

Sukkot 5779

Sukkah of Light and Shadow

A Sukkah is a paradox.

Actually it's a series of paradoxes.

The first paradox is that a Sukkah is both concrete and symbolic. We build it with our own hands – it is a mitzvah to put in the first nail directly after the fast ends on Yom Kippur - but at the same time it represents multiple other things from our history:

- Our journey through the desert
- The clouds of glory that surrounded us

The second paradox is that a Sukkah is simple in its construction but subject to very complex rules! There is a wonderful Dr Seuss-style parody of them - *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* etc. These rules are real and culled from the Talmud, which also includes the rule that you can build a Sukkah with the side of an elephant serving as one of the walls. And don't get me started on the rules about the *schach* and how it mustn't be fixed or held down...

The third paradox: it's an immersive mitzvah that's full of holes. If a mikveh had as many, it couldn't function as a mikveh! A Sukkah is a partial place in which we live. A home that's not a house.

And this year I discovered a fourth paradox and I want to share it with you.

A Sukkah isn't kosher unless it has shade. That's the purpose of the *schach* - essentially the same word as the one for Sukkah in Hebrew. There must be more shade than sun. And if we think that the *schach* might dry out, we have to put on extra so that even when it's dry, there is still more shade than sun.

How do we test for shade? We look for the right proportions when the sun is out. But at the same time we should not roof our Sukkot so thoroughly that there are no holes. We have to be able to see the larger stars through the roof at night.

So the criterion for shade is a positive during the day but a negative at night. Perhaps that's why the Sukkah is a place for ghosts (*ushpizin*)...'shade' is another word for 'ghost,' after all.

Either way, we have another paradox. A Sukkah has to have shade. But if it doesn't have enough light it can't be a proper Sukkah.

Human beings cannot live without light. Actually, according to a website with the promising name of space.com, I learned that nothing on this planet can live without the light of the sun - without it we would be a bare expanse of rock. When scientists are looking for new planets they first try to find water, but they also look for sunlight - because it is ultraviolet radiation that creates the building blocks of life.

Perhaps this is why, in about a week's time, when we once again read the start of the Torah, we will learn once more that light was the first thing to be created.

The Hasidic teacher Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efrayim of Sudylkov also has a teaching about light and shade being critical not only to the Sukkah but to the whole of the High Holyday season. He teaches that the dark time of this season is Rosh Hashanah. That's when the moon is dark in the sky: that's when we are judged and scrutinized. But on Sukkot there is light - the moon is full.

And without the benefit of space.com, Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Efrayim made his own link between light and life. He further teaches that the words 'lulav' and 'hadas' are both equivalent numerically to the word 'hayyim.' So in contrast to its ghosts, the Sukkah is the place in which we encounter the power of life, flowing directly from its sacred Source.

And we only need to look around a Sukkah to know that's true. As we sit in that fragile space, we can feel the power of life well up around us - from the green leaves, from the beauty of the decorations and most of all from each other's faces.

As we move towards the winter - because even here in New Orleans last Friday was the first day of fall! - the Sukkah reminds us that there is light. And where there is light, there is life.

Hag sameah.