

**The Sukkos Crash**  
**Sukkos 2009**  
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In the 1970s, a fellow named James Opie was a small business owner who traveled to Afghanistan in search of hand-made rugs. In a short article about one of his trips, he writes that he was able to find some exceptional antique rugs in some of the provinces and he and his driver were on their way back to Kabul.

*The trunk, he writes, was packed and the back seat mounded over with goods that nearly touched the ceiling. Heading south, we passed through steep terrain with peaks of the Hindu Kush on either side and threatening cliffs dropping abruptly only yards to our left.*

*An hour and a half south of Mazar-i-sharif, the driver and I came upon a startling scene. A public bus had crashed into an enormous rock on the right hand side of the road. Passengers had spilled out of the bus and were gathered in clusters. There were no obvious signs of injury. My driver slowed down, but not too much, for a dozen bus passengers had turned their attention toward us and come so close to the car that I wondered if some might grab hold of our vehicle. A few shouted, begging for rides.*

*Only when we drew fully abreast of the accident could we see that the entire front end of the bus was caved in, pressed against a house-sized boulder.*

*My driver exclaimed, "Good driver! Good driver!"*

*We regained speed and traveled another kilometer before I spoke.*

*"You said, 'Good driver.' Please tell me what is good about crashing a bus full of people into a large rock."*

*The driver thought for a moment before answering.*

*"You not understand," he said. "Driver lose brakes. Bus will crash. It must! Where crash? Driver must decide. Not easy decide. Must decide! Easy thing... wait. Easy not crash now, here! Then bus goes much fast! If crash here, some hurt. No one die. There." He pointed down the mountain. "There. Everyone die. Everyone!"*

*He concluded, "Good driver."*

*"You young man," he said. "Not realize, sometimes better crash early, when damage not great. Sometimes you wait and wait. Damage very great! In life, must know when crash." (Excerpted from Parabola 34:3.)*

Everything about Sukkos feels like a crash – and an early one at that.

Sukkos is just full of disjunctions:

- To begin with – it feels like it's in exactly the wrong place on the Jewish calendar. It doesn't comport at all with the mood of Tishrei. It was just Yom Kippur. It took us all of Elul and the *עשרת ימי תשובה* to gear up for our holiest day. Couldn't we use just a short break – a couple of weeks to let things sink in? Yet in the span of just four days, we're expected to make the leap from somber and reflective to joyous and celebratory.
- Sukkos doesn't seem out of sync with just the Jewish calendar; it seems out of sync with the seasonal calendar, too. A month ago it was beautiful outside. Yet we wait just long enough for the weather to turn – just long enough to make the prospect of our actually being able to dwell in our Sukkahs a precarious one at best.
- What's more, the meaning and symbolism of the *ד' מינים* seem totally lost on us. Maybe farmers or outdoorsmen would appreciate them. But we metropolitans don't quite know what to do with them. They're awkward. Holding them, shaking them, waving them – is a disjunctive experience.
- And finally the Sukkah itself. Especially for us city-dwellers. It's so jarring. We live in a city where we privilege longevity. We use terms like vintage, pre-war and landmark. It would be hard to imagine anything less city-like than a little hut with the staying power of no more than eight days.

So how do we explain it? Other Chagim seem to have quite a natural flow. The timing, the mitzvos – they all seem to fit. Why is Sukkos so different?

The answer is really quite simple: It's because Sukkos is the holiday of galus. Think back to the original Sukkos constructed in the wilderness. We were on the run; wanderers. Betwixt and between – refugees from the land of our bondage – with no land to call our own. For the homeless Jew, the Sukkah is what he calls his home.

צא מדירת קבע והכנס לדירת עראי

It's not just about occupying an impermanent dwelling; it's about the notion of leaving one's home – being alienated – feeling like a foreigner.

That's why the halacha says one can even build a Sukkah on a boat or wagon. At first glance it seems preposterous. Is that any way to perform the mitzvah of sukka? The answer is yes – it fits perfectly. Because Sukkos is the holiday of the wandering Jew.

There's so much disjunction on this holiday because Sukkos is meant to remind us that this is precisely our experience in exile – both politically and religiously.

Politically, there will be times when we are made to feel like aliens or second class citizens. We may have little or no say in shaping what our society looks like. Perhaps our very safety will be threatened.

Religiously too – things may not fit the way they would if we had the time and the wherewithal to plan them properly. Sukkos tells us that we'll just have to do the best we

can under the circumstances. It will be inconvenient. It will feel rushed. Because this is exactly how our religious experience may feel when we are not at home.

But why? From this perspective, Sukkos at least makes a little more sense for us. There's a message in here about not getting too comfortable. But more broadly – think about Sukkos at virtually any other time in Jewish history. Did Jews suffering the expulsions of the middle ages need a Yontif to remind them that they were in גלות? Did victims of a pogrom or an inquisition need a holiday to encapsulate the feeling of being in exile? They felt it every day!

Why do we have a holiday devoted to the theme and experience of גלות? Of course on one level it's to encourage us to appreciate what home would look like and feel like – to impel us to yearn for the days when all of us will be back in the land of Israel. It reminds us to daven for and hope for the messianic era. And for this reason, too, we express our redemptive aspirations. This morning's הפטרה, for example, is all about the redemption.

But I would argue that a holiday of exile helps remind us, too, that the challenges of גלות can never serve as an excuse for a slackening in our commitment to Hashem and His Torah. Despite the weather and the inconvenience and the ill-preparation, Sukkos is our חג שמחתינו – it's the happiest time of the year.

Back in the מדבר, the fact that we were on the run and had no home didn't stop us from receiving the Torah. One could have imagined that the life-altering experience of revelation might only be possible at a quiet time in a secure homeland. מתן תורה happened while we were living in a Sukkah.

The holiday of Sukkos insists that we make Judaism portable – that it really is possible – under even the most non-ideal circumstances to take Judaism with us wherever we go. Think of the Ushpizin we invite into the Sukkah: From Avraham to King David – each one of them felt the pain of גלות in some form or fashion. Yet as Rabbi Lamm once wrote, “All of them were people who learned how to live as a citizen of Heaven while a stranger on Earth.” We invite them to join us because they are our great models for how to accomplish the goal of Sukkos: to make Judaism an animating voice in our lives even as we wrestle against the forces of alienation.

It really is possible – even at times that are not our own among people who are not like us – to live as citizen of Heaven – to bring our Torah values into everyday life and living.

Maybe it's the way you talk or the language you use in your workplace. Maybe it's davening Mincha at one of those particularly inconvenient moments. Maybe it's a shiur or a class you listen to on your ipod on the train. Or maybe it's bentching on the go.

The sounds of Sukkos only last for seven days. But the thud of its crashing into our calendar echoes throughout the year. For in our own ways, each of us is still a wandering Jew.

We hope and daven that our wanderings will soon come to an end. Until they do – let us embrace the legacy of Sukkos Judaism and fill as many moments as we can with the מצוות and the values of the Torah that we hold so dear.