

From Refuse to Refuge

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A few months back, I get a call from a young woman who tells me that she and her husband are in the process of opening a new bakery on the West Side. She's interested in having kosher supervision, but she's not that knowledgeable about Kashrut. Could I help guide her as to what kind of supervision might be acceptable to people in the Orthodox community. So I try to explain that the best option is to use a nationally recognized organization like the OU or the Chaf K which would be universally accepted. She thanks me and I hang up the phone with a newfound hope that there may soon be a kosher bakery on the Upper West Side.

A few weeks later I'm walking down the street and I pass by the establishment. It looks like it's just a few days away from opening. Out of the front door walks a Chassid – with a beard, payus, long tzitzis.

I'm more than a little excited. So I walk over and say. "Shalom Aleichem! So... I guess they got the Hashgacha!"

"I don't know," he says. "I'm the contractor."

Too often we make snap judgments based on appearances. Sukkos is no different. Surely all of the Sukkahs we'll visit will be beautifully decorated and tastefully appointed. And this is absolutely as it should be. There is no holiday more ensconced in the ethic of *זה קלי ואנוהו*. Our Sukkahs should be no less pleasing to the eye than to the soul.

But if you'll permit me for just a moment, I want to make the case that behind this veneer of what is visually appealing is a halachic reality that speaks an entirely different language.

The details of Hilchos Sukkah are actually quite complex. But on the most basic level, what do you need to have a kosher sukkah? There are two ingredients. You need walls – at least two and doorway – and you need a covering atop the Sukkah that we call סכך.

So let me ask you: What are the requirements for the walls?

There are actually are no material requirements. They can be made out of anything you want. They just have to be sturdy enough to constitute walls. In fact the Gemara brings up the most unlikely cases – a person, an elephant, the posts of a bed. Virtually anything can be conscripted into the service of Sukkah walls.

And what about the סכך?

We know there are three halachos that govern סכך. It has to grow from the ground, be detached from the ground, and can't be something that's *מקבל טומאה* – it can't be a finished product.

But the most revealing formulation is the Gemara.
The pasuk tells us:

דברים פרק טז פסוק יג

חג הסוכות תעשה לך שבועת ימים באספך מגרנה ומיקבך:

Make for yourselves a festival of Sukkot for seven days with what you've gathered from your threshing floor and your winepress.

Which means, according to the Gemara:

למד שמסכין את הסוכה בפסולת גורן ויקב:

This teaches that you cover your Sukkah with the remnants of your threshing floor and your winepress.

סכך by definition comes from the chaff – the leftovers – the part of the harvest that would otherwise be discarded. סכך is the least flattering substance we have at our disposal.

When you put the pieces together, I'd like to suggest that what emerges is a stunning revelation about our relationship to nature and really our relationship to everything in God's created world.

The message of the Sukkah very simply is that – approached from the right perspective – anything and everything can be put into the service of Hashem and His mitzvos. Pooling together your children's Lego for walls and few dozen sunflowers for סכך would be no less a Sukkah than any other.

There's a fascinating concept that applies to virtually no other mitzvos in the Torah called הוקצה למצוה. Once Sukkos begins, the Sukkah becomes Muktzah. That doesn't mean you can't touch it – you can almost always touch something that's Muktzah. You just can't appropriate it for any other use. By virtue of your using these materials to perform a mitzvah, the walls, the סכך, the decorations – every part of the Sukkah – become הקדש. They're endowed with a sanctity that makes their use for any other purpose entirely off limits.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף ט עמוד א

כשם שחל שם שמים על ההגיגה כך חל שם שמים על הסוכה, שנאמר חג הסוכות שבועת ימים לה', מה חג לה' - אף סוכה לה'.

It's really quite amazing. In an instant, you haven't just transformed worthless refuse into an invaluable mitzvah; you've created sanctity ex nihilo.

Let me share with you an image:

On Erev Sukkot in 1973, Adir and Shlomo were two yeshiva boys in the IDF tank corps who found themselves in the Golan being bombarded by the Syrians during the Yom Kippur war. In one of the quieter moments, near a place called Alika, Adir found a hole that had been created by a Syrian mortar shell. He did the best he could to measure it and determined that it was big enough to fit a person. So he collected some eucalyptus branches and put them on top of the hole. He had built himself a Sukkah. Shlomo decided to ask his commanding officer, Captain Vagman, if he could sleep in the Sukkah. Vagman, who knew nothing about the holiday, thought Shlomo was crazy, but ultimately agreed.

Sitting in that hole, he prayed that God spread his Sukkah of peace over Israel even as the sound of gunfire erupted not a moment later.

To me, this is really the most pronounced manifestation of this ethic that we're describing. Sukkos is a great pedagogical moment. It preaches that really anything can be enlisted in the service of Torah and Mitzvos if we are but willing to see our world through the lens of halachic opportunity.

Imagine taking a hole – a *luch* – it's not even anything – it's the space created by a mortar shell that was intended to blow you to bits! – imagine transforming such an entity – such a non-entity – into a מקום מצוה! It's just extraordinary.

It captures the spirit and essence of everything Sukkos is about. It's a training ground. The Sukkah envelops us entirely. When we sit inside it, we have no choice but to be struck by our surroundings – to be struck by the recognition that anything in this world can be approached from this perspective: Given the means at my disposal, what can I do to add Kedushah to this world?

- It's sitting on the bus wondering who might need a hand getting off;
- It's preparing a Shabbos meal with the thought: What if I just made one extra portion and delivered it to my neighbor who's all alone?
- It's going to the Kiddush wondering who might really need a smile or a friendly greeting;

It's all a question of perspective. If we wait for Kedusha to come to us, we may be waiting a while. The mitzvah of Sukkah invites us instead to become the builders of our own sacred lives. To the extent we heed this call, we too will be among those who dwell in the presence of Hashem.