

SHABBAT SERMON
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Today I reap the benefit of being your rabbi for 30 years and having a long-term contract with job security. Today I am going to touch on a subject that I think very few rabbis would be courageous enough to discuss. You have to feel very secure in your position to raise the subject from the pulpit. But before I do, let me set the stage and context.

We are in the midst of celebrating the festival of Sukkot. And that, in and of itself, raises a question. Why are we celebrating Sukkot now? Sukkot is one of the three pilgrim festivals ... Pesach commemorates the exodus from Egypt. That event took place on the 15th day of Nisan, so obviously we must celebrate Pesach on that day. Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. That event took place on the 6th day of Sivan, so obviously we must celebrate Shavuot on that day. But Sukkot? What do we commemorate on Sukkot? The 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. We wandered day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year for 40 years. We wandered in October, but we also wandered in January and July. Sukkot could have been celebrated on any day of any month, so why now?

One of the most popular answers goes to the very nature of this festival. Sukkot is a thanksgiving festival. In ancient Israel this was the time when the farmer was beginning to enjoy his rich harvest. In preparation for winter, now his granaries were filled with the produce of his fields; now he felt prosperous, happy and successful. Now was the time to stop and give thanks to the Almighty for all His blessings.

But of course, this year Sukkot played a cruel trick on us. This year Sukkot comes at a time when our granaries are not full; when our financial harvest has not been very successful, and when for most all of us, our financial portfolio is smaller than it was last year.

And it is with this in mind that today I want to talk to you about this product, Emerald Cypress & Fir Natural Toilet Bowl Cleaner. I told you ... a rabbi has to feel very secure to discuss this subject. I venture to say that had I discussed it in one of my first sermons when I came to Beth Tfiloh, it also would have been one of my last! But I discuss it with you today not because of its use but because of its certification. Yes, Emerald Cypress & Fir Natural Toilet Bowl Cleaner is certified kosher with the symbol of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. It is left to the consumer to decide whether it can be used with meat or dairy. Why does such a product have rabbinic certification? I venture to say that the makers of the product feel that for the general consumer, having a rabbinic certification gives the impression that the product is purer or healthier, because you know what they say about Hebrew National ... it answers to a "higher authority." And so, companies are willing to pay for the rabbinic certification, even though it is really not needed. There are a lot of products like this ... bottles of water have rabbinic certification, as if anything could be non-kosher about it! Aluminum foil has rabbinic certification that it is kosher for Passover. One of my teachers described the process of how aluminum foil is made. He pointed out that the raw product is poured through flaming hot rollers – and he went on to say that the rollers are so hot that if you put a pig through them, it would come out kosher l'Pesach!

Now, if manufacturers want to pay for unnecessary rabbinic certification, that is their prerogative. If they think that this will get them more business, that's fine. The only problem is, it is not really the manufacturer who is paying for this. Ultimately, it is the consumer ... the cost is passed down to us. Now that is fine and dandy when the economy is booming, when our granaries are filled, when our 401K's are secure. But today, when all Americans are being told – and indeed, don't need to be told – that they are going to have to tighten their belts and curb their spending ... do we have a right to add unnecessary costs to our shopping list?

And I am not just talking about a penny or two for a toilet bowl cleaner. I am talking about a lot of money when it comes to buying kosher meat. I am always being told that people are not having a kosher affair because kosher food is too expensive. And I try to explain that there is a reason why kosher food is more expensive ... there is a higher standard in the poultry and animals that are used, there is a higher standard of supervision; and we have to pay for that quality control. What I don't tell them, and what I'm sorry I have to tell you, is that most all of us as Jews are paying more for kosher meat than we have to because for the most part, all the kosher meat being sold in our country is glatt kosher ... and it doesn't have to be! Glatt is an extra stringency that relates to adhesions on an animal's lung. "Glatt" means "smooth" and refers to the fact that the lungs of animals slaughtered according to glatt kashrut do not have any adhesions. And that's very nice ... but you should know that traditionally it was only Sephardic Jews who accepted that stringency. In Ashkenazic lands, regular kosher was the standard, with glatt being reserved for the exceptionally pious who were also willing to pay more. That's the way it was in our country until about 30 years ago when, to meet the wishes of some of the more "pious" major kosher supervisors including the Orthodox Union, stopped certifying non-glatt meat. That's very nice ... but it's also very costly. Similarly, Empire Poultry now has two certifications, not one. This, because for some "super-pious," the Orthodox Union was not good enough. But all of us are the ones paying for it. The question is whether this year when our granaries are not full, when many are dipping into their 401K's, when being Jewish in and of itself costs more ... shouldn't these policies be reconsidered?

You know who would tell you that, in fact, they should be reconsidered? Jewish law would tell you! And it tells it to you in regard to the observance of this Sukkot festival.

During this festival, we are told, "*u'lkatchtem lachem pri eitz hadar* – and you shall take for yourself the fruit of a beautiful tree." Our tradition tells us that that fruit is an etrog. But tradition also tells us that the etrog has to be "*hadar*" – enhanced, beautiful. Which means that, yes, you can get a kosher etrog for \$25, but you should spend more, just that it should be a pretty etrog. This is one of the ways that we fulfill the biblical words, "*zeh keili v'anveihu* – this is my God and I shall exalt Him." How do you exalt God? Say our sages: by fulfilling His mitzvot in a beautiful way. In the same way we want the best in our clothing and in our homes, we should want it in the way we serve God as well. In fact, this is the basis for the tradition we have to decorate the succah. The reality is, the only commandment we have regarding the succah is to dwell in it. No place does it make any mention of hanging decorations. And in fact, you have fulfilled the mitzvah if you don't have any decorations. But we decorate the succah just to show that when it comes to a mitzvah we don't simply want to do it, we want to do it in a beautiful way. So whereas, yes, you can get a lulav and etrog for \$25 ... you should spend more to make sure it's a beautiful one.

How much more? The answer is not as simple as you might think. In the Talmud we are told that one should spend up to a third of his money. In the Shulchan Oruch we are told up to one fifth. There's lots of discussion amongst the commentaries over just what this means. Does it mean even if you are exceptionally wealthy, or does it mean 1/5 of your regular earnings as

opposed to a windfall you may have? Even more, is the significant question: be it whether 1/3 or 1/5 ... are you restricted from going over that limit? Is this just a guideline, and for those who want to go over ... more power to them! This issue is debated back and forth, but I would just bring you the words of one commentary that speaks to our contemporary condition: The Alei Tamar writes, “The sages estimated that the amount which a person decides upon in his own mind to spend for a mitzvah can be exceeded by up to a third without imposing an intolerable burden on the person. Beyond that, the person will resent the entire mitzvah as overly onerous and it would not be right to impose upon him to such an extent.”

Do you hear what the Alei Tamar is telling us? There’s got to be some price control when it comes to Jewish observance, or else people are going to come to resent the entire observance.

How wise were our sages, like the Magen Avraham, who knew that one may not pay more than the basic price of an etrog, if by doing so the price would be forced up for others. Yes, one’s attempt to beautify a mitzvah cannot come at the expense of others. When merchants of the three-stemmed hadassim we use on Sukkot raised their prices to exorbitant levels, the sage Samuel threatened them with economic ruin by making acceptable two stemmed myrtles. Even more, there is a biblical law that a woman who has given birth is required to bring a sacrifice. If she has given birth five times, she must bring five sacrifices. But the Talmud tells of an instance when the price of the doves or pigeons suitable for this type of sacrifice rose to such a high exorbitant level that Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel exclaimed, “I swear by the Temple, the residence of God, that I will not go to sleep tonight until the price has dropped to a silver dinar.” He then entered the court and said that a woman who gave birth five times need only bring a single sacrifice. And this resulted in the price of the pigeons dropping dramatically. Do you understand? Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was being more lenient than the Torah itself! And yet, he did it; his reasoning being that if women could not find reasonable priced birds, they would refrain from bringing any sacrifice at all.

I, as a rabbi, applaud all those who are strict in their observance, and I applaud an ultra-Orthodox community that has raised the standards of observance. And at a time when so many Jews are “ultra” in the other direction, thank God we have Jews who strive for the highest standards. But they – and we – should all remember that while the desire to have the highest standard in kashrut is a noble one, it can come at the expense of those who have limited means, especially now at a time when even people of means have to put a limit on their spending ... at a time when people have much less disposable income ... should we as Jews be flushing some of that income down the toilet? People are telling me that they are going to have to cut down on their charitable contributions. Wouldn’t it be better for us to help people who are poor, rather than having to spend it on an extra and unnecessary kosher certification? Should there be Jews who are allowed to go hungry while others insist on only eating glatt?

We are going through a period of adjustment as Americans. And there is no better time for us as Jews to think about that than at this time in the calendar when we celebrate the festival of Sukkot. You know, this festival of Sukkot on which we thank God for all that we have, for the bounties of our harvest ... it is on this festival that we leave the luxury of our home and dwell in a very shaky, temporary, rather impoverished looking booth. It is in the succah that we are reminded that what is necessary for us to celebrate the “*zeman simchateinu*” – the season of our happiness – requires no luxuries, only necessities. As long as we have necessities, we can be happy. Let us make the adjustments that are necessary as Americans and as Jews so that once again we can, with a full heart, recite the words of our holiday prayer: “*V’hasianu Hashem*

elokeynu et birkat moadecha l'chayim u'lshalom l'simcha u'lsason – God will bestow upon us the blessing of His appointed festivals for life and peace, gladness and rejoicing.” Amen.

I am indebted to Dr. Marc Shapiro for his insight on glatt kosher toilet bowl cleaners, and lots of other things!

** Rabbi Wohlberg's new book of sermons, *PULPIT POWER*, is available at:
www.bethfiloh.com/Register.

Sermons/Sukkot08
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