

Why Do We Sit in the Sukkah?
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The other day, I brought in some laundry to the cleaners.

“How was your holiday?” the owner asked me. He was referring to Yom Kippur. He knew that this past Wednesday was Yom Kippur because I had asked him to have some shirts ready by the previous Monday.

How do you answer that question?

“It was a good holiday,” I said. “Very fulfilling.” He knew that it was a fast day, so I don’t think he expected to hear it was a “*happy*” holiday. “But very long,” I said.

I dropped some shirts on the counter, and the owner asked me, “OK if these are ready Monday?”

“No problem,” I said. “I won’t be in until Wednesday or Thursday.” I paused, before adding, “There’s another holiday coming up.”

“*Another* holiday?” he asked. “Which one?”

“Sukkot,” I said. “It means ‘booths’ or ‘tabernacles.’” There was a blank expression on his face.

“You are familiar with the Bible, right?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. (We’ve talked about the Bible on other occasions.)

“Well,” I said, “In Leviticus 23 it describes the holiday. We sit and eat in booths for a week.”

I looked at the man. He didn’t say anything, but his face was asking a question:

“*Why? Why do you leave your house and sit in a sukkah?*”



This was a sincere question. I knew that because we've talked in the past. He's very curious about Jewish practices. He takes religion—his own and mine—seriously. So his puzzlement was authentic.

What do you say? Why *do* we sit in *sukkot* on Sukkot?

It's a good question, isn't it? If I, or a co-worker, or a person who handles your laundry, were to ask you that question, "Why do we sit in *sukkot*?" What would you say?

Well, two reasons are given explicitly in the Bible:

1. To thank God for the bountiful harvest.
2. To remember how God helped our ancestors while they were wandering in the desert.

Rabbi David Golinkin, in a piece I recently read, identified five other reasons:

3. To be reminded of the difficulties in life at a time of prosperity. (Philo; Rambam)
4. To teach us humility and modesty (Rambam)
5. To learn not to trust in houses or people, but in God. (Aboab) (Spain, 15th c.)
6. The *sukkah* is a symbol of Peace and Fellowship (S. R. Hirsch)
7. To remember the less fortunate. (Golinkin).

The reason *I* think we sit in the *sukkah* is to experience **happiness**. Only five days after Yom Kippur, this holiday comes as a welcome relief.

It's hard to command people to be happy. (It's as challenging as commanding them to love God.) But telling people to go out into the *sukkah* and "be happy" is good advice: It helps us realize that happiness, ultimately, doesn't come from bricks and mortar. It comes from people sitting around the kitchen table—wherever that table may be. It comes from one's loved ones—and one's community.

So, I encourage people to celebrate Sukkot: On each day of the holiday—at least on the first day, if we find it challenging to do it each and every day—go out, shake the *lulav* and *etrog*, and say the blessing thanking God for the commandment to dwell in the *sukkah* (it concludes with the words, "*leshev ba-sukkah*"). We

should give thanks for the opportunity to learn the various insights described above—and we should focus on whichever particular ones are most salient to us.

I didn't say all of this, of course, as I was dropping off my shirts. But I tried to convey this spirit. I tried to convey that, although it's a *mitzvah*, an obligation, to do all of this, it's a *joyful* one. It's one that enhances our lives and renews our spirit and helps us move into the fall and winter to come.

As I gathered up my things and prepared to leave the laundry, the owner turned to me, looked me straight in the eye, and said, "*Shanah Tovah!*"

"Thank you!" I said in response. "And *Shanah Tovah* to you as well!" I added.

Something tells me that when I pick up my shirts next Wednesday or Thursday, we're going to have more to talk about!

Shabbat Shalom and *moadim l'simchah!*