

# Sh'ma, *celebrating twenty years as* *a journal of Jewish responsibility*

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## God covers his sukkah with... what?

*Benyamin Cantz*

The rabbis say that everything that exists on earth has a spiritual counterpart in heaven. For example, in the *tefillin* that a Jewish man wears on his head and his hand there are passages from the Torah that tell how close G-d is to the Jewish people. And the rabbis say that G-d, too, has *tefillin* and that in His *tefillin* are passages which say how close to Him the Jewish people are.

I thought of this during *Succos* and wondered: perhaps in a spiritual sense G-d also has a *sukkah*. And if He does, I asked myself, what does He use for *s'chach*, for a roof over the top? Our *s'chach* is actually refuse that gets used for accomplishing the *mitzvah* of building a thatched hut during the holiday. My family and I use the vines cut from the vineyard after the harvest as well as corn stalks, palm leaves, and clippings from the backyard. Perhaps G-d's *s'chach* is also refuse, but refuse from our growth.

During *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* we confess our sins, blunders and blindness before G-d. We aim to repair these mistakes and to refine ourselves. The rabbis say that in the effort to transform ourselves into better people by turning from sin and doing *t'shuvah*, each sin becomes a stepping stone and can be counted for the good. Each sin is raised up from the lowly place of its origin to a position of honor, for, albeit in a roundabout and unintentional way, it too has brought us closer to G-d.

Perhaps the husks and refuse used for *s'chach* on top of G-d's *sukkah* are the sins we have discarded. As we collect old vines from the vineyard, G-d collects those sins that, during *Yom Kippur*, we were

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BENYAMIN CANTZ is a viticulturist on Happy Valley Road, Santa Cruz, Ca.

able to cut from their vital root by confession and true regret. Perhaps G-d raises up all this refuse and places it on His *sukkah* as a sign that the Jewish people have fulfilled the covenant of the Torah, not only through *mitzvahs*, which are, so to speak, G-d's harvest, but even by using their sins to transform the world and themselves for good. The uglier and lowlier the sin that was transformed to good during *Yom Kippur*, the more *simcha* it adds to G-d's *sukkah*.

We sing and drink our wine in the shade of the discarded vines and G-d sits beneath the refuse of His vineyard joyously making *l'chayims* with us. And as He does, delighting in His harvest, He looks up through the cuttings of the previous year and sees in them blessings. □

(In issue 20/397, Eugene B. Borowitz argued that the ethnic turn in American Jewish community activity ushered in by the Six Day War of 1967 has now come to an end. With the State of Israel no longer able to provide a mythic core for our Jewish life, he contended that we need to turn our attention to what we believe. The discussion of his views continues in the following articles:)

## On the passing of the ethnic era: a response

*Jonathan S. Woocher*

Eugene Borowitz argues, with typical insight and cogency, that we are sliding into a new era in American Jewish life. The momentum that American Jewry derived from the Six Day War, a momentum that has carried us through a Jewish mini-revival in the 1970s and 1980s, has largely dissipated. If Jewish identity and involvement are to be compelling factors in the lives of the vast majority of American Jews who are neither totally indifferent nor fully committed, the religious basis for Jewish continuity in America must be clearly and persuasively articulated.

I agree. Neither ethnicity nor activism alone can sustain American Jewish life over the long run. Only the conviction that being Jewish *matters*, both in personal and historical terms, can motivate a transition from a marginal, essentially utilitarian, attachment to Jewishness, to one that is continuous, serious, and transmissible. The question is: where

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JONATHAN S. WOOCHEER, author of *Sacred Survival*, directs the work of the Jewish Education Service of North America.