and then repeats it to Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14) when the covenant is passed down to

Abraham's children. A universal role is part of the very destiny that the Torah has for the Jewish people.

Thus in the deepest religious sense, the Jewish people are not supposed to be a ghetto people, insulated and isolated from the larger story of humanity. We are supposed to be players in shaping the culture and destiny of the human race. Withdrawal is not a valid spiritual option: If we become only an insignificant footnote to the vast narrative of human history, we will have failed God's covenantal challenge to Abraham and us alike. And survival is not enough: “*Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.*” Through God's repeated challenges to our forebearers, the Torah calls us to be a charismatic people, a people with a message to the world.

The *Midrash* teaches that prior to Abraham people acknowledged a transcendent Creator of the universe, but it was only after—and because of—Abraham that they recognized God as a part of human experience: “Before Abraham, God was called the God of heaven, but after Abraham, God was called God of heaven and earth.” Abraham's actions somehow convinced the people around him that God was present in human affairs and in the everyday lives of individuals. In Jewish tradition, Abraham is the model of *hesed*, lovingkindness towards others. The great nineteenth century Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berliner (“Netziv”) taught that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's special righteousness was their tolerance and ability to maintain friendly relations with even the pagans around them. Because of this, they were able to exercise influence on their societies. Perhaps this is what the Torah means in Gen. 18:19 when God tests Abraham to determine if he is committed to “the way of God, to teach *tzedakah u'mishpat*”—what is right and just—to his descendants and to humanity.

The Torah has both a particular and universal vision for the Jewish people. Our religious life and indeed Jewish history must be a delicate blend of both elements: We must ensure our people's survival through Jewish education and intense commitment to the Jewish community. Yet we must be mindful always that we have a double covenantal calling that includes a message to the world at large. In addition to Jewish survival we must not forget our involvement in humanity and human culture. God has asked Abraham—and we, his children—to be pacesetters for the entire world, to teach *tzedakah u'mishpat* and to make God's values of justice and righteousness present in human affairs.

Balancing our particular interests with universal concern is difficult to achieve today. But the God of Israel and His eternal covenant with the children of Abraham demand nothing less of us. As the Torah teaches, “Be a blessing.”

*Eugene Korn is Director of Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Congress and editor of The Edah Journal—A Forum of Orthodox Discourse.*

# Ending Ramadan in the Sukkah

by Rabbi Asher Lopatin

The high holidays are behind us, together with their emotional and spiritual peaks. Whether these peaks occurred in a synagogue, outside in a Sukkah, or on a street filled with dancing Torahs, they have all left their mark. How they will shape our year remains to be seen.

Here in Chicago, amidst the excitement over the World Champion White Sox, we enjoyed one such peak, an incredible evening that simply cannot be sent to the dustbin of history. It was a Muslim-Jewish, Judaic-Islamic coming-together that must live on beyond Sukkot. The program was a joint Iftar – Ramadan break fast and Sukkot celebration right in our synagogue, our “house of prayer for all nations.”

On a rainy Sukkot Sunday, over seventy people shuttled from our sanctuary for speeches about Ramadan and Sukkot by Muslim and Jewish leaders. Then, while we made the afternoon Jewish prayer in the sanctuary, over twenty Muslim men and women prayed their Salat in the JCC’s gym across from the synagogue. Dozens of Muslims watched minchah in our synagogue, and dozens of Jews watched the Salat accompanied by traditional hand washing and mats. For the first time, these people were seeing up close how their fellow worshippers prayed.

Afterwards, we went downstairs in the social hall for the simple Iftar meal of water and dates for the thirty or so Muslims who were fasting. Finally, we all retired to a strictly kosher, halal dinner where Muslims and Jews of every age group and nationality could not stop mixing and talking and sharing their religious lives.

There was so much goodwill at this event, so much warmth and civility, that it felt like the words of Zechariah 14, from the first day of Sukkot, had come true: “Once a year the gentiles will come to celebrate Sukkot.” In fact, the Muslims at the event insisted on seeing our Sukkah, even though that meant walking in the rain to see it.

Muslims were invited as individuals through the contacts with the Jewish Council for Urban Affairs, which co-sponsored the event with our shul. But many of these individual Muslims are leading figures in the Chicago Muslim community who were not afraid to be seen and photographed with rabbis in the sanctuary. In fact, one leading Muslim organization, CAIR – Chicago, put the whole event, including pictures of the sanctuary and sukkah, on their website.

This is not an organization known for loving Israel, and though one cynical observer felt that CAIR was exploiting this event to gain legitimacy, I prefer to take their goodwill at face value. Jews conveyed the magic of Sukkot and Muslims communicated the excitement of Iftar.

**We will not forget conversing with each other that night, sharing experiences of our holidays, and being in each other’s presence as we engaged in intimate prayer before God.**

Combined with a shared enthusiasm for food, this exchange broke through all other barriers, at least for one evening.

“It was my first time inside a Synagogue observing Jews pray,” said Dina Rehab, CAIR-Chicago’s Outreach Coordinator. “The Rabbi was very friendly and astute to the fact that there were guests observing. He made sure to explain things. I very much appreciated the opportunity.” This comment sounds honest and sincere, not contrived for the media.

Sukkot is over and with it a month of high holy days and festivities. We have all returned to our regular jobs, our normal year-round synagogue programs, and our busy lives in the secular world. Unfortunately, we look at the news from the Middle East and there is still no magical peace in Israel, no apocalypse of Gog and Magog, as we read about in Ezekiel. Religion doesn’t seem to be the great peacemaker as it was in our synagogue only a few weeks ago. Possibilities and dreams from Sukkot seem far away, a distant chapter.

Yet, the Sukkot-Iftar celebration was real. We will not forget conversing with each other that night, sharing experiences of our holidays, and being in each other’s presence as we engaged in intimate prayer before God.

I ask us all not to leave Sukkot behind, but to carry it into the months ahead. Let us recapture these innocent interactions between Muslim and Jews, who perhaps began the conversation with the protection of Sukkot, Ramadan and Iftar, but might be able to continue that conversation beyond.

Last month we read the following from Isaiah 56 as part of the liturgy: “My house will be called a house of worship for all nations.” The prophets were more astute politically than we give them credit for; maybe a shul is a good place to start to welcome the nations, and maybe it is not too much to ask Muslims and Jews to “observe” each other’s holidays every year by viewing and appreciating them. Our job this winter will be to turn the dreams and fantasies of Rosh HaShana and Sukkot into reality, rather than to abandon them. Having seen our Muslim friends in Chicago hear my prayers, pray in my institutions, and share my food and hospitality, I am confident that Sukkot can come true.

*Rabbi Asher Lopatin is the spiritual leader of Anshe Sholom B’nai Israel Congregation, a leading modern Orthodox synagogue in Chicago. A Rhodes Scholar in Arabic Thought from Oxford University, and received ordination from RIETS and Brisk Rabbinical College.*

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