

Sukkos and Syria
Day I Sukkos 5776
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky

“After five years in a cramped refugee shelter in southern Germany, Ashkan finally found a room to rent. It is newly renovated and cheap, if on the small side and a bit out of town. The 22-year-old chef, who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban killed his father, immediately set about decorating it with an Afghan bedroll, a Persian rug and an Afghan flag. The low building that flanks his new home looked unremarkable to him. But to a German, the distinctive, elongated shape is rather unsettling, and for good reason. Ashkan’s new home is in a part of [Dachau](#), a former concentration camp where the Nazis murdered 41,500 people, some in agonising medical experiments. Under the Nazis, the complex of buildings where Ashkan lives was used as a school of racially motivated alternative medicine, surrounded by a slave-labour plantation known as the “herb garden”. Asked if he feels uneasy about the site’s history, Ashkan replies with a resigned smile: “I just wanted a roof over my head.”¹”

Our sages tell us that the purpose of building a Sukkah is to live in it, and transfer our residence to it, for seven days. תשבו כעין תדורו - The Sukkah is supposed to be our home for seven days, yet the laws of constructing a Sukkah have nothing to do with constructing an actual home. You would never live in a house with only three walls, but walls of the Sukkah can be put up in three different ways-with four walls, three walls or two walls and a third of one cubit (incidentally, hinted to in the shapes of the letters of the word Sukkah- ס ‘Samech,’ כ ‘Kaf’ and ה ‘Hey’). So long as there are at least two walls and part of a third, we view the amount that remains

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/19/the-refugees-who-live-at-dachau>

unenclosed as being a closed unit. Not only that; the Halachic definition of what constitutes walls of the Sukkah is quite loose. You would never build a house with walls on the outside that didn't reach the ground. When it comes to a Sukkah, though, that is perfectly acceptable. A wall that starts from the top of the Sukkah and reaches within approximately 39 in. of the ground is viewed as though it reaches the ground. This is known as the principle of *gud achis*, or completing the bottom of the wall. The same is true if the wall starts from the ground and reaches within 10 cubits of the *sechach*- this is the principle known as *gud asik*- or completing the wall from the top. Furthermore, that the *sechach* of the Sukkah doesn't even need to be connected to the walls. If it is close enough, we invoke a principle called *dofen akumah*, or "the crooked wall," in which we construct a hypothetical wall extending from where the *sechach* begins to the ground. And when you build a home, you want to make sure your walls are solid, but when it comes to a Sukkah, that certainly is not necessary. Indeed, when it comes to the walls of the Sukkah, Chazal tell us that there does not need to be any actual physical wall present. As long as one ties strings within 10 cubits of each other, that is considered a perfectly acceptable Halachic wall, and is viewed as though there is a full wall for that Sukkah. Indeed, the strips don't even need to be around the perimeter of the entire Sukkah- only some of it. And finally, when you build a home, you want a roof over your head- not a bamboo mat. Why is it that we invoke all these seemingly nonsensical principles when it comes to building a Sukkah?

In a sermon that Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm delivered at the Jewish Center on the first day of Sukkos in 1964, he used these concepts to describe the idea that Halacha mandates and encourages illusions. As Rabbi Lamm put it, "Illusions are not opposed to fact. Illusions are what

facts add up to in the long run, what give us the ability to understand and interpret facts." On Sukkos, we leave our home for eight days and make our home in what amounts to an illusion. We treat the impermanent and illusory structure that is the Sukkah as our actual home, but we know that's not actually the case. In permitting us to use all sorts of halachic illusions in the creation of our temporary homes, Chazal were teaching us an essential lesson- while we may view our walls in our home as solid and the house on a strong foundation, any conception we have of permanence in our *actual* homes is also an illusion. This has been the experience of the Jewish people for centuries. It started from Yaakov, the wandering Aramean; it continued through 210 years of Egyptian slavery and then another 40 years wandering in the desert; it happened during the period of the crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and, more recently, before, during and after the Holocaust. Now matter how settled we may feel in the so-called *Golden Galus*, and even though we have the gift of the state of Israel, we can never take our shelter in *galus* and the safety of the State of Israel for granted.

I've been thinking of this lesson quite a bit lately, as the refugee crisis continues to unfold in Europe. That piece I read to you is simply the most shocking example of ways in which the crisis has been dealt with, and Germany is one of the countries that took refugees in! I don't think we can look at this humanitarian crisis without it evoking memories for us of the kind of journeys our own forbears took among the same European countries, some of whom closed their doors back then as well and were actually the reason for the exodus in the first place. For those of Middle Eastern ancestry, the images of Jews fleeing middle East evokes the spectre of ancestors fleeing the same region many decades ago. We are talking about prosperous Jews, who were in

the upper echelons of their communities, pillars of commerce established with multi generational families- who fled their homes and had to start over from nothing. Without a doubt, this issue is complicated on a geopolitical level- there are plenty of nuanced questions with complicated answers that we have to ask about the intentions of the refugees, and how their influx will change the democratic character of the countries whose borders they cross². And yes, Israel has been understandably reluctant to accept refugees from enemy nations; most of the refugees probably don't love Israel or the Jewish people. And yes, I have *semichah*, not a degree in political science, and I recognize that this is not my area of expertise. But all of that doesn't mean this is not a Jewish issue; it most certainly is.

Toward the end of the book of Yonah, which we read on Yom Kippur, we start to find many images more relevant to Sukkot. Yonah is on the run from God's mission to rebuke the people of Nineveh, the Assyrian stronghold, the same region where the Syrian tragedy is taking place. .

Yonah is hot, and the scripture tells us

וַיַּעַשׂ לּוֹ שֹׁמֵר סֹכָה וַיֵּשֶׁב תַּחְתֶּיהָ בְּצֵל עֵד אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה מִה־יְהוָה בְּעִיר:

Yonah built a hut and sat underneath it in the shade, until he could see what happened in the city. For Yonah, sitting in the Sukkah and enjoying some shade turned his thoughts toward the people who were not enjoying the same divine protection, and it was at that point that he began to be more receptive to God's message of repentance, return and responsibility for the world. At a time when hundreds of thousands of people are meeting an horrible and dire fate, our response doesn't

²See here for an excellent treatment by Dr. Deborah Lipstadt:
<http://forward.com/opinion/320609/reasons-to-think-before-acting-on-migrants/>

have to be to take in one of the few families likely to make it into the USA, but it does have to be one of prayer and concern. Moreover, our response has to be to internalize this lesson, the lesson that is painfully relevant to Sukkos. Let us never take for granted the walls we construct for ourselves, the roof over our heads, the sense of security and instability we may feel in life- with our families, our health, our careers or the world around us. May we know no sorrow, and may God provide us protection in his Sukkah of peace.