

My Darling New Orleans
By Rabbi Deborah Silver

Until I come to New Orleans, I've never built my own Sukkah.

Not in London. Israel. Los Angeles. - apartment after apartment, and still no Sukkah.

But New Orleans is different.

My darlin' New Orleans, they sing. The city that defies all expectations. Cradled in the serpentine crescent of the Mississippi it has no concept of straight lines or compass directions. Layer upon layer of history and heartbreak piled at every street corner. Weather advisories warn not to drive into standing water because who knows if you will get out again, ever. And mosquitos that truly understand what it means to party.

A house comes as part of my salary as the rabbi, and with it, a wood-framed patio that waits all year for the fall. For Sukkot. I buy white lace curtains, bamboo matting and strings of colored lights, a mauve dreamcatcher. I hang the walls with Jewish peace flags and a poster proclaiming OCCUPY MY HEART. The green roof comes courtesy of a member of my community who looks hilariously like Father Christmas. The long palm fronds are hefted on to the matting by two of his three brawny sons. Finally, there it is - my first Sukkah.

Such a paradox. It has a roof, but the roof must have spaces through which we see the stars. If it rains, you can't tell the difference between outside and in. The walls are permeable too, the easier to invoke the spirits of ancestors and loved ones from other worlds to join us. We eat there and even sleep there sometimes, but it remains *arai* - that gorgeous Hebrew word that means both temporary and random. It's a mitzvah to make it beautiful even though we know it won't last. It's home, but it could fall apart at any moment. And it is precisely amidst this collection of contradictions that we are commanded - not once, but multiple times - to rejoice.

Rejoice I do. Accompanied by the burr of cicadas. Sometimes with friends, sometimes with family, sometimes with a class of teenagers, sometimes alone, late at night, with the dog asleep at my feet. So many different iterations of joy.

But Sukkot in New Orleans always coincides with hurricane season.

The second year of my contract, Nate comes through just in time to dedicate the synagogue's new Sukkah. Along with every rabbi in town I ponder the pros and cons of whether it's worse to dismantle a Sukkah on Sukkot or on Shabbat.

The fifth year of my contract belongs to Zeta, which skirts Sukkot and offers me the chance to add to my resume 'conducted Zoom shivah in eye of hurricane.'

And in 2021, on the 16th anniversary of Katrina, as if hurricanes also know how to celebrate, Ida arrives.

These are the shards Ida leaves behind:

- The eerily clear skies and stillness before, as I run through the house gathering the irreplaceables that can't survive a windstorm - some books, my photos and precious pictures, my memories box, my soft toy from when I was six months old, my college gown.
- The TV reports through the night as I sit with friends, their generator, their parents, their dogs, my dog, watching the track of the storm wobble towards New Orleans.
- The morning after, with no means of communication save texts on my hostess's phone - one to the family and friends to say "I'm safe" and then more silence. I walk the streets, listening to my own footsteps. Shingles lay everywhere like flayed skin as I pick my way over huge fallen branches of live oak with their leaves still attached. The synagogue survives; my home less so. Miraculously, the synagogue's Sukkah is untouched. I send pictures of the blue sky shining through its wooden bones from the one working internet spot outside Whole Foods uptown.
- The drive to Dallas, not knowing if there is enough in the tank to make it, calling and checking in on my community all the long journey through.

Hopefully, one day the house will be habitable again. Until then, I continue to travel - up and down the interstate from the Airbnb to the shul and back again, dog on the front seat, dresses hanging from my office bookshelves. A life *arai*.

And I ponder the paradox of this city.

Because I have come to realize that New Orleans itself is a Sukkah. So ephemeral that it is hardly a place, defying sea levels and weather patterns, constantly hanging on by its fingernails. A collective of temporary roofs of blue tarp and crooked, bumpy alleyways that whisper to each other of past and future upheavals while tourists visit and take selfies, oblivious to the fact that this place can break you into pieces and you'll never see it coming.

But the residents of New Orleans know its secret: that to live here, you have to find joy. And when you find it, or make it yourself, you lift it up as high as it will go. "Throw me something, Mister!" you shout, as the Mardi Gras floats pass by, hands raised in the hope of snatching a treasure.

And the spirit of New Orleans, flimsy enough to blow away but fragile enough to endure, giggles behind her gilded mask.