

Yom Kippur 5770

Rabbi Jill Borodin

The Sukkah – A Metaphor for Life

Tonight, after a 25 hour period of fasting and praying in shul, feeling perhaps maxed out on religious experiences, we are expected to go outside immediately to begin to build a sukkah. What's the rush? Why on the heels of Yom Kippur must we immediately begin to build?

On Yom Kippur we are symbolically reborn through atonement for our sins. Now, with this new life, Sukkot comes right away and tells us how our lives should be lived: not through retreating from the world and ascetic practices, but through embracing the world, in all its vulnerabilities and building in this world. We are not supposed to sit still, there is much to be done, as reminded by our Yom Kippur haftorah readings from the books of Isaiah and Jonah. We need to start building immediately, making this world better and reaching out to include others. Sukkot helps us develop a working model for improving the world, helping us to not surrender to passivity.

As Rabbi Reuven Hammer, the author of our Or Hadash comments, "Yom Kippur is all deprivation, asceticism, and spirituality; Sukkot is all joy, festivity, dancing, singing, and feasting. On Yom Kippur we are in heaven; on Sukkot we are very much on earth – to our great pleasure. We cannot and should not stay very long in the rarified atmosphere of Yom Kippur. We have to return to earth, to begin to build and make life happy and fruitful, not only

for ourselves but for others. If that is the outcome of the Days of Awe, they have been worthwhile. The call to connect Sukkot with Yom Kippur in this way is symbolic of what Judaism wants us to take away from the Days of Awe. They are not to be isolated, but are to be integrated into a total Jewish life, one that includes celebration and a full relationship with God and with other human beings. In this way, we actualize the Torah's command, "choose life." (Hammer, 200-201)

Choose life. Two stories. In the New York Times last week I read a story about a man who rose to top of his career, had everything going for him, friends, loving family, success, money, a beautiful apartment. The economy took its dive and he lost his prestigious job. He went from job to job at substantial pay cuts until he could no longer afford his lifestyle. He was urged to sell to his NY condo to live within his means but he refused. He chose instead to commit suicide.

Natan, an octogenarian survived the Holocaust. He lost his entire family but for his wife, although he did not know that his wife too had survived. He returned to his home in Hungary and found his wife with another man. She begged his forgiveness for assuming that he had died in the camps. He forgave her and they immigrated to Israel. They had three sons, one died in the Yom Kippur war. Natan outlived his wife. Every day he woke up, wrapped tefillin, said his morning prayers, and drove to the nearby pool to work out. His faith, his wonder and curiosity about life remained intact despite the tragedies that befell

him. These are the paradoxes of life. One can't let go of his shelter and chooses death, the other forced out of shelter, recreates life.

Of all the holidays we celebrate, Sukkot best instructs us on how to choose life. Sukkot begins this Friday night. Sukkot, unlike the exodus we re-enact at Passover, or the peak experience of revelation at Mt. Sinai that we celebrate on Shavuot does not commemorate a historical event. Bothered by this lack of specific occasion, the rabbis suggest Sukkot reminds us of the booths the Israelites dwelled in for 40 years in the desert.

What Sukkot celebrates is the long journey of liberation - the march across a barren desert to freedom and the Promised Land, without knowing when we will reach our destination. It honors the endless wandering in the desert with the 14, 600 gritty days of marching and pitching tents, and the 43, 000 meals prepared in the desert. The holiday of Sukkot celebrates constructing order, finding meaning and creating joy in the wilderness. It celebrates holiness amidst life's daily toil and grind

Jewish law, Halacha, on the rules for a kosher sukkah, teaches important theological lessons about how to live life. Let's explore some of these laws and the wisdom they teach.

1) All that really matters is the roof. The walls and design can be simple or elaborate and any material may be used for the walls. However, the roof is called schach, and is natural plant material which is detached from the earth (in other words, we can't use the shade of a tree). This roof out of plant material

which we have not adulterated or changed reminds us that there should be limits on how we manipulate nature and that we have a role to play in being its guardian. At the same time, it is okay to take from nature for our benefit, as long as we don't abuse it.

2) The schach must provide more shade than sun and you must be able to see the stars through it. It must be open to heaven and God above and in this way serve as a model to being open to others. The Talmud teaches that this schach also represents the annanei kavod, God's clouds of glory, providing us with guidance and protection. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg describes the schach as "the perfect expression of divine protection: God is not a mechanical field that protects from all evil, God is the Presence who gives the strength to persevere, to overcome" (Greenberg, p. 100). The schach simultaneously maintains our vulnerability to the elements and having God within our vision, as we gaze upon the heavenly canopy.

3) Size: min of 10 handbreaths (around 40 inches) and max of 20 cubits (around 10 yards). We need enough space to be comfortable, but we should not be taking up too much space. This is similar to the teachings of musar which offers as a definition of the attribute of humility: taking up the right amount of space.

4) The sukkah must be a temporary structure, with walls that are not so high that they are permanent and that their shadow blocks out all the sunlight. We need to experience the light of the sun. We should be sensitive to the fine line between a shelter that helps protect us and a shelter that walls us off. The

sukkah should withstand regular weather but falls down in a harsh storm. We are to build a shelter for ourselves, but know that there is no such thing as guaranteed safety, or protection from all of life's contingencies. We should not be paralyzed by this vulnerability, but affirm and celebrate life in the face of it.

5) And last, the shelter must be portable, as was the Sukkah in the desert and, for that matter, the *mishkan* – the sanctuary in the desert – as well. We must be able to carry a sense of shelter with us wherever we go; to become too rooted in one place makes us inflexible. As Rabbi Michael Strassfeld describes "a shelter should not be just a refuge to run to in time of trouble or to rest in at night. We must take the security of the shelter with us when we go into the outside world in our everyday lives. We need it not just for self-protection but for a deep sense of security that frees us to relate to others. Without it, we carry a suit of armor that encumbers our encounters on the road, for all others remain objects of suspicion or envy, and we are always poised to retreat or strike first, on the lookout for dungeons and dragons that may not exist." (Strassfeld, 144)

Having reviewed some of the laws of a sukkah, let us consider what is the purpose of dwelling in the sukkah, as we say in the berachah *leshev basukkah*? Why do we need to leave our comfortable permanent homes and dwell in temporary ones?

Because we think we are safe in our homes, safe from power outages, hurricanes and floods. We pretend that if we have enough money and good enough insurance, we are safe from disease and accidents, that we can't be hurt by car accidents, acts of violence, cancer or mental illness. But like our first

story, there are dangers to placing too much confidence in the security system of our brick and mortar homes. We are often in denial that this system is penetrable and we are in shock when something breaches it. We don't know how to accommodate incursions. We become too rooted and invest too much energy into maintaining this system, perhaps to the point of idolatry. We falsely believe our goal is attaining more resources and defending the status quo. We become fearful of change, and forget that change is possible.

Change is not easy even in the best of times. It is terrifying in the worst of times. And yet we must all adapt when life knocks on our doors. Who this year did not feel like they were dwelling in a sukkah, a sukkah on a rainy day, or perhaps in the midst of a storm or a hurricane? None of the sturdy structures and protection we erected were immune to the elements of our time. Our savings and resources turned out to be more vulnerable and fleeting than we thought possible. Jobs disappeared overnight. Our health insurance had more gaps in it than we believed, cost more and offered less. And perhaps we also faced fear, loss or illness.

You are one of the lucky ones if it felt like your sukkah just got wet, as many people in this country and all over the world experienced their roofs caving in and their walls falling down.

It is the sukkah that teaches us how to build a proper shelter: open to the elements rather than one which can become a sealed vacuum giving a distorted impression of safety. It demythologizes solid walls and controllable security. It is not a renunciation of self-protection but a recognition of its

limits. It is a corrective to the natural tendency to become excessively attached to turf and materialism. It is also a structure that forces us to be in touch with the world around us. We too experience the weather and hear the cries of our neighbors. And from this direct experiencing of the fullness of life, comes joy.

One of the names of Sukkot is zman simchateinu, the time of our rejoicing. And we add this description of the holiday to many of our blessings and liturgy for sukkot. As a second liturgical expression of this, a full hallel is recited on each of its days (in contrast to Pesach where a full hallel is only recited on the first two days and then a partial hallel is recited the remainder of the days). Unlike Pesach where we eat foods and talk about symbols of oppression, on Sukkot we only bring pleasant food and decorations into our sukkah. What is the nature of this joy?

It comes from having completed Yom Kippur, with knowing that forgiveness and atonement is possible. We are joyous to be back in harmony with ourselves, with God and with those around us.

The Hasidic commentator Sfat Emet explains that “the days of sukkot are the season of our joy, because God has privileged us to dwell in his shade, to give us a time when a bit of the garden of eden still glows, where we dwell in a shelter that belongs to the realm of heaven. The sukkah, touched by divine grace, open us to the possibility of a renewed garden of Eden.”

Our joy also comes in part from the fact that we are supposed to invite others into our sukkah, both real guests, and symbolic guests from our past, a tradition

we call *ushpizim*. We are supposed to share our food, particularly with those in need. We are aware and celebrate the bounty of our food, as we celebrate the harvest.

The sukkah comes from a time in our history where we learned to live together as a community that looked after one another in the desert. There is joy in being together. Unlike the joy of Pesach which comes at the expense of the Egyptians, this joy is at no one else's expense.

The joy of sukkot is so important that with the exception of the first night, we are to refrain from eating in the sukkah if it is raining. Nor do we sleep in the sukkah if it were to cause us any distress. This is the reason we don't sleep in the sukkah in colder climates.

Dwelling in a sukkah is the only mitzvah I know of where we are commanded to refrain from fulfilling it if it will be unpleasant experience. This is an incredible concept in halacha. Why? Perhaps halacha hopes to teach us that while there is pain and suffering in our lives, we are commanded to avoid unnecessary anguish and discomfort. As the Buddhist saying eloquently summarizes, "Pain is inevitable but suffering is optional."

In our second story, Natan understands that pain, but chooses to embrace life and joy and maintain faith despite the fragility of life.

In our liturgy, we regularly ask God to *ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha*. What is the sukkah of God's peace and wellbeing? It is not from set walls, nor is it

watertight, but it is portable and available when we recognize the ananei kavod, the clouds of God's glory, above our head. True shelter is within our reach when we open ourselves to the protective feeling of love and joy even in the face of our greatest vulnerabilities. And as our tradition reminds us, zman simchateinu, the time of our rejoicing, is found in the sukkah. Ken hi ratzon.

May this be a year where we all merit dwelling in the sukkah of God's well-being, where no hurricanes come and blow down our walls and we continue to find joy with the leaves of life falling into our soup.

(end with mara singing ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha)