

CONNECTING TO SUCCOT: a PRIMER

From Hillel's Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning

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There are aspects of *Succot* which are immediately attractive to most members of a Jewish community. Who doesn't enjoy building a structure and then celebrating that building by feasting for a week with song, with joy, and celebration? Intuitively, one can immediately imagine that this activity has something to do with the last harvest and certainly the fact that we adorn our succahs with seasonal fruit reinforces that impression. Still, why is it the custom to move out of our homes and live as much as possible in this temporary dwelling. Why, at a time, when we should bring the harvest home, are we obliged to leave that home, and feel what it is like to be "temporary", "on the move", or "homeless" on a festival that was supposed to be a family celebration. Let's take a look at the origins of the festival and see if we can gain some insight into what the celebration of this joyous feast can teach the spirit.

In the Torah it is written:

LEVITICUS 23:42-43

מב בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאִזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת:
מג לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי
אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

42. You shall dwell in booths seven days; all who are Israelites born shall dwell in booths;
43. That your generations may know that I placed the people of Israel in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

YOUR TORAH NAVIGATOR

1. Verse 42 tells us that this is a festival for all Israelites and that everyone has to do it.
2. Verse 43 comes along and tells us why. But wait, if you read the verse literally, it sounds like we were put in booths, and not that we built them. The sages of the Talmud noticed this problem and wondered, "If we were placed in *Succot*, which *Succot* are they referring to? The Torah never tells us that they built *Succot*. In fact, we're never given any details about their housing conditions until this verse. Were they like the ones we build nowadays?" Or is it referring to another kind of shelter that was provided to them, miraculously, by the Holy One.

THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD, THE TRACTATE OF *SUCCA* 37b

(ויקרא כג) כי בסכות הושבתי את בני ישראל - ענני כבוד היו, דברי רבי אליעזר. רבי עקיבא אומר סוכות ממש עשו להם

"That I placed the people of Israel in booths," These were the "clouds of glory (see *Exodus 13:20-24* where it is explained that when the Hebrews traveled through the desert they were escorted by a "cloud" during the day and protected by a pillar of fire at night. Rabbi Eliezer refers to this cloud as the "clouds of glory").", so says Rabbi Eliezer .

Rabbi Akiba says, "This is referring to the actual *succot* they made for themselves."

NAVIGATING RABBI ELIEZER

Rabbi Eliezer assumes that because the verse says that God placed the people of Israel in Succot, that the verse must be referring to something that God did. Since the text never says that God built little huts for the people the verse must be considering another kind of shelter.

NAVIGATING RABBI AKIBA

Rabbi Akiba seems to be taking the verse less literally. He seems to be saying that the Exodus from Egypt created the situation in which the people had to reside in these booths for forty years. So, what the text is saying is that "I placed you **in a situation** where you had to build these succot.

CONNECTING WITH RABBI ELIEZER

According to Rabbi Eliezer, a succah is supposed to make me feel appreciative that I have shelter, that I am nurtured and to remind me that there are forces out there that could leave me feeling helpless, impoverished and alone. When we go out to the temporary dwelling we are acknowledging that the forces beyond our control have to be cooperative in order for us to have a life of plenty and meaning. By going out to the succah we attempt to be intimate with those "clouds of glory", acknowledging the limits of our power and the fragility of our lives.

CONNECTING WITH RABBI AKIBA

Rabbi Akiba seems to say that the succah accentuates the role of human creativity. Not that we passively acknowledge God's role in providing, but that we are given **situations** in life that requires us to respond. We honor the fact that we take whatever is thrown at us and that we as partners with the greater forces in history react with creativity and dignity. We remember that we are able to improvise and be creative with flexibility in our wandering. In life, we travel through time always capable of responding to new situations with appropriate solutions. A stone house with solid foundations would not have made sense in the desert. By recalling our response in the desert, we are emphasizing our role in making the most of our circumstances.

DANCING BETWEEN THE SAGES

Between these two opinions lies great wisdom. Sometimes at night when you look up to the succah's roof you can get a feeling of being enveloped, embraced by a spirit of contentment as if the world has a plan for you but you may not know what it is. So, in the spirit of Rabbi Eliezer, you relate to the succah as a reminder of those clouds of glory which guided the people through the desert and the succah may become an opportunity for a prayerful moment.

But during the day we may see things the way Rabbi Akiba does. When the weather may be just a little bit nippy, you may need to bring appropriate clothing, or have a thermos of hot soup handy in order to make your time in the succah pleasant. The weather and the outdoors present challenges and in order to create opportunity, we have to respond. One who lives outdoors, lives by their wits and that creative spirit is what makes our Jewish lives dynamic, creative and renewing. We put ourselves in the succah as we choose how to reckon with the vagaries of the outdoors.

SOME CONTEMPORARY THOUGHTS

The succah teaches us that even when we are in the comfort of our homes, we need to go out to the succah to remember that we began as slaves, without homes and that behooves us especially to use this holiday as an opportunity to help those without homes using our succah of plenty to reach out to others.