



# WEEKLY PARASHA

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Sukkot | October 2, 2020 | 15 Tishrei 5781

## Holy Imperfection

The Rabbis tell us that the mitzvah to dwell in a sukkah means that we are, for this week, to *tzei midirat keva ve'sheiv bi'dirat aray* –to leave our established, permanent abode and live in a temporary dwelling.

In other years, I have understood the message to be that by living in a temporary dwelling we become aware that the normal stability and predictability of our lives – our established abode – is actually an illusion. The Israelites, when they dwelled in huts in the Wilderness, were aware that it was only because of the Clouds of Glory that they were able to survive. It was not the huts that provided protection and shelter, but God. Our living in a sukkah reminds us that this is our reality as well, that it is not our house or our job that protects us, but God. At the end of the week, after we have hopefully internalized this awareness, we bring it back with us into our homes, so that it can become a lens through which we live our predictable, stable lives.

This year, however, the lesson is a different one. For this year, we do not live in a stable reality. The entire world changed drastically on us, and we have become painfully aware that our past reality was not nearly as firm as we thought. And it is not just the present. It is the future which is so unstable, and hence so deeply unsettling. When will this be over? What will the next month look like? What will the next year look

like? This week schools are open, but for how long? And if they close, when will they reopen after that?

We are living in an unstable reality. We are living in that *dirat aray*. The message of Sukkot this year is to embrace that reality, to embrace the fact that our lives, when they are unstable, are not going to be perfect. But if we can own that, then this imperfection can be holy.

All the laws of how a Sukkah is to be built are about improvising and making do with less. A sukkah doesn't need four walls, three are good enough. The Rabbis then tell us that you don't even need three: If you just have a little bit more than two, the very beginning of a third wall, that also counts. You don't need the wall to be of full height – three feet high is good enough. And it doesn't need to be solid – gaps of up to nine inches are fine. And on and on. Then there are the Rabbinic concepts of *gud asik mechitzta*, *gud achit mechitzah*, and *dofen akuma* – a partial wall magically extends upwards or downwards, and invalid *schach* at the end of the sukkah can be looked at as if it were a bending –wall. These are all showing us that making doing with less is ok, is part of our lives. And with a little imagination, we can see the gaps in our lives as if they were filled and complete.

## Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School

I once had a student who had very little money. He couldn't afford a nice, canvas sukkah. I loved to get his calls before sukkot. They went something like this: "So, I was walking down the street and saw that someone had discarded a big piece of cardboard, so I took it, and want to use it as a wall, but it doesn't extend all the way, but if I put it near the edge, it can sort of reach this sheet that I am using for the other wall – is that kosher?" Here is someone who was building a sukkah as the Rabbis imagined! No easy prefab sukkah for him, but taking the world as it is, and making do with what comes to hand.

A final lesson that the Rabbis teach is that *sukkah mi'kol makom, kasher* – however the sukkah gets built, its fine. And while this is true and yet another teaching that we can accept and embrace our imperfect reality, there exists a special mitzvah to build the sukkah ourselves. For the way to truly make this imperfection a holy one is by throwing ourselves into it and bringing our skills and talents to the fore.

So many people told me that this recent Yom Kippur was not disappointing in the least. It was actually one of this most beautiful Yom Kippurs that they had ever had (of course, we must remember, that for others it was one of the most difficult Yom Kippurs). The *davening* was shorter, so they had more time to think about the prayers themselves. Some *minyan* were outdoors, and for those who participated in them, and they share with me that praying outdoors was a truly special experience. The small *minyan* that people participate in were small and intimate and had a real beauty and sense of connectedness. And most of all – that the small

*minyanim* that took place outside the synagogue were do-it-yourself affairs. Yom Kippur services did not come prepackaged from the shul. People had to come together – one person lent their yard, another constructed the *mechitza*. People who had never read Torah on Yom Kippur or lead the prayers or served as *gabbais*, stepped up to the plate and did so. And you know what? It wasn't perfect. But it was beautiful. Because we were building it ourselves. And we embraced that imperfection, and were able to see God and holiness present where we had not seen it before.

This Sukkot, we are living in an unstable world are well aware that our lives lack a certain stability, that society is not as it was before and will not be so for some time to come. But it is in this reality that we can do the mitzvah of building a sukkah, we can bring our talents to the fore to make it not only livable, but truly special. It won't be perfect. But by embracing this imperfection, we can find new ways to connect with and discover God's presence in our lives. We can live lives of holy imperfection.



For more of Rabbi Linzer on the parsha, tune in to Parsha in Progress, where he discusses and debates the parsha with noted author Abigail Pogrebin.

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