

Every native in Yisrael shall dwell in booths (23:42)

Every Jew is commanded to dwell in a *succah* for the prescribed period of seven days. Indeed, our ancestors went to great lengths to ensure that they fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *succah* according to *halachah*. A poignant story occurred concerning **Horav Mordechai M'Nedverne** that, while its focus is not actually on *Succos*, teaches us a timely lesson. In *Rav* Mordechai's city, there was an outbreak of cholera, a very contagious plague. The doctors warned the general populace to exercise extreme care in regard to sanitary conditions. It just so happened that it was just before the festival of *Succos*. Despite the plague, *Rav* Mordechai built his *succah* as usual. The mayor of Nedverne, who was infamous for his virulent anti-Semitism, insisted that *Rav* Mordechai dismantle his *succah*, claiming that it was against sanitary regulations to have a *succah*. The *rav* ignored the mayor's message, refusing to take down his *succah*. When the mayor saw that he was being ignored, he immediately dispatched a number of police to "reiterate" his demand and to warn *Rav* Mordechai of the dire consequences for non-compliance. *Rav* Mordechai responded, "I made the *succah* that it should stand, not so that it would be torn down." Overcome with rage, the mayor threatened the *rav* if he would not concede to his demand. *Rav* Mordechai looked at the mayor and said, "My great uncle was the great *tzaddik*, *Rav Meir M'Premishlan* ." The mayor heard those words and scoffed in anger, "Who cares who your uncle was? Tear down the *succah* now!"

During this whole dialogue, *Rav* Mordechai never lost his temper. He remained calm and cool in the face of the mayor's rage. He reiterated his statement yet again, which brought a torrent of threats to his physical well-being from the mayor. Yet, he would not budge. Finally, he said to the mayor, "Let me tell you a story, so that you will understand why it is that I invoked the name of my sainted uncle. "

There was once a priest who was blessed with ten tall, strong sons, who were the picture of health. The priest also was the proud owner of a beautiful garden filled with many fragrant flowers and trees. One day the priest decided that he wanted a small garden of little flowers. In order to fulfill his desire, it was necessary to cut down a number of beautiful trees. He proceeded to chop down the trees, planting little flowers instead. Suddenly, as soon as the priest completed his plan, his sons, one by one, became gravely ill and died. In no time, the priest was bereft of nine of his beautiful sons. All but one had died. Suddenly, the youngest son, the only child left to the unfortunate priest, became gravely ill. The priest turned to doctors, to magicians, to anyone who, in his desperation, he thought could help him. Alas, everything was to no avail as his son lay dying."

A number of his close friends suggested that as a last resort he should travel to *Rav Meir M'Premishlan*, who was the pre-eminent Jewish sage of the time. He was known to all to be a virtuous, holy man. The priest figured that he might as well go to the great *Rebbe*. After all, nothing else seemed to work. What did he have to lose? He came to the *Rebbe* and recounted the terrible tragedies that had befallen him. He pleaded with the *Rebbe* to intercede on his behalf so

that his last remaining son would live."

The *Rebbe* looked at him with stern eyes and said, "You had a beautiful garden in which grew wonderful fruit trees. You were not satisfied, however, with these trees. You desired a garden of flowers. So, you cut down the trees. Do you realize that you cut down G-d's trees! Are you aware that a man is compared to a tree. To cut down a tree is like destroying a life. The Almighty has taken your sons as punishment for your avaricious behavior. Your coming to me is an indication of your repentance. I, therefore, assure you that your remaining child will be spared." The *Rebbe* prayed on behalf of the child, and his prayers received a positive response; the child lived."

Rav Mordechai completed the story. Turning to the mayor, he said in an accusing voice, "You are that child that my uncle saved," How dare you repay the good that he produced for you by insisting that I dismantle my *succah*!" When the mayor heard the story, he fell to his knees in shame, pleading with *Rav* Mordechai to forgive his insolence. "It is true. It is true," cried the mayor. "I was that boy that was saved. I have forgotten the meaning of gratitude. You may keep your *succah* and celebrate your festival in the manner that you desire."

While the story is loosely connected to the *parsha*, its message is timely. *Hakoras hatov*, recognizing the favor one receives and showing appreciation, is a phenomenon which is in great demand. If we would only open our eyes, we would see how much we owe to so many people. If we could only overcome the myopia with which so many of us are plagued, we would not only be better people, we would also be happier people.