

What the Sukkah Teaches Us

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Sukkahs can vary widely, from the rather simple model we built this year at Shir Hadash under COVID social-distancing restrictions to very comfortable temporary “homes away from home,” complete with carpet and even blow-up mattresses to make sleeping in the sukkah more comfortable.

In Cincinnati, where I grew up, when Sukkot came late, we could be dealing with heavy rains and even occasional snow, but in Israel, where the weather is more like California, it's usually a very comfortable time of year to be outside. People can get competitive about their sukkahs, and there have even been sukkah contests in the United States and in Israel. One year in Jerusalem the theme was light, and there were amazing sukkahs along the walls of the Old City near the Jaffa Gate, lit up beautifully for an evening stroll.

There are some rules about building a sukkah, and when a group of architects had a competition in New York in 2010, they hired a rabbinical student to be their consultant. They kept all the creative constructions within the limits of the Talmud's size restriction of 8 feet by 19 feet. Some were interesting from a design point of view, and there was one political statement: The walls of that sukkah were made completely from the cardboard signs that homeless people had held up asking for help.

A simple sukkah is in many ways most consistent with the message of the holiday. At the time of the fall harvest, when we might be most inclined toward a materialistic exaltation of our stuff, we are commanded to leave our comfortable homes, our central heating and air conditioning, our up-to-the-minute tech devices, and live the simple life of a wandering nomad, a life not too different from that of the refugees of our own time, forced to live in tents, possessing only the clothes on their backs and what they can carry in their hands. After all, what were the Israelites at that time when they were wandering in the wilderness but a motley crew of runaway slaves.

Zach, you prepared your D'var Torah for the Torah portion you were supposed to read back in March, but serendipitously the message is completely appropriate also for this festival that we are celebrating.

Dwelling in the sukkah is meant to remind us to think about what really is most important in our lives. Is it really our stuff? Is it our cell phone?

Just as Purim has the Book of Esther and Shavuot has Ruth, Sukkot also has an additional reading. The scroll for this holiday is Ecclesiastes, *Kohelet*, the reflections of an older kingly man who had been very rich with many possessions. He writes:

I multiplied my possessions. I built myself houses and I planted vineyards. I laid out gardens and groves, in which I planted every kind of fruit tree. I constructed pools of water, enough to irrigate a forest shooting up with trees. I bought male and female slaves, and I acquired stewards. I also

acquired more cattle, both herds and flocks, than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I further amassed silver and gold and treasures of kings and provinces and I got myself male and female singers, as well as the luxuries of commoners, coffers and coffers of them. Thus I gained more wealth than anyone before me in Jerusalem.

But having become so rich, what does Kohelet conclude? He concludes that this is all futility, it is of no ultimate value. In the end he says it is relationships and the simple enjoyment of what we do have that is so much more meaningful than amassing possessions. It is sharing what we have with others that makes for true joy. Our harvest festival teaches: Enjoy what you do have and be goodhearted in sharing it with others. Feeling connected with others, our souls can experience harmony and well-being.

Zach, you are in the sukkah; we had planned for you to be in the sukkah for your Bar Mitzvah. In that way, you and your family expressed your love of this festival and appreciation of its values. May this commitment stay with you always and may it bring you fulfillment and joy.