

Sukkos: Chol Hamoed Shabbos "A New Way of Seeing" *

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 5775/2014

*** based upon an essay by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

It was 1967 and the Civil Rights Movement was at a tipping point. On this particular evening, African-American leaders were meeting at an NAACP fundraiser in Beverly Hills, California. That's when a woman named Nichelle Nichols turned around and saw Martin Luther King, Jr. smiling at her.

Nichols sang with Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton before turning to acting. She had recently finished working on the first season of a science fiction television series you may have heard of: *Star Trek*. Nichols played Lieutenant Uhura, the Chief Communications Officer onboard the starship, and she was the first black woman on television who wasn't cast in a stereotypical role as a maid or servant.

Even so, Nichols was ready to leave the show. Her role had been largely written out of the script during the first season and, without many lines, she wanted to try acting on Broadway instead. She had written her letter of resignation the day before and now she found herself face-to-face with Dr. King.

To her surprise, Dr. King loved *Star Trek* and started the conversation by saying, "*Ms. Nichols, I am your greatest fan.*" Nichols was grateful and responded, "*Dr. King thank you so much, but I'm going to miss my co-stars.*" She began to explain her resignation, but King interrupted her.

"You cannot," King said. "You cannot leave. Do you understand? You have changed the face of television forever. This is not a black role. This is not a female role. It can be filled by a woman of any color, a man of any color. This is a unique role and a unique point in time that breathes the life of what we are marching for: equality." He went on, "*This is why we are marching. We never thought we'd see this on TV.*"

Nichols was stunned. She thought of herself as a simple cast member, as an actress with little impact and even fewer lines—not as a role model for men and women of color. It was the first time that the importance of her role had become clear to her.

Dr. King's words gave her a new way of seeing.

The following Monday, Nichols returned to work on *Star Trek* and continued to play Lieutenant Uhura in every *Star Trek* episode and movie of the next 40 years. She remained a trailblazer throughout her career as she performed the first interracial kiss on national television and took on a variety of acting roles that redefined black women in the eyes of society.

If you think about any job for long enough, you can find reasons for why it is unimportant, insignificant, or useless. But it all depends on how you look at it. With a slightly different vantage point -- like the one Nichelle Nichols gained from her conversation with Martin Luther King, Jr. -- one can have *a new way of seeing*.

You can look -- but you might not see. And sometimes what is needed, is a new way of seeing.

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Take Judaism. Of course, Judaism is demanding. There are so many laws, so many details. Today we're in the midst of celebrating Sukkos. There are four *minim* (agricultural species). Do the hadassim go on the right, or left? What are the haddasim, again? Which way do I hold the lulav? How do I shake it? Regarding my sukkah can I tie down the *schach* down with string? Can the walls be made of canvas?

In the midst of the details, you can sometimes lose sight of the big picture.

It's like the first French impressionists. At first people could see only brushstrokes and confusion. It took time before they realized that Monet, Renoir, Pissaro and the rest were capturing the play of light on surfaces and producing a whole new way of seeing.

Judaism can look like a blur of laws and customs, until you realize that it's a whole new way of seeing and living. How? Halakhah, Jewish law, isn't an end unto itself. The mitzvos and their details serve the objective of translating the highest of ideals into the simplest of acts, and helping us to establish a relationship with our Creator.

Here's the paradox: Most people think that more people would keep Judaism if only it were easier, less demanding. Why all the commandments, 613 of them? Aren't 10 enough? 613?!? Wouldn't it be better if we made being Jewish simpler?

Let's examine this. Think of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkos. Which of the three is kept, on average, by the greatest number of Jews? More people keep Pesach than Sukkot. More people keep Sukkos than Shavuot. Several years ago I met a young man who made mention that the holiday of Shavuot was soon coming. A bit surprised that this apparently Jewishly-unconnected fellow knew about the holiday, I said to him, "I'm impressed you know about Shavuot. Where did you hear about it?" He said, "Well rabbi, I don't really know anything about Shavuot, but I know that on that day, the Jewish Community Center is closed."

More Jews keep Pesach than Sukkos. More Jews keep Sukkot than Shavuot. That's true wherever you go in the Jewish world.

Now ask, which is the most demanding? Pesach is by far the most difficult. It involves cleaning the house, koshering the kitchen, using special utensils, additional expense for Pesach food, and much else besides. Next comes Sukkot. You have to buy a lulav and esrog. You have to make a Sukkah. Easiest by far is Shavuot, which has no special mitzvah, unless you count eating cheesecake and staying up late on the first night for a Tikkun. So, the harder a festival is to keep, the more people keep it.

As Dr. Spock would say: Fascinating!

Now think of the hardest day of all, one in which there is no eating or drinking, no joy or celebration, on which you spend the entire day in shul, thinking of all the things you did wrong. A perfect formula, you would have thought, for making sure that no one keeps it at all.

But of course the opposite is true. Yom Kippur, when all these things happen, is the day on

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which more Jews come to shul than any other in the entire year.

It's counter intuitive but true: the things we value most are the things that are the most demanding. That's true of study; it's true at work; it's true in sport; and it's true in matters of the spirit. As we learn in Pirkei Avos: *L'foom tzara, agra -- According to the difficulty, is the reward (5:27)*

In the October 2014 edition of Forbes, 50 billionaires were asked, *To what do you most attribute your success?* With more than one answer possible, three said 'Inheritance', ten said 'Native Intelligence', ten said 'Education', fourteen said 'Luck', twenty four said 'Willingness to take risks', and thirty five said, 'Discipline and hard work'.

Things that cost us little don't mean much. What matters most to us are the things we make sacrifices for. If Judaism had been easier, it would have died out long ago.

There are people who make each day a work of art by the way they do their work. There are unsung teachers who shift the minds of children, sanitation workers who keep society running smoothly, grocery store clerks who bring a smile to the face of people in the checkout line, and unknown artists who create beauty for a handful of fans. It's not about what you do, it's about how you do it.

It wasn't just Dr. King who praised Nichelle Nichol's work. When Whoopi Goldberg met Nichols years later, Goldberg said,

"When Star Trek came on, I was 9 years old. And I saw this show and there you were and I ran through the house saying, "Hey! Come everybody! Quick! Quick! Look! There's a black lady on television and she ain't no maid! I knew from that moment that I could become anything I wanted to be."

In the theater of her own mind, Nichelle Nichols convinced herself that her work wasn't useful. She thought it would be better to quit and move on. Meanwhile, people of color everywhere were finding inspiration in her work. Martin Luther King, Jr. was at home watching the show with his children each week. A 9-year-old Whoopi Goldberg was running around the house dreaming of her future. For Nichelle Nichols, it just took a different way of seeing.

Never doubt that it's a privilege to be a Jew. Is it tough to be a Jew? You betcha! But it's tougher NOT to be a Jew. It's the challenge of Judaism that makes it great -- and precious.

Head for head our people have done more to transform the world than any other. There are easier ways to live, but none more challenging. G-d asks great things of our people. That's what made our people great, and makes it so wonderful to be Jewish. All it takes is a new way of seeing.

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