

Blowin in the Wind

Sukkos Day II

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Congregation Shaare Tefilla

For this morning, I had been planning on delivering a rousing sermon about the recent Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded to the great Reb Shabsai Zissel Zimmerman. I was even going to connect it with the holiday of Sukkos, especially since many of his lyrics seem to be tailor made for this day.

How many times must a man look up

Before he can see the sky?

Could that be referring to anything other than a Sukkah? I was going to speak about my hope that the expansion of the definition of “literature” gives will eventually encompass Rabbinic sermons. And then the phone calls started coming in. The first came from Ben Fine, who, along with his helpers, spent several days erecting the shul Sukkah. On Erev Yom Tov, Ben came by the shul to check in on the Sukkah and found more than half of the *schach* strewn across the parking lot. Ben is a busy man and didn’t have time to put it all back himself, so he asked me what to do. I told him to tell Stuart

that if there are not five men at the shul in ten minutes, there won't be a Sukkah. A few calls later, two men showed up- Ben Kogutt and Evan Smith had joined him to put the *schach* back up again. When we arrived at shul before Yom Tov, some more *schach* had fallen down, and Paul Geller and David Radunsky put it back up. They were not the only ones whose *schach* had fallen; for the rest of the day, I received text messages and other inquiries, and I began to think of different lyrics from Bob Dylan- "The answer, my friends..." And, in the face of that wind, everyone asked: "Can I tie down my *schach*?"

There is a halacha concerning the walls and *schach* of a Sukkah, that have to withstand a *ruach metzuyah*, a common breeze¹. That is why the tarp walls you have on your prefabricated Sukkah have to be secured- they cannot blow back and forth more than 3 *tefachim*, or about 9 inches, in any direction. The halacha is that your *schach* has to be able to withstand a normal breeze wherever you live, without any kind of assistance, but an inability to withstand unusual gale force zephyrs would not invalidate the *schach* if it were secured in place. When Ben called me about the shul Sukkah, I asked him, "In your estimation, is it unusually windy today?" Ben was emphatic on this point, and I allowed it. Why is this so significant? If I put up the frame of the Sukkah and the walls blow a little more, does that

¹ Orach Chaim 628:2

mean it's not a Sukkah at all? And if the *schach* is tied down because it can be a little windy, does that make it any less of a source of shade, and any less functional?

Perhaps we can suggest that a Sukkah has to be able to withstand the *ruach metzuyah*, the common winds blowing at the time because that is the circumstance under which the Sukkah is strongest, the one under which it thrives. More than that, though, a Sukkah is representative of the home a Jew builds, as it is the *dirat ara'i*, the temporary primary dwelling of a Jew for the duration of Sukkos. The circumstances under which the Sukkah has to stand are representative of the way a Jew must thrive and navigate this world; a Jew must be able to withstand a *ruach metzuya*, the prevalent and common “winds” at the time- literally, the *zeitgeist*. A Jew doesn't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing, but isn't easy to tell the world around us, you go your way and I'll go mine. For some, especially our children, it is the winds of peer pressure that are hardest to resist. It takes strength of character for our children to be able to say no to friends who want to eat at a non kosher establishment, or to be different and bow out when other kids are going trick-or-treating. It takes courage and spine for a Jewish college student to remain a committed, observant Jew when religious dogma is questioned and religious practice is not necessarily socially supported, and to be a voice for Israel on college campuses where

the winds of moral relativism blow strongly and anti Israel activism is rampant. It takes fortitude to calmly and rationally evaluate the latest parenting fads for ourselves as they sweep the carpool lane and engender insecurity and angst in anyone who hasn't subscribed to or know about them. But as much as a Jew has to withstand these "winds," we are allowed to move a little bit, like the walls of the Sukkah. After all, "The times, they are a changin'." Our challenge is to adhere to timeless Torah principles while making them ever relevant to the next generation, and to those who are seeking. May we apply the timeless lessons of the holiday today and beyond, as we confront and remain steadfast in the face of the winds that always blow against our Sukkah.