

I'm On A Boat
Sukkos Day 2 5779
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

Reeling from a divorce after a marriage of less than a year's duration, Ilana Kurshan found herself unmoored. She was living in Jerusalem far from her American family, she was working in an unstable publishing job and her life seemed characterized by uncertainty. Reaching for some kind of consistency, something to anchor her and to instill discipline as she navigated her life, she undertook- and completed- the study of Daf Yomi, the daily study of a page of Talmud. Her remarkable memoir *If All the Seas Were Ink* is the chronicle of the ensuing period of seven and a half years. In it, she masterfully applies the lessons she learned from the tractates she was studying with the period in her life in which she was studying them. Most appropriately, during the cycle she had joined, Daf Yomi's study of *Masechet Sukkah* overlapped with the holiday of Sukkos. She describes¹ what happened the first night of Yom Tov, when she was invited to the home of her friend Yael's parents for dinner. It was her, her friend and two older couples; at the dinner table in the Sukkah, her friend's mother asked her if she would share some words of Torah from the Daf Yomi with them. Pulling out her volume of Talmud, which she carried with her at all times, she began to share a passage from Sukkah 23a. The Mishnah there discusses

¹ Pp. 44-46

the halachic validity of a Sukkah built on a boat, on a wagon or as a treehouse.

העושה סוכתו בראש העגלה או בראש הספינה כשרה ועולין לה ביום טוב בראש האילן או על גבי גמל
כשרה ואין עולין לה בי"ט

MISHNA: In the case of **one who establishes his *sukka* at the top of the wagon or at the top of the ship**, although it is portable it is fit, as it is sufficient for a *sukka* to be a temporary residence. **And one may ascend and enter it even on the first Festival day.** In the case of one who establishes his *sukka* at the top of a tree or atop a camel, the *sukka* is fit, but one may not ascend and enter it on the first Festival day because the Sages prohibit climbing or using trees or animals on the Festival.

The Talmud wants to know whose opinion this Mishnah follows, and adduces a statement from Rabbi Akiva showing that it is his opinion:

מני מתניתין רבי עקיבא היא דתניא העושה סוכתו בראש הספינה רבן גמליאל פוסל ור"ע מכשיר

GEMARA: The Gemara comments: In accordance with whose opinion is the mishna? It is in accordance with the opinion of **Rabbi Akiva**, as it is taught in a *baraita*: In the case of **one who establishes his *sukka* at the top of the ship**, Rabban Gamliel deems it unfit and Rabbi Akiva deems it fit.

The Talmud then relates what Kurshan calls a “punchy anecdote.”

מעשה ברבן גמליאל ור"ע שהיו באין בספינה עמד ר"ע ועשה סוכה בראש הספינה למחר נשבה רוח
ועקרתה אמר לו רבן גמליאל עקיבא היכן סוכתך

There was an incident involving Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva, who were coming on a ship. Rabbi Akiva arose and established a *sukka* at the top of the ship. The next day the wind blew and uprooted it. Rabban Gamliel said to him: Akiva, where is your *sukka*? It was unfit from the start.

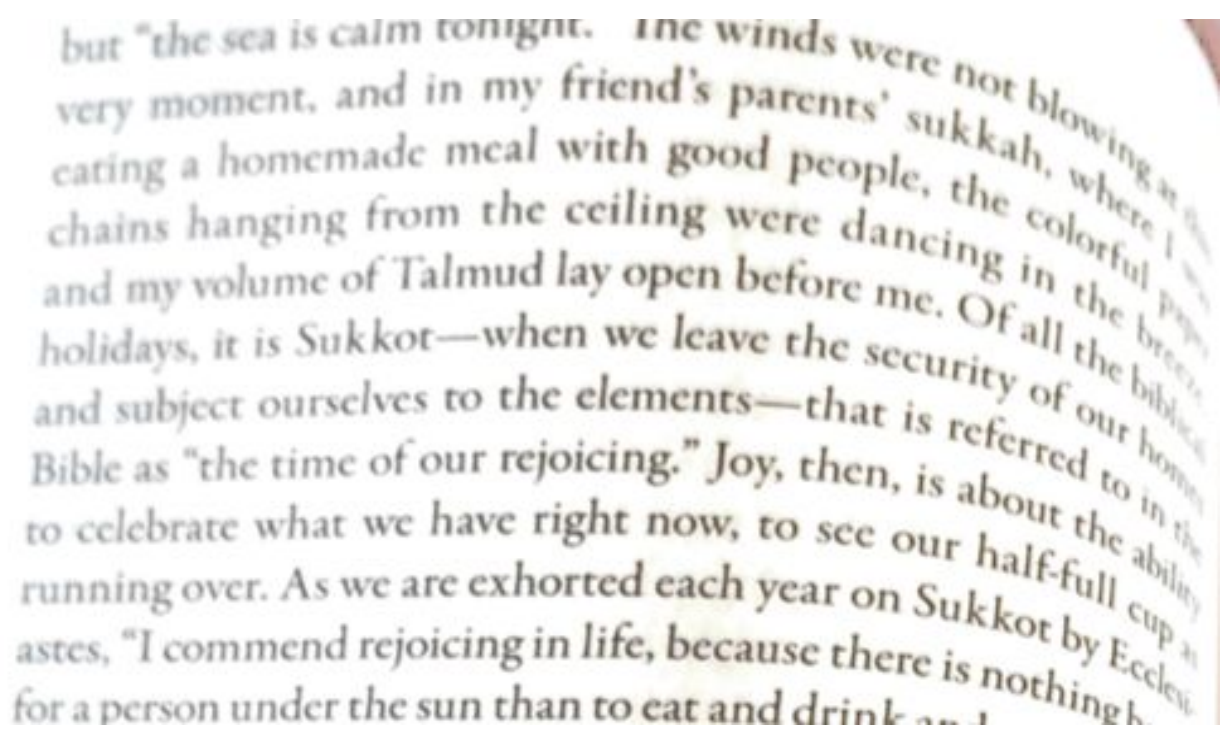
What is the nature of the debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabban Gamliel? Why did Rabban Gamliel think Rabbi Akiva's Sukkah was laughably invalid, worthy of a sarcastic retort? The Babylonian sage Abaye explains that the debate centers on how stable a Sukkah must be. According to Rabban Gamliel, a Sukkah must be strong enough to withstand any type of wind—whether the gentlest zephyr or the most violent gale. Even if the Sukkah is unlikely to face extreme weather conditions, it must still be built to resist them. According to Rabbi Akiva, however, a Sukkah is a temporary dwelling by definition. As such, it only needs to be able to withstand רוח מצויה, a typical wind *on land* wherever you happen to live. It is Rabbi Akiva's ruling that we follow as a matter of Jewish law.

In sharing this passage of Talmud, Kurshan writes, she was sharing a piece of Torah that was deeply resonant for her, as it contained an important message for the life she found herself living:

Ecclesiastes—

The dispute between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva is one I played out in my head all the time. "OK," I'd tell myself, "you're managing your life right now, but what if you suddenly lost your job? What if your very few friends were to leave the country? What if you had to move again?" I thought of the empty cardboard boxes collapsed in my closet. Each time I'd moved, I'd packed up my possessions. I had started saving them between moves, which seemed to make sense given how frequently I kept packing up and relocating. Suddenly the routine I had constructed for myself seemed to be as flimsy as those cardboard boxes. Yes, I was in a place where I could withstand the little breezes that destabilized me every so often—a lost bus pass, a missed appointment—but what if another gale were to blow? Where would my sukkah be then?

Ultimately, I sided with Rabbi Akiva. It is OK, I decided, to be in a place in life where I can withstand only those winds that are blowing right here and right now. Perhaps there are stronger winds that would knock me over—certainly they had knocked me over in the past, and were they to blow again, I had no doubt that I'd be flat on my back, flailing helplessly. And yet, as Matthew Arnold wrote in "Dover Beach," the world has no certitude.



but "the sea is calm tonight. The winds were not blowing at this very moment, and in my friend's parents' sukkah, where I was eating a homemade meal with good people, the colorful paper chains hanging from the ceiling were dancing in the breeze, and my volume of Talmud lay open before me. Of all the biblical holidays, it is Sukkot—when we leave the security of our homes and subject ourselves to the elements—that is referred to in the Bible as "the time of our rejoicing." Joy, then, is about the ability to celebrate what we have right now, to see our half-full cup as running over. As we are exhorted each year on Sukkot by Ecclesiastes, "I commend rejoicing in life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be merry."

Ilana Kurshan started the Daf Yomi as a newly divorced woman, and navigated Tractate Sukkah at a time of personal and professional transition. But by the time she concluded the Daf Yomi cycle, she had remarried and was the mother of three young children. It was this lesson, from this page of Talmud and from this holiday, that allowed her to face the challenges—known and unknown—with fortitude and equanimity, and it is this lesson that we are challenged to learn today, as well. There will always be people to worry about, catastrophes that will, with God's help, never happen even if they represent our greatest fears, and situations that will arise over which we will have no control. There is a poem of unknown provenance, dating back to the 13th century or so:

העבר אין

והעתיד עדיין

וההווה כהרף עין

דאגה מנין

The past is past

The future isn't yet

The present is fleeting

Why worry?²

We ruin our present happiness because we are worried about future *potential* sadness! Let us understand and apply the message of Sukkos, so we can live in the moment, and find blessing and enjoyment in the life we are living *now*.

² For a fascinating study of the history of this adage, see:
<http://seforim.blogspot.com/2010/11/whence-worry-on-murky-trail-of-aphorism.html>