

The Pitchfork and the Sukka

Mesechta Sukka Daf 13 and Daf 14 spend time talking about the nature and materials of a *sukka*. When the discussion turns to the *shkach*, or roof materials, of a *sukka* the conversation becomes interesting. The text turns to what makes a “handle” of a vessel ritually impure and we begin to compare pitchforks to prayers.

Sukka 13b-14a states: “Didn’t we learn in a *mishna*: All vessels descend into their state of ritual impurity by means of thought? Although an unfinished vessel ordinarily cannot become ritually impure, if the craftsman decided to leave it in its unfinished state, it immediately assumes the legal status of a completed vessel and can become ritually impure. However, they ascend from their state of ritual impurity only by means of a change resulting from an action. Merely deciding to complete the unfinished vessel does not alter its status. It loses its status as a vessel only when he takes action to complete it. Action negates status created by action and status created by thought; however, thought negates neither status created by action nor status created by thought. Therefore, once the straw of the grain harvested for food is considered a handle and is susceptible to ritual impurity, its status cannot be negated by thought alone.”

Enter the pitchfork.

Sukka 14a states: “Apropos a pitchfork, the Gemara cites a related *aggadic* teaching: Rabbi Elazar said: Why are the prayers of the righteous likened to a pitchfork [*eter*]? It is written: “And Isaac entreated [*vayetar*] the Lord for his wife, because she was barren” (Genesis 25:21), to say to you: Just as this pitchfork overturns the grain on the threshing floor from place to place, so too, the prayers of the righteous overturn the mind of the Holy One, Blessed be He, from the attribute of cruelty to the attribute of mercy, and He accepts their prayers.:

The mitzvah *Sukka* and holiday of *Tisha B’Av* have been on my mind for three weeks. *Sukka* is a ritual I embrace, relate to, and look forward to every year. *Tisha B’Av* is another story. Why do we mourn for a building and rituals we lost so many years ago? What does it have to do with myself, my family and my community? Like the pitchfork, our minds can be used to benefit and further our purpose, or we hold ourselves neutral or even worse, dangerous. We can negate our status of ritual purity by inaction, or we can be like the pitchfork, take action, and use ourselves to “overturn” our status with the actions of Torah study, service/prayer, and acts for loving kindness – *Al haTorah, v’al Avodah, V’al Gemilut Hasadim*. Like the pitchfork we are useless without the power of another force. The pitchfork needs human power to come out of its inert state, and we need *HaShem* to move us forward. But how do we summon the connection to *HaShem* that enables us to move forward?

Ufros Aleinu Sukkat Shelomecha. Spread over us Your *sukkat* of peace. We say this in the *Hashkiveinu* prayer every evening. *HaShem* is asked to comfort and protect us. Every year I look forward to embodying this prayer by building, eating in, and doing the mitzvah of the Lulav and Etrog in the sukkah. *It is personal and communal, and my eyes can see the ritual objects*. *Tisha B'Av* is somber, and without insight into what the practice of observing this time of year calls us to do, it can seem too formidable. This year my husband and I took the action of looking into this memorial day. We read Erica Brown's introduction to her book, "When Memory Speaks," [Erica Brown](#), we listened to Rabbi Meir Soloveichik speak about memory and mourning [The Miracle of Jewish Memory](#), and we read *Eicha*. A miracle occurred. Our internal pitchforks turned over our understanding and we began to think that *Tisha B'Av* might be the Jewish date that we could relate to better than any others – personally, as a family, and in relation to our community. This fast day was about our identity as Jewish people, different from a day of atonement when we examine our own, individual doings.

Issac pleaded with *HaShem* to "turn over" the status of his home and bring about the birth of children. We pray the Amidah in three parts, praising Hashem, petitioning Hashem 18 or 19 times, and then thanking Hashem for the strength to bring good work to our lives. We can connect to our "inner pitchforks" by picking up the handles and moving forward. Thinking about doing an action is only the beginning. Digging in and shaking out the seeds might bring about the changes we want.

-Deborah Kopp