

## Finding Security Within Insecurity

We are a nation obsessed with security:

When we buy a computer, the first thing we do, is put a password on it. Then we download spy wear, to protect the computer. Then we put a pass word on our spy wear. Which still doesn't help! Last year, I still managed to contract a cyber bug, wiping my computers memory twice in one year!

Remember how simple traveling within the US used to be? Passengers were just required to show ID. Relatives who weren't flying could walk their loved ones up to the gate! Then airlines started randomly checking bags. Then they introduced metal detectors. Now you can't get onto a plane until you have removed your shoes, belt, jewelry, and walk through a full body scanner!

When I lived in South Africa, we were never allowed to sleep in our *sukkot*, despite the fact that the weather was mild. It was too dangerous. We lived barricaded behind electric fences, with barbed wire, and a guard posted on every street. With good reason. My home was broken into twice. My grandmother was locked in a closet by intruders who stole every item in their home, and my cousins were held at gun point in their own home.

We live in a world that is not secure.

We live in a world where guns are accessible. Where people can walk into schools and shoot children. Where an ex soldier can walk onto a navy base, and murder innocent people.

And so, our protective instincts kick in, and we put up more walls, more fences, and more guards. How else can we feel secure in a world full of uncertainty?

Perhaps then, our *sukkot* are meant to emulate our sense of insecurity and uncertainty of life.

The very nature of a *sukkah*, after all, is decidedly temporary and uncertain. It has a roof that is open to the elements; walls that can be blown down at any moment. We are meant to experience the harshness that is inevitable in our world. The *sukkah's* very existence conveys insecurity.

I would like to argue today, however, that the complete opposite is true. A *sukkah* is not a symbol of insecurity, but rather a symbol of helping us **seek security within the fragility of our lives.**

In Vayikra (23:43) we are commanded to dwell in booths for seven days:

לְמַעַן, יֵדְעוּ דַרְתֵיכֶם, כִּי בַסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם  
“so that your generations will know that I caused you the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them from the land of Egypt.”

But why would God want us to build and live in *sukkoth* after the turmoil and hardship of *Mitzrayim*? What comfort does a *sukkah* hold for those who have suffered?

We can begin to answer this question by looking at the other two other times that *sukkot* are mentioned in the Torah-- not only with regard to the festival, but in two other contexts. Once as the place where our patriarch Jacob stayed upon his return after his reunion with his brother Eisav, and once as the first station that the Israelites camped after the Exodus from Egypt.

The *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (Tractate *De-Pis'ha* 14 Lauterbach ed., vol. 1, p. 108) connects these three very different uses of the word *sukkot*.<sup>1</sup> And if you look closely,

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<sup>1</sup> *To Succoth* – to the place where they actually put up booths, as it is said: “And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built him a house and made booths for his cattle” (Gen. 33:17) – these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer. But other

each mention of the *sukkah*, comes after a trying and difficult time for the Jewish people.

The very first place that the Jews escape to, upon leaving Egypt is to a place called Succoth. Immediately after the death of the first born, the Torah explains that Bnei Yisrael “journeyed from Rameses to Succoth” סִכְתָּהּ, מֵרַעַמְסֵס, בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל (Ex. 12:37).

It is in the city of Succoth where Bnei Yisrael baked dough for *matzah* for the journey ahead. Succoth, then is, a place of refuge; a protective space. The Jews marched from the hardship of Mitzrayim to the sheltering city of Succoth.

And in Bereishit (33:17), the Torah tells us that Yaakov built a *sukkah*, immediately following the harrowing encounter with his brother. Yaakov hears that his brother is approaching, and he prepares for the worst, for war, tragedy and bloodshed. The Torah conveys within the drama of the reunion, a sense of uncertainty, even when they parted as friends. The Haamek Davar notes the coolness between them:

וַיָּשָׁב בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עָשׂוּ לְדֶרֶכּוֹ, שְׁעִירָה,

“So Eisav started back that day towards Seir.

וַיַּעֲקֹב נָסַע סִכְתָּהּ

But Jacob journeyed to Succoth” (33:16) -- they did not embrace and kiss, when they parted ways, and thus, Yaakov is left feeling tentative about his future. And in his uncertainty, he goes to Succoth. And what does he do there:

וַיִּבֶן לוֹ בַּיִת; וַלְמִקְנֵהוּ עָשָׂה סִכְתּוֹ, עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שֵׁם-הַמָּקוֹם סִכְתּוֹ.

“he built himself a house, and for his livestock he made *sukkot*, and therefore called the name of the place Succoth.”<sup>2</sup>

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sages say: Succoth is merely the name of a place, for it is said: “And they journeyed from Succoth, and pitched in Etham” (Num. 33:7).

<sup>2</sup> Rabbenu Yaakov Ba'al Ha'Turim (Spain, 1275-1349) cites his brother as commenting that the three Regalim (pilgrimage festivals) – Pesah, Shavuot and Sukkot – correspond to the three patriarchs – Avraham, Yishak and Yaakov. Avraham was visited by three angels on Pesah, and the horn from the ram offered at Akedat Yishak was

How does Yaakov respond to uncertainty? He builds a *sukkah*. And in the very next *pasuk*, Yaakov arrives in the city of *shchem*—*shalem*. In tact.

וַיְבֵא יַעֲקֹב שְׁלָם עִיר שְׁכֶם

He emerged from his *sukkah* with a sense of peace and serenity.

A Sukkah, then, is a symbol of God's protection. It is the *anneni hakavod*, the clouds of glory that surrounded Bnei Yisrael in the desert, bathing them with the protective presence of the Divine. (Sukkah 11b)

It is the “*sukkat shlomecha*” the shelter of God's peace that we recall in the *haskevenu* prayer that we recite during maariv. The shelter that protects us from plague, famine, and woe.

דָּבַר וְחָרַב וְרָעַב וַיְגֹן.

This brings us back to our central question: why would God want us to build and live in *sukkot* after turmoil, hardship and uncertainty?

Because the Sukkah is a symbol of finding security within insecurity; protecting ourselves from the unknown by reminding ourselves to keep building. To keep living.

The Maharal (*Netzach Yisrael*, Chapter 35) living in the 15<sup>th</sup> century describes the fragility of the sukka in this counter-intuitive way. Every time we say brikat hamazon, we pray:

May the All-Merciful One establish for us the fallen *sukka* of David (*sukkat David hanofalet*).”

Why should we be blessed with a fallen *sukkah*, and not the strength of a *bayit* or

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sounded when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai, which we commemorate on Shavuot. The connection between Yaakov and Sukkot emerges from a verse in the Book of Bereshit (33:17), which tells that upon Yaakov's return to the Land of Israel, "He built for himself a house, and for his cattle he made Sukkot."

home? The Maharal explains that if a *sukkah* falls, it can easily be put up again; but when a house falls, its bricks crumble. A house's fall is complete and final, and putting it back up is impossible. When it is later rebuilt it becomes a totally new house. A *sukkah*, however, is always ready to be put back up, retaining its original *kedusha*, its original essence, and it is easy to do so. It is resilient.

A *sukkah* exemplifies the human spirit to pick ourselves up and re-build. We know that tragedy is inevitable. We know that we will fall. That people will fall. Yet, we retreat into our *sukkot* where we seek out God's protection. And remind ourselves of our intrinsic ability to re-build.

This is how I am able to watch the news. To see so much hardship. To listen to tragic stories of loss. Of people struggling. Of people losing their homes due to flooding, fires, and earthquakes.

We build *sukkot* as a response to uncertainty. We recognize the fragility of life. And we respond by building a structure that, though we know it can fall, we know that we can put it back together again.

It is the shelter of the *sukkah* that we invoke in Psalm 27, recited during this period:

אֶחָד, שְׁאֶלְתִּי מֵאֵת-יְיָ -- אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ : שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית-יְיָ , כָּל-יְמֵי חַיַּי ; לַחַזוֹת בְּנֹעַם-יְיָ , וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָלֹו .  
הָ כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי , בְּטֹכָהּ -- בְּיוֹם רָעָה :

“One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of the LORD, and to visit early in God's Temple. **For God hides me in God's *sukkah* in the day of evil;**”

That is power of *sukkoth*. The human ability to seek security within insecurity.