

Sukkot 5778 Day 1 Our New Sukkah

Rules of the Sukkah
According to Dr Seuss

*You can build it very small
You can build it very tall
You can build it very large
You can build it on a barge
You can build it on a ship
On a roof (but please don't trip)
You can build it in an alley
You shouldn't build it in a valley
You can build it on a wagon
You can build it on a dragon...*

The joke underlying this priceless piece of verse – which goes on for a good deal longer – is that everything mentioned in it is absolutely (halakhically) true. And there is a good, thick tractate of the Talmud that goes into the most minute detail about what does, and doesn't, constitute a kosher Sukkah.

That's an awful lot of rules about one little space.

Particularly in light of the fact that we 'wandering Jews' have often had to be very flexible about our holy spaces.

Think about it. The first Jewish holy space to be built – as opposed to a single altar for making a sacrifice - was the *Mishkan*, the desert sanctuary. You can see a picture of it on page 1520 of the humash, if you are interested – while there were solid altars, a laver, a Menorah made of one solid gold ingot and, of course, the Ark of the covenant, the Mishkan itself was made of cloth strung between poles, with other bits of cloth thrown over. The border between the outer courtyard and the inner sanctuary (known as the *kodesh*, or 'holy'), and the boundary between that and the 'holy of holies' were made out of a single layer of fabric. It was called a *parochet* and the same word is used for the curtain that hangs before our Ark today.

And while a good part of the Torah – half the book of Shemot – is given over entirely to describing the Mishkan, there's also a section describing exactly how it should be dismantled and packed for travel – which groups of Levites are responsible for dismantling and carrying which bits.

Or consider the Temple. Hey, consider both Temples. They were both of them solid architectural structures. But neither has lasted as a physical center for the Jewish people. Rather, in a wonderful twist, the rabbis of the period of the Mishnah redefined the word for Temple service – *avodah* – to mean 'prayer.' They replaced the daily sacrifices with daily prayer services. And the Jewish people has been having a love affair with the intangible ever since.

There's something inherently temporary, inherently portable, inherently ephemeral, about Jewish holy space.

By contrast, Jewish time is very holy indeed. It's not an accident, I think, that today's Torah reading, in common with those for the second day of Pesach and Shavuot, deals with the flow of our calendar. It's not an accident that Abraham Joshua Heschel famously described the Sabbath as 'a palace in time.' He wrote:

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.

All of which makes the Sukkah a very peculiar proposition.

Consider this. It can't have less than two and a half walls, but it mustn't be permanent. It must be roofed, but you have to be able to see the sky through the top. But the gaps between the greenery can't be too big, either. It can't be too tall, or too short, and while it can be built on a camel or on a boat, or other strange places, it won't be kosher if it's not built under the sky. The walls have to be able to withstand wind, yet the *scach* – the leafy roof covering – shouldn't be nailed in place (tying is okay but only if it's more than usually windy). It doesn't require a mezuzah, but it's a mitzvah to make it as beautiful as it can be.

On the one hand, a sukkah is a very physical thing. It's the only time in the year that we commemorate anything by building an actual structure, and we perform the main mitzvah of the festival with our whole bodies. On the other, it's a very precarious thing – it's fragile and temporary and it reminds us of our own vulnerability and fragility. On Shabbat we'll read one of the greatest criticisms of material wealth that has ever been written – the book of Ecclesiastes, with its sweeping declaration 'everything is vanity'. It's very much in the spirit of Sukkot.

The blessing we make on a Sukkah is also ambiguous. We say 'leyshev basukkah'. But this Hebrew word – lashevet – has a whole range of meanings, from 'sitting' to 'staying' to 'dwelling'. So, which is it?

But even with all these ambiguities, who among us hasn't felt a spiritual something when constructing, or sitting in, a Sukkah?

The Sukkah's walls – even though they are walls, after all - define the most open space of our year – one into which it is a mitzvah, a commandment, to invite a multitude of guests. Some of you will be familiar with the custom of the *ushpizin* - the invoking of the presence of the patriarchs, the matriarchs, the kings of Israel, the prophets and prophetesses. History makes the walls transparent, permeable. A sukkah sits in time as well as sitting in your garden.

So the Sukkah is a paradox: it's a place, but it isn't. It's a location in time, but with walls.

I suggest that one way of resolving that paradox is to notice what's inside the Sukkah. Space. There are NO rules about what to put inside a Sukkah, only what to do there. This is part of a pattern, with us. The holiest places of the Mishkan are hollow, and empty space represents absolute potential. It's what we do that defines the space. The mitzvah of this festival is to transfer our lives into this ambiguous space – to eat, and sleep, and study, and sing there. In other words, Sukkot is, at the end of the day, about what we can do and how much beauty our actions can create.

And that, I think, is one of the real messages of this festival. Following just long enough after the HHD for us to be disappointed in the way we've fallen short of our own expectations, the Sukkah is just 'placeful' enough to make us feel grounded, but still open enough for our aspirations. And even as we acknowledge that everything is ambiguous and complex and not really very perfect, we can continue to aspire to fill the space.

What will you fill our new Sukkah with, this year?

Hag sameah!