

### Frail Home?

The *sukkah* is at once the weakest and the strongest thing we build, a fragile and temporary structure, yet representing the all-embracing protection of God. This paradox goes to the heart of what it means.

The Talmud teaches that a *sukkah* should be no less than ten hand-breadths high and refers in explanation to the Tabernacle which the Children of Israel built in the wilderness. Within it, in the Holy of Holies, was the Ark of the Covenant. Over its cover, formed of beaten gold, were two *keruvim*, their wings spread out ten hand-breadths above the Ark. Just as they represented the divine mercy, so the *sukkah* symbolizes the security of our spiritual home beneath the shelter of God's wings.<sup>9</sup>

Actually, the biblical evidence suggests that the *sukkah* was originally a practical structure, a canopy built at harvest time for shelter from the sun. Sukkot almost certainly began as an agricultural festival. On to this, the Torah grafted a historical meaning, teaching that we should live in booths for seven days because God caused the children of Israel to dwell in them on the journey out of Egypt (Lev. 23:43), but in rabbinic eyes the *sukkah* was primarily the representation of a spiritual reality. This is most obviously apparent in the kabbalistic name for the *sukkah*, *tzila de mehemanuta*, "The shade of the Faithful One." Thus the *sukkah* teaches us not to put our trust in houses or in anything which may, to our eyes, seem permanent, but to

set our faith firmly in God on whose support alone we can truly rely. Without God's help we couldn't have survived either our journey through the desert some three thousand years ago or our many and hazardous flights and wanderings since. To dwell in the *sukkah* is to demonstrate our faith in the Divine. The *sukkah* represents God's protective power.

At the same time the *sukkah* evokes a totally different set of images that stand in contrast to pious tradition. For in leaving our houses for seven days, we are reminded of the countless partings that have compelled people to flee their homes throughout the ages. Sukkot is the festival of the refugee. Between its frail walls, beneath its leaking roof, we think of all those throughout history who have had to abandon their homes and seek whatever flimsy shelter they could find. We are reminded that no home is ever really permanent, that every abode is essentially provisional. Thus, when Jews came to what is now Bosnia following the expulsion from Spain in 1492, many brought with them the keys of their former houses. Signs of the hope of return, they became symbols of the reality of exile:

Where is the key that was in the drawer  
My forefathers brought it here with great love  
They told their sons, this is the heart  
Of our home in Spain  
Dreams of Spain.<sup>10</sup>

So the *sukkah* brings to mind the immediate reality of homelessness — of makeshift protection against wind and rain, of helpless exposure to ice and snow.

My darling [wrote Ida to her sister from a camp in Transnistria in 1941] the things and the money which you have sent me helped me greatly and arrived at the proper time. From the wool that you have sent me I have made a thick shawl for Vili's neck, because who knows how many days we will be on the way; at least, may God give us fine weather.

But God didn't give them fine weather, and Vili, whom his mother carried lovingly on her back, froze to death.<sup>11</sup>

How strange, then, that the *sukkah*, which is supposed to make us think about faith, should remind us of so many things that lead us to the opposite conclusion — persecution, flight, helplessness, abandonment, misery,

the inability to save those dear to us, and the absence of protection. Where is the shade of the Faithful One now? Where is the shadow of the divine protection in all this?

Yet the very paradox is significant. In showing us what we cannot trust, the *sukkah* challenges us to ask in what we can put our faith. If our houses can be taken away from us and the protection of “civilized” society crumble, there has to be something firmer on which to base our lives. The *sukkah*, apparently weak and temporary, directs our attention to what is truly strong and sustaining: Is there anything we have which cannot be taken away?

My parents would often say to me when I was a child, “Everything can be taken away from you except what you have within.” They knew what they were talking about. My mother escaped from Germany as a teenager with her family in 1939. My father and his family left earlier, in 1937. Following a tip-off that the Gestapo were going to arrest my grandfather, they simply packed and left that very night. What my parents meant was that our real strength lies in using, to the full, the capacity of our mind, heart, and soul.

What, then, are our ultimate resources? In times of trouble I hear so many people say: “If it weren’t for family and friends I don’t know where I’d be!” In times of crisis the question of what we have becomes the question of whom we have. Again and again I have witnessed the truth that there is no greater resource than a strong and supportive family. If we are not blessed with such a family, then close friends come a near second. Of course, those we love can be taken from us, too. Exile, for example, often means isolation as well, but in many of life’s troubles the people we love are with us. If they cannot be close to us in external reality, they remain near to us in thought, sustaining an inner strength without which we couldn’t survive.

The value of making close bonds with other people is epitomized in the *sukkah*. In the *sukkah* one does not sit alone; one invites family, friends, and strangers in as guests. The mystical tradition teaches us that when we do so, our ancestors — Abraham and Sarah, Rebecca and Isaac — come to our *sukkah*, too, and give us their blessing.

We find strength through our traditions. One can strip people of everything, one can take away all their material possessions, but one cannot so easily destroy the culture and principles by which they live. Such a culture enables them to reconstruct their existence out of the ashes. Force can

## Sukkot

erase neither the memory nor the love of their way of life. It cannot root out a person's or a nation's longing, or obliterate their yearning for the homes and customs from which they have come. It is precisely such love that has enabled the Jewish people to survive. For the fabric of our life is made not of bricks and girders, but of laws and customs cherished throughout many exiles and in innumerable lands.

The *sukkah*, with its multitude of rules about how to define a roof and what constitutes a side, may appear more fragile than other buildings. But in symbolizing the very need to build a structure and culture wherever destiny may lead us, it represents a power far stronger than the thickest walls. The *sukkah* is the physical manifestation of the undying creativity garnered in a beloved community and tradition. Year in, year out, we build the *sukkah*; indeed, to fulfil the requirements of the commandment, a *sukkah* must by definition be completed anew every year. Year in, year out, we rebuild our bond with those we love, with our tradition, and with our faith.

For above everything is the abiding strength of our connection with God. The relationship of the Jewish people to God has been the one fixed point from which we have steadfastly refused to be driven. For God, even when our fortunes have been low, when there was no resting place for the sole of our foot, has remained our challenge and our inspiration.



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