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Fullness and Vulnerability:
A Gathering in the Sukkah During Rough Economic Times
Outline of a Potential 45-60 Minute Program for October 2009

Goals/Purposes of the Program:

An opportunity for Jews impacted by the Economy...

- * to come together with other community members in related circumstances;
- * to draw on Jewish spiritual wisdom and resources that address their challenges; and
- * to enjoy a bit of the holiday's joy and transcendence, during the intermediary days of Sukkot, courtesy of the Jewish Community/Tradition!

Consider the **Physical Set-Up** for the gathering, taking into account the anticipated size of the group, as well as programmatic elements such as the music, texts to be explored, extent of discussion (so that people should be able to see one another), refreshments, etc.

Begin by welcoming people and thanking them for coming, alluding to the group's commonality – each is facing challenges due to the ongoing and widespread economic crisis – and acknowledging that there are “many stories in the room/Sukkah.” Remind them of the evening's purpose, explaining that though this is not a “support group,” *per se*, you hope/expect that the study, singing, discussion, ritual, etc. will strengthen their spirits during these rough times. (2-3 minutes)

Start with a niggun, perhaps one that relates to a song/theme of the holiday – *v'samahta b'hagekha*, for example. Hopefully a leader or co-leader will be able to contribute guitar accompaniment. It can also be useful **to begin with a reading together**; in these kinds of programs, it can be helpful to allow people to contribute their voices early on, and not wait passively, and impatiently, for such opportunities. (3-4 minutes)

If appropriate, you may want to say the *b'rakhah leishev baSukkah*, explaining it very briefly. (2 minutes)

At this point, roughly 10 minutes into the program, you may **introduce a theme for study and discussion (approximately 15-20 minutes.)** Below (pages 3-5) are three possible themes, with a few trigger-texts for each; **please select one!** Generally, *less is more* when it comes to this portion of the program – it is better to grasp and delve into one theme than to try to “cover”/accomplish too much. Depending on the size of the group, the nature of the participants, their familiarity and comfort level, etc., you may either read sources out loud and discuss it all together, or split up into *hevrutot* (or small groups) and enable them to have a more intimate exploration.

Please note that under each theme, there is a summary of ‘Clinical Background’ – really, just a reminder/affirmation of what people are experiencing -- followed by the texts, which are then followed by some possible discussion questions. *These are all for your consideration and modification* – none of it is required, certainly not as is!

And please remember that you may, of course, choose to use some of these sources for other purposes -- teaching, sermons, divrei Torah, bulletin pieces, etc. You know your community and its opportunities best.

Following the study/discussion portion of the program, you might want to **return to some singing** or, perhaps, singing interspersed with instrumental music. (4-5 minutes)

To move towards closure, and as a bridge to the more informal, ‘kiddush-like’ refreshments-reception, you may conclude with one of the following (5 minutes)

* A **simple, parting teaching** (max. 5 minutes) – perhaps one of the following:

- Something from *Sefer Kohelet* (e.g., 3:1-8 -- The Cycles of Time and Life)
- Jewish Notions/Understandings of *Simhah/Joy*
- Psalm 27 (e.g., “*Shivti b’Veit haShem* as what we did this evening”)
- *Ushpizin*: Inviting in Ancestors as Protecting and Sustaining **AND/OR**

* If it fits the culture of your synagogue/group, you can suggest that the group offer a **group prayer** – in which you, the leader, begin with something such as “I thank everyone for coming tonight and wish everyone sustenance and security on this holiday and in the coming months and years” and then it moves around the Sukkah as people express similar sentiments. (5 minutes)

Explain that you’ll **end with a poem** (here’s one possibility...); invite all to join in refreshments/shmoozing. (2 minutes)

“For the Blessings” by Ruth Brin (*From Harvest, Reconstructionist Press, 1986*)

For the blessings which You lavish upon us
in forest and sea, in mountain and meadow,
in rain and sun, we thank You.

For the blessings You implant within us,
joy and peace, meditation and laughter,
we are grateful to You.

For the blessings we ask of You
and those we cannot ask,

For the blessings You bestow upon us openly
and those You give us in secret,

For all these blessings, Lord,
we thank You and are grateful to You.

For the blessings we recognize,
and those we fail to recognize,

For the blessings of our tradition
and of our holy days,

For the blessings of return and forgiveness,
of memory, of vision, and of hope –

For all these blessings which surround us on every side
dear God, hear our thanks and accept our gratitude.

**I. Texts Related to the Theme of
Community/Gathering; Strength in Joining as One**

“Clinical Background”:

- Many people feel alienated, diminished, ashamed, and disempowered by their loss of employment, savings, social standing, professional/occupational directions, etc.
- So many are facing crises of role and identity, and are having to re-find or re-define their place in the community.

The Etrog has a fragrance and a taste symbolic of those in Israel who possess an abundance of Torah and Mitzvot.

The fruit of the Palm has no fragrance but has taste, symbolic of those scholars who perform only a few kind deeds.

The myrtle has a fragrance, but no taste, symbolic of kindly persons who are unlearned.

The willow has neither taste nor fragrance, symbolic of those who are neither learned nor kind.

God says: “It is impossible for Me to destroy them, but let them all be united, and let each atone for the other.”

Yalkut Emor, Pesikta Buber, p. 185

There are four things taken up on Sukkot. Two of them, the palm and the Etrog, bear fruit; the two others, the myrtle and the willow, bear no edible fruit. But all of them are needed to observe the *mitzvah*.

In a like manner, when Israel fasts and prays for God’s aid in the hour of calamity, those who study Torah and observe the mitzvot, and those who are unlearned and fail to observe the mitzvot, must all unite in prayer and fasting, if they wish God to answer them.

Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 27a

Just as one cannot fulfill his duty on Sukkot unless all four *Minim* (species) are held together, by the same token Israel cannot be redeemed unless all Israelites hold together.

Yalkut, 188a

*Though the texts mention “atoning” and “those who...fail to observe the mitzvot,” we **do not** view the current economic suffering as traceable to sins or the result of lapsed observance!*

Instead – consider:

What is the upshot of these texts in terms of the underlying message of the Four Species of Sukkot – the ‘Arba Minim? What could they teach us about the community’s response to those impacted by the economy?

One approach might be to re-define the metaphors, e.g.: The Etrog has both fragrance and edible fruit, representing the times when we are able to provide for ourselves and give to the community....etc ...

And the Willow, without fruit nor fragrance, represents those among us who, currently, may not be in a position to fully support themselves and cannot aid others.

II. Texts Related to the Theme of The Sukkah's Protection: Exposed but also Sheltered

"Clinical Background":

- The current economic reality has left so many feeling totally vulnerable, with no safety, certainty, or 'armor';
- Though Community is key in Judaism and certainly an essential dimension of Sukkot, many are searching for something even 'bigger' or overarching to help them through rough times...

One Rabbi says we must take Sukkot "*mammash*," literally, to refer to actual huts in which the Jews dwelt and found protection in the sun-beaten desert.

Another sage, Rabbi Eliezer, interprets the word figuratively....He says "Sukkot" means "*Ananei Kavod*," the "Clouds of Divine Glory." The Jews were saved in the desert because they dwelt in the protecting clouds of God's glory. (*see next* text from Bemidbar Rabbah)

Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 11b

The Sages tell us that there were seven such clouds of Divine Glory, which enveloped the hosts of Israel and which served as their protecting shields.

"Four of the clouds surrounded the Israelite on all sides of him, one on the East, one on the West, one on the North, and one on the South. These four clouds protected him against the constant attacks of the enemies who came from all sides, and who were ever eager to destroy him. Their efforts were of no avail, for, behold, they could not penetrate the Divine protection of God's glory.

"There was a fifth cloud that accompanied him in his journey...It covered his head. The rays of the desert sun would have scorched him. But God placed this cloud above him to shield him from the burning heat of the sun.

And then there was a sixth cloud – that went before him, that paved and illumined the path on which he should go. He could not stand still. He had to march forward. But what path should he take? This cloud God sent before the people of Israel to guide them, to lead them, that they should not stumble, but march ever onward toward the desired goal.

And finally, there was a seventh cloud that went after him. For in the long and dreary march many fell by the wayside. They had not the strength, either physical or spiritual, to endure the hardships of the journey. What should be done with these weaklings? Should they be left to die in the desert? God, therefore, sent this seventh cloud of His Divine Glory, to lift the fallen, to help the weary, to carry, if need be, those who could no longer stand on their feet.

Bemidbar Rabbah, 1, 2; also in Mekhilta, Tanhuma, etc.

The talk about "Clouds of Divine Glory" seems to some, at least initially, somewhat abstract and magical.

But re-read the second text and the description of the seven kinds of "accompanying clouds."

If you had to name seven sources of protection – not necessarily equal in strength or importance – what would you list?

What might these teachings suggest about how we might shape our attitude to these difficult times – what can we try to cultivate in ourselves, to make it through and even to grow?

III. Texts Related to How are We to View/Use the Wilderness, the Wandering?

“Clinical Background”:

- When job opportunities are few and far between, and inadequate, and resources are scarce, people feel as if they are in a kind of boundless state of suspension or falling, as if they are being sorely tested, in purgatory, until they break;
- So many people have tried for weeks, months, and even years to get back on their financial feet, but it may have begun to feel like an endless, rootless drifting.

The festivals of Sukkot and Pesah inculcate both an opinion and a moral quality. In the case of Pesah, the opinion consists in the commemoration of the miracles of Egypt and in the perpetuation of their memory through the periods of time. In the case of Sukkot, the opinion consists in the perpetuation of the memory of the miracles of the desert through the periods of time. As for the moral quality – it consists in man’s always remembering the day of stress in the days of prosperity, so that his gratitude to God should become great and so that he should achieve humility and submission (Unleavened bread and bitter herbs must be eaten on Pesah in commemoration)...Similarly, one must leave the house (during Sukkot) and dwell in Sukkot, as is done by the wretched inhabitants of deserts and wastelands, in order that the fact be commemorated that such was our state in ancient times....

Rambam/Maimonides (1135-1204), Guide for the Perplexed, Part III, Chapter 43

A prisoner of war, who had been made a slave, succeeded in escaping from his master. Though he was free in body the moment he escaped, he was not free from anxiety and fear until he reached a distant place, where his master could not recapture him.

By the same token, Israel was freed on Pesah, which is called “the season of our freedom,” but he did not feel free from anxiety of pursuit and sustenance until he reached His Father and received his hospitality. And to demonstrate his feeling of true freedom, he takes up his residence in a flimsy hut, not in a stockade or a fortified camp. Then he rejoices in his freedom, and for this reason, Sukkot is called “the season of our rejoicing.”

Mikra’ei Kodesh (Venice, 1586), two-volume work on the meaning of Torah precepts by R. Joseph ben Benjamin Samegah (died 1629) of Salonika, Venice, Padua; pp 151-2.

A Hasid asked the Dzikover before Sukkot to grant him a blessing so that he might have an exceptionally fine palm branch, etrog, myrtle twigs and willows of the brook for the festival. The Rabbi replied, “What you need for Sukkot is a kind heart, a humble spirit, a truthful mind, and the will to perfect yourself. After you have attained these, it will be time to concern yourself regarding an exceptionally fine set of the symbols for Sukkot.”*

*First attain ‘Arba Midot,’ four qualities, and then acquire ‘Arba Minim, the four species of the holiday.

Quoted in Dor De’ah by Y. A. Kamelhar (Bilguray, 1933) page 327

Sukkah is the dearest mitzvah of all, since a person plunges himself completely into it – not only his entire body, but also his clothes, and even in his shoes and boots!

R. Simcha Bunam of Pshicha (1765-1827)

For what can we be grateful, even now, even in these trying times?

Can the quote about freedom ring true for you, in any sense?

How might we use this period of transition, of some ‘empty’ or ‘down’ time? Is the value only in the goal – the Promised Land – or is it also in the process, the Wandering?

What lessons might they take away from the Sukkah as a transitional, impermanent, unsettled space – and yet one of joy, security, and even eternity?