

## Torah Commentary

After Yom Kippur, we celebrate Sukkot, a pilgrimage festival that honors God's protection of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness, and also celebrates the last harvest of the season. Sukkot is marked by the rising of the full harvest moon, and here's a fun fact: we will have two full moons this month, on the 31st the Hunter's Moon will rise, and that we can count on.

A unique part of this weeklong holiday is the sukkah, an outdoor dwelling similar to a tent or hut where we can live and eat. I like to think of the sukkah as a way station, a stopping point on the journey after Yom Kippur and before we return to the new year and all it contains. In the sukkah we can turn our eyes away from our computer screen and phone, pause, catch our breath, gaze at the moon and stars, and relax in the shade by day.

And it is a mitzvah, for God says "You shall live in booths – sukkot, for seven days, all citizens in Israel, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt."<sup>1</sup>

Why would we be expected to live in a temporary tent or booth exposed to the elements? Wouldn't a sturdier more permanent dwelling better represent the kind of care and protection God provided in the wilderness, and the kind of care and protection that we long for today?

The rabbis of the Talmud spend a considerable amount of time debating what conditions lend a dwelling to be deemed temporary or permanent housing. And no wonder their concern given the experience of evictions and homelessness throughout Jewish history and the theme of wandering in the Bible.

It happened that Rabbi Gamaliel and Rabbi Akiva when they were journeying on a ship during Sukkot that R. Akiva arose and built a sukkah on the deck of the ship. The next day the wind blew and tore it away. R. Gamaliel said to him, "Akiva, where is your sukkah?" R. Gamaliel is of the opinion that the sukkah must be a permanent abode, and since it cannot withstand a *normal* sea breeze, it is nothing, while R. Akiva is of the opinion that the sukkah must be a temporary abode, and since it can withstand a *normal* land breeze, it is valid.<sup>2</sup>

We know whose opinion prevailed because here I am in my backyard under a sukkah: three walls not four, gaps in the roof, cloth sheets for walls. This can be a reminder that life and our dwellings are precious, often precarious, and always impermanent, but that God's care and protection is enduring. Strong enough.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 23:42-43

<sup>2</sup> BT Sukkah 23a

I have a friend who throughout this pandemic when I ask how she's doing will answer, "I'm good" (brief pause) "enough." And then adds, "Well, I've been better, but for now, I'm good, enough." And in these times, it is enough to be good enough on most days.

But if life is like a sukkah, good enough to withstand a normal breeze, then what can it mean when an ill-timed gust brings us down like a house of cards – a lost job, a positive Covid-19 test, an eviction notice, the death of a friend or loved one?

One part of the truth of things is that we are robust and resilient, our dwellings are sturdy and our love for family and friends, enduring, for that we can celebrate! Another part of the truth is that we, our relationships and things bruise and break, scatter, or end – fundamentally, we and they are fragile.

And again, another part of the truth is that what may be an ill-timed gust for one, is a hurricane for another given unequal access to protection, food, adequate housing, and health care all because of the color of one's skin or the amount in one's bank account.

Vulnerability and fragility do discriminate, and this is not good enough! These hard-pandemic times expose the cracks and gaps in our society and in our relationships. But if we don't look away, these times can also generate creative and courageous ways to mend and fill those gaps.

And it starts in relationship: Five years ago, this month, I was hiking across Northern Spain intent on walking five hundred miles in thirty-five days. One morning our little group set out early to make good time, the moon helping to light our way as it had the previous days. But we forgot to check and this time there was no moon and we missed a turn at the sign post. At day break we found ourselves lost in an expansive olive grove. And all those little irritations that can build up from being together 24/7, flared and our group fractured, we argued over which way to go, which turn to take. But we couldn't get away from each other – we were lost, together. Late in the afternoon we found a road and eventually hailed a cab. Later, we figured that we had wandered at least twenty miles. But talking it through, we agreed, those 20 miles counted, getting lost mattered, because in the end, we knew we were no longer just traveling companions we were family; a loyalty borne from shared adversity and necessary cooperation.

But here's the wonder and the challenge of this holiday: "You shall rejoice," the Torah teaches, "...and you shall have nothing but joy."<sup>3</sup> It's a mitzvah.

Nothing but joy? Perhaps this mitzvah could be more about making room for joy rather than negating our sad thoughts and feelings.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 16:14-15

To prioritize joy may be to see beauty with the same eyes that see sorrow, to listen to bird song with the same ears that hear the evening news, to touch the world with love with the same body that feels pain or is ill.

When the doors of Temple Adath Israel closed, did we feel lost? I know I did. This community is not locked outside of the Temple doors, we continue to find ways to connect, be creative and courageous whether it's getting together on Zoom for services and classes, calling the lonely and isolated, growing vegetables in the garden and giving them away, volunteering to help people facing eviction, and speaking out against systemic racism. Our community is here, and it is good.

This community will not be together in the sukkah this year, but that doesn't mean we can't look forward to next year. This sukkot, my hope is that we find time to simply rest in these open-ended huts during these open-ended times, gaze at the moon and stars and make space for joy, perhaps feeling a little less fear and a little more hope. That would be good. That would be enough.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach!*