

Sukkot 5781

Hugs

Hag sameah, and welcome to Sukkot.

One of the many things about this festival that brings me joy is the fact that its name tells us what we are supposed to do to celebrate it. A Sukkah can have four walls, or three, or two and a half. Coincidentally, these shapes are exactly the shape of the word for 'sukkah.' Each of these letters wraps itself around a space in the middle, carving out a little area that feels like a bit of sanctuary, a temporary shelter from what's going on around us.

But this year there's even less shelter than usual. The guidance from the Conservative Movement this year is to keep our Sukkah walls to the bare halakhic minimum so as to allow maximum airflow. So our Sukkot this year are sparser and more spacious than we might be used to (our own Shul Sukkah has been a pioneer of this design for many years, I'm proud to say).

But even that kind of extra-fragile, airy Sukkah opens its arms to take us in.

That idea isn't as sentimental as it might sound. There are a number of mystical teachings that analogize the Sukkah to an embrace. Rabbi Meshulam Feivush, a Galician Hassid (18th century), describes the shape of the Sukkah as being similar to that of a parent embracing a child - the parent's upper and lower arm are the two full walls, the hand is the third and the parent's head bent over the child is the roof. Rabbi Feivush looked at the Sukkah and saw us as the child and the parent as the Holy One. As the Sukkah embraces us, we feel safe and happy.

The Alter Rebbe, (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, also 18th century) also looks at the Sukkah and sees an embrace, a line from the Song of Songs:

His left hand is under my head and his right embraces me.

He teaches that there are four ways of showing love: speech, look, kiss and embrace. All of them are good, but the embrace is the best, because it expresses love in a way that the other three don't. Loving speech is good to hear; a loving gaze is a gift; a kiss, which involves the mouth even more, is a language of intimacy; but an embrace is strongest of all. The Alter Rebbe teaches that this is because it is directed to the whole person. No other expression of love takes in the person's back as well as their front; no other expression contains the whole of the person including the parts they hide even from themselves.

Right now, each of us has a series of lists in our head of things we feel we've lost, things whose absence we grieve. High on my own list is the fact that we still don't have a technology to enable us to sing in unison, and that even when we sing masked, we have to remember that we project whatever we're carrying around inside ourselves 12 feet to the front and 6 to the side unless there's something in the way.

But also high on my list the absence of hugs.

This year, though, perhaps the Sukkah is how we get hugged. As fragile and vulnerable as another human being, it offers itself to us and embraces us fully and unconditionally - all our joy and all our grief, the face we project to the world and the parts of ourselves that we are burying in order to get through another day, another week, another month. The Sukkah is there to hold us and contain us and welcome us just as we are. It offers itself to us even though anything stronger than an average wind could blow it away. And while we are held in that embrace, we can replenish ourselves and remind ourselves that even though we are fragile, we are still here, and there are still things to celebrate and for which we can feel grateful.

Whether your Sukkah has two and a half walls, or three, or four, whether it's at your home or at Shir Chadash, I wish you a Shabbat Shalom and a *Hag* - or should that be, HUG? - sameah.