

# WORLDLY AND OTHER-WORLDLY DIMENSIONS OF THE SUKKAH

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A *sukkah* does the impossible. It carves out a small space to meet God in our own backyard. After the intensity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, immersed in synagogue and prayer, for Sukkot we build a structure, and then all we need to do is be in it. Being ourselves is doing a *mitzvah*; being ourselves is being with God.

What allows for this meeting point between the divine and human realms? How do we imagine this encounter? The Talmud's discussion of the physical dimensions of the *sukkah* reveals deep theological dimensions, giving us access to richer understandings of what it means to be in a *sukkah* and appreciate its spirituality.

## MAXIMUM HEIGHT: TAPPING INTO MESSIANIC TIMES

The Mishnah (Sukkah 1:1) states that a *sukkah* may not be higher than twenty cubits or lower than ten handbreadths. The Talmud offers a few perspectives on where these measurements come from. One explanation for the twenty cubit height limit emerges from an apocalyptic vision in Isaiah:

### תלמוד בבלי סוכה ב.

רבי זירא אמר: מהכא (ישעיהו ד) וסכה תהיה לצל יומם מחרב, עד עשרים אמה – אדם יושב בצל סוכה, למעלה מעשרים אמה – אין אדם יושב בצל סוכה, אלא בצל דפנות.

### Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 2a

*R. Zeira said: From here, "the sukkah will be shade during the day from destruction" (Isaiah 4:6). Up to twenty cubits, a person sits in the shade of the sukkah. Above twenty cubits, a person no longer sits in the shade of the sukkah but in the shade of the walls.*

From a technical perspective, the verse in Isaiah proves that a *sukkah* shouldn't be too tall, because, if it is, the shade comes from the walls rather than the "*sukkah*" itself, that is, from the *s'khakh* on top. The shelter of the *sukkah* must be fragile, such that you can see that the sheltering effect comes from the delicate material above. The fragility of this structure becomes all the more pronounced when we notice the context of the verse, which describes destruction in the end of days. As storms and chaos swirl about, a tiny shelter creates some security:

## ישעיה ד:ה-ו

וּבָנָא ה' עַל כָּל-מִכּוֹן הַר-צִיּוֹן וְעַל-מִקְדָּשָׁהּ עָנָו יוֹמָם  
וְעָשָׂן וְנִגְהָ אֵשׁ לְהִבָּה לְיֵלֶה בִּי עַל-כָּל כְּבוֹד חֲפָה: וְסָבָה  
תְּהִיָּה לְצִל-יוֹמָם מְחֻבָּב וּלְמַחֲסָה וּלְמִסְתוֹר מִזֶּמֶר  
וּמִמָּטָר:

## Isaiah 4:5-6

*God will create over the whole shrine and meeting place of Mount Zion cloud by day and smoke with a glow of flaming fire by night. Indeed, over all the glory shall hang a canopy, which shall serve as a pavilion for shade from heat by day and as a shelter for protection against drenching rain.*

The Gemara, though, objects to R. Zeira's proof:

## תלמוד בבלי סוכה ב:

רבבי זירא נמי לא אמרי - ההוא לימות המשיח הוא דכתיב.

## Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 2b

*They don't follow R. Zeira; that is written about messianic times.*

According to this refutation, the verse connecting shelter to the fragile *s'khakh* itself has no bearing in our own times. The utility of such a fragile shelter made out of God's manifest presence is meaningless in the world we live in; it can only offer protection in messianic times. But the Gemara deflects this objection, and, in so doing, draws a line between the messianic days and our own, real world:

ורבי זירא: אם כן לימא קרא וחפה תהיה לצל יומם, ומאי וסכה תהיה לצל יומם - שמעת מינה תרת.

*R. Zeira responds: if so, let the verse say, "the huppah will provide shade in the day." Why does it say "sukkah"? To teach two things [(1) about the messianic times, and (2) about the sukka we build today].*

R. Zeira points to a superfluous use of nouns in the passage from Isaiah. The previous verse refers to the sheltering structure as a *huppah*, and only subsequently as a *sukkah*. He concludes that the unnecessary usage of the word *sukkah* hints to the holiday of Sukkot. In fact, the *sukkah* of our own times is like the *sukkah* of messianic times. From a technical

perspective, this means that it, too, must have shade from the *s'khakh* and not the walls. When we treat the verses from Isaiah as an intertext for understanding the function of the *sukkah* more broadly, though, the image of God's presence offering shelter from storms takes on new meanings. Even in the storms and chaos of the times we live in, we may find divine shelter, however fragile that may be. It isn't merely a messianic dream deferred.

## MINIMUM HEIGHT: TRAVERSING THE DIVINE/HUMAN DIVIDE

When the Gemara later discusses the minimum height of the *sukkah*, it catapults us into dramatic scenes of biblical narrative. The Gemara draws our attention to three moments that explicitly refer to times of close encounter between a person and God.

## תלמוד בבלי סוכה ד:ה.

מנלן? אתמה, רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו... ארון תשעה וכפורת ספח - הרי כאן עשרה

וכתיב ונועדתי לך שם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת

ותניא, רבי יוסי אומר: מעולם לא ירדה שכינה למטה, ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום, שנאמר השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם

## Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 4b-5a

*From where do we know [that a sukka less than ten handbreadths is not kosher]?*

*It was said: Rav, R. Hanina, R. Yohanan and R. Haviva taught... 'The ark was nine and the cover one handbreadth'—this makes ten handbreadths.*

*And it is written, "I will meet with you there and speak to you from on top of the cover [between the two cherubim on the ark of testimony]" (Exodus 25:22).*

*And it was taught: R. Yose said: The divine presence never came down to the lower world, and Moses and Elijah never went up to the upper world. As it says, "the Heavens belong to God and the earth, God gave to human beings" (Psalm 115:16).*

This *sugya*, or passage, offers a complex, three-part proof for ten handbreadths as a minimum height of the *sukkah*. First, the Gemara traces the number ten to the model of the ark in the *mishkan*—together, the ark and the cover made ten handbreadths. This is a solid case for ten handbreadths, but what does it have to do with a *sukkah*? Cryptically, the prooftext goes on to quote a verse from Exodus that states the function of the ark was for God to meet Moshe there and speak from above the ark's cover. Finally, the Gemara turns to the last part of the proof: a statement from an early sage, R. Yose, that God's presence never came down to earth, nor did Moshe or Eliyahu ever transcend into the divine sphere.

This discussion is all fascinating, but what does it have to do with a *sukkah*? With the aid of Rashi, we see that this three-part proof serves as the basis for a general principle, not specific to *sukkah*, that ten handbreadths constitute a distinctive zone or area, a *reshut*. God and humanity must have separate realms ("the heavens belong to God and the earth to human beings"); yet, God comes to speak to Moshe in a divine-human encounter. So it must be that the separate zones were maintained even in this encounter. Hence, the ten handbreadths of the *mishkan* were to create the barrier that would allow for meeting. The *sukkah*, then, is like the ten handbreadth barrier that allows for God's presence to rest on top, remaining outside of a delineated and discrete human realm.

Through these theologically rich narrative prooftexts, the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* becomes an exercise in the possibility of nothing less than approaching God. At the same time, the Gemara weakens the power of these moments by introducing a level of distance between God and the human realm in each. We are left to wonder: does the *sukkah*, of at least ten handbreadths, propel us into close relationship with God, or does it actually erect a barrier?

The Talmud records a vehement backlash to the idea of a constant ten handbreadths of distance between the human and the divine realms. How could the fundamental theology of the Torah, including the central depiction of revelation, hold up to this concept of divine distance? The Gemara hurls multiple attacks against this notion that neither God nor humans penetrated each other's realms:

תלמוד בבלי סוכה ה.  
ולא ירדה שכינה למטה?

והכתיב וירד ה' על הר סיני! למעלה מעשרה טפחים.

והכתיב ועמדו רגליו ביום ההוא על הר הזיתים! -  
למעלה מעשרה טפחים.

ולא עלו משה ואליהו למרום? והכתיב ומשה עלה אל  
האלקים! - למטה מעשרה.

והכתיב ויעל אליהו בסערה השמים! - למטה מעשרה.

והכתיב מאחז פני כסא פרשו עליו עננו, ואמר ר'  
תנחום מלמד שפירש ש-די מזיו שכינתו ועננו עליו! -  
למטה מעשרה.

#### Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 5a

*The divine presence never came down?*

*But it is written, "God came down on Mount Sinai" (Exodus 19:20)! God remained ten handbreadths above.*

*But it is written, "God's legs will stand that day on the Mount of Olives" (Zechariah 14:4)! Ten handbreadths above.*

*Moshe and Eliyahu never went up? But it is written, "Moses went up to God" (Exodus 19:3)! He remained ten handbreadths below.*

*But it is written "Eliyahu went up to the Heavens in a storm" (II Kings 2:11)! Ten handbreadths below.*

*But it is written, "grasping the throne, He spread his cloud over him" (Job 26:9), and R. Tanhūm said: This teaches that God spread His divine glory and His cloud upon him. Below ten handbreadths.*

Of course, it is possible to break through a barrier between the divine and human realms, says the Gemara: God on Mt. Sinai giving the Torah; God on the Mount of Olives in the end of days; Moshe and Eliyahu go up to God. To all of these, the Gemara offers the same response. In each of these moments of union, there was actually still a ten handbreadth buffer in between. In light of these narrative moments, we are left to perceive the *sukkah* as that buffer, creating the safe distance that allows for close connection with God.

## REACHING TO THE OTHER

In the end, the Gemara cannot resolve one scene in exactly this way. The verse in Job (midrashically applied to Moshe) speaks of a human “grasping” the divine throne. Obviously, grasping is not something someone can do at a ten handbreadth distance!

כל מקום מאחז פני כיסא כתיבי! - אישתרבובי  
אישתרבב ליה כסא עד עשרה, ונקט ביה

*But still, it says, “grasping the throne” (Job 26:9)!  
God extended the throne ten handbreadths, and  
he grasped it.*

Here, the Gemara explains that God stretched beyond the divine realm, extending the divine throne through to the end of the ten handbreadth barrier between Moshe and God. This cryptic, but rich, line leads us to picture the *sukkah* a bit differently. Rather than creating the ten handbreadth barrier that keeps God at a safe enough distance to allow for meeting God, the *sukkah* could be read instead as either our—or God’s—mechanism for extending into the zone of the Other. By building the *sukkah*, perhaps we are extending ourselves into the ten handbreadth buffer between us and God. Or perhaps the *sukkah* reflects God’s desire to extend into our lives.

## HOUSING GOD’S PRESENCE

There is one final turn in the Gemara’s discussion of worldly and transcendent dimensions of the *sukkah*. Catalyzed by a technical question about the minimum height of the *sukkah* (how do you know the ten handbreadths of empty space in the *sukkah* must exclude the *s’khakh?*), the Gemara leads us to a verse in the discussion of the ark in the *mishkan* that has more explicit resonance with the *sukkah* than the discussion that came before:

**תלמוד בבלי סוכה ה:**

וכתיב והיו הכרבים פרשי כנפים למעלה סככים  
בכנפיהם על הכפרת. קרייה רחמנא סככה למעלה  
מעשרה.



**Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 5b**

*And it is written, "The cherubim spread their wings above, covering the ark with their wings" (Exodus 25:20). The Torah calls it "covering (s'khakh)" above ten handbreadths.*

From here, the Gemara derives that, just as the height of the cherubim's wings was ten handbreadths above the cover of the ark—i.e. just above their heads—so, too, the *s'khakh* must hover above ten handbreadths of empty space to the floor of the *sukkah*. This leaves us with clarity about the minimum height of the *sukkah*: it must be ten handbreadths, not including the height of the *s'khakh* itself. Yet, this image is actually a total swerve from the previous derivation for ten handbreadths. Before, we thought the *sukkah* was akin to the ten handbreadths of the ark itself, creating a barrier between us and God. Now, the ten handbreadths constitute the space above the ark, where God's voice emerged between the cherubim.

So, how should we think of our *sukkah*? Is it a barrier between us and God, with the divine presence hovering above? Or is our *sukkah* the space that actually houses God's presence? This metaphysical paradox may mean nothing to our actual experience of dwelling in the *sukkah*. Yet, I find it helpful that our

tradition offers a dynamic picture of how the *sukkah* brings us into relationship with God.

When we build the *sukkah* each year, or dwell in one somebody else built and shared, we can focus on different aspects of building close relationship, whether with God or with others in our lives. Sometimes, we need to figure out how to draw boundaries that create the space and distance to allow for encountering each other. Sometimes, we may be ready to temporarily extend ourselves into that boundary. And sometimes, we need to realize that we have the capacity to hold another's presence in our own space, no matter how counterintuitive that may seem. When we see the legal details of the *sukkah* through their theological and narrative underpinnings, we can start to do the work of bringing us closer to redeemed times, where our *sukkah* is like a *huppah* of shelter amidst the storms of life. ♦

