



Meaningful Sermons

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*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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Sukkot 5771 > Saving Your Life... and the World
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Saving Your Life...and the World

Note: This is a two-part sermon – the first part focusing on the personal lessons of Sukkot, the second part focusing on the global lessons of Sukkot. These parts can stand alone and do not have to be given on the same day.

ABSTRACT

Asked a skeptic of a Jew: “Why in the world would you leave the climate-controlled comfort of your beautiful home to move into a fragile shack with little protection from the elements?”

Because a house is not always a home. Because a house that warms the body, sometimes chills the soul, as a moving letter from an anguished mother to her estranged daughter illustrates: “You saw our lavish home not as a majestic palace, but as a lifeless dungeon. More than anything, you craved for a warm hug rather than a numb fortress.”

Why do we leave our comfortable homes to move into something that looks like a poor excuse for a tool shed? To nourish the soul. To save the world. (Or at least to save America.) And above all, to save ourselves.

The profound psychological significance of the *sukkah* is that it teaches us how to cope with the false security of a materialistic world, offering us lessons that are more relevant today than ever.

A two-part look at the lessons of Sukkot – the personal and the global.

HOW SUKKOT CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE ... AND THE WORLD

1. Introduction

A woman who converted to Judaism – let’s call her Sally – tells the story of her first introduction to the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. At the time when this happened, Sally had little interest in any religion, and barely noticed that one of her co-workers was Jewish. It was by chance (if we believe that anything happens by chance, that is) that she found herself knocking on the co-worker’s door on some work-related errand. It was a weekday evening, but she immediately noticed that something unusually festive seemed to be going on in this home. Perhaps it was the Christmas lights – or what looked to her like Christmas lights in the yard? But in September?

When she was invited into the home, Sally learned that these lights were leftover from the just-finished holiday of Sukkot – the Festival of Booths. “We are quite traditional,” her co-worker chuckled, “my husband builds a *sukkah* every year. We move in there during the Sukkot week.” Sally peered out back where she spied what looked like a poor-excuse for a tool shed. “Aha. Must be ... er ... fun.”

She might have passed this off as weird and forgotten all about it, except for one thing that happened. As the co-worker tried to explain a bit about the holiday to Sally, she mentioned something called “the four kinds” and pointed to a green, sword-like object and to an ornate silver box punctured with many holes. Curious Sally opened the box and inside found what looked like a large lemon, but smelled simply amazing. She held it up to her face and could not stop inhaling the sweet scent. A stray thought crossed her mind that this must be what Paradise smells like. And in that moment she realized that something profound was going on here. Astonished she asked, “*What* is this?”

What is this holiday called Sukkot, and why do we build a hut and dwell in it for seven days?

Incidentally, some Jews in Israel take this tradition quite seriously.

A few years back, a Jew living in high-rise apartment building in Tel Aviv built his *sukkah* on a public sidewalk. Now, in largely-religious Jerusalem this would not have raised an eyebrow, but in secular Tel Aviv, there isn't the same kind of tolerance. So the police arrested the guy and hauled him in front of the judge. "Now, you know you can't obstruct the public sidewalk in this manner," the judge sternly admonished. "But your honor, I have no yard, no roof, no garden!" the man wailed. "How can I dwell in a *sukkah* otherwise?" The judge pondered the problem, and then he delivered his verdict: "I am sorry. This just can't be. You must remove this structure. I give you one week to take it down."

Only in Israel, right?

But even as we do this – do we really know why? Is it just a Torah commandment we fulfill, a quaint custom we observe, or does it hold for us profound significance – both personal and global?

PART I: THE PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SUKKOT

2. An Indispensible Tradition

As we celebrate Sukkot, one of the important challenges facing us today is to make the holiday come alive by recognizing its personal relevance. Relevance is the key word and integration is the primary objective. How can we experience this holiday as a process of personal growth and improvement? How can we integrate its message into our lives, routines, and aspirations?

Mechanical holidays celebrated by rote will ultimately lead to waning commitment. Perpetuation of our rich heritage – in a crowded marketplace aggressively competing for our time and attention – cannot depend merely on guilt, fear or blind commitment. It must include a personal dimension that makes the tradition *indispensable* to our lives.

3. Jewish Guilt

The Torah tells us: "Dwell in booths for seven days...in order that your generations shall know that I housed the Children of Israel in booths when I took them out of the Land of Egypt."¹

But why should we care about the housing conditions of the Children of Israel? Just because they lived in make-shift shacks, why should we? What's this thing with Jews anyway that they always have to torture themselves? Even when they have freedom and options, why do they need to suffer?

I know what some of you must be thinking: That's Jewish guilt for you.

Why else would anyone want to leave the warmth and expanse of a richly-appointed living room and forego feasting on a mahogany table in an elegant dining room ... in order to move into a cramped little hut? And a hut that is vulnerable to the elements *by design!*

While its walls can be of any substance, the *sukkah* roof must be of vegetable matter so sparse that you can see the stars through it. And let's face it, if you can see the stars, you can see the sky; if you can see the sky, you can see the clouds; if you can see the clouds, you can see the rain ... coming down on your poor head.

And that's just for starters.

Okay, so you do it anyway. You build a shack, and you move in for a week. Other than pretending you are having fun sweating or shivering while camping out in your back-yard – when you could be enjoying the comforts of your climate-controlled home – what's in it for you?

Allow me to submit that the simple *sukkah* – as it is with everything Jewish – contains profound psychological lessons, relevant today more than ever.

Sitting in a *sukkah* can help us save the world. If not the whole world, at least America. And if not America, at least our souls.

¹ Leviticus 39:42-43.

4. A Mother's Epiphany

I would like to share with you an excerpt from a powerful and moving letter written by an anguished mother to her estranged daughter. Listen to it, and you will never see the *sukkah* in quite the same way again:

My dearest Debby,

I don't know if you can forgive me and be open to hear my words. I feel compelled to state them nonetheless, and please know that they come from the depths of my heart.

*All these years I never understood your anger and animosity towards me. But then I had a surprising experience that opened my eyes for the first time. I was invited for a holiday meal in what is called a *sukkah*. Though we sat in a makeshift hut, exposed to the cold and damp, I never felt so much warmth and love. Initially, I was frankly annoyed at being seated in a cramped shed, wondering why we were not enjoying the comfort of the home inside. But as the night wore on, and I saw the giggling children and was lifted by the moving melodies, deep chords were touched inside of me. And of all things, I began thinking of you.*

For years I thought that the best way to provide you with security was by providing you with an expensive and luxurious house. We accumulated furnishings and other material delights. We built up equity and threw fancy parties. We went on exotic trips and visited the most beautiful islands. I felt that this was the path to success – the only way to keep us safe. How wrong I was.

I now realize that all along you were trying to whisper to me that you saw our structure not as an expansive palace, but as a stone dungeon, a lifeless house. All the opulent furnishings and elaborate accruements were, for you, ostentatious distractions. All you wanted was a warm and nurturing home. And when whispering didn't work, you acted out, kicking and screaming. I misunderstood and dismissed your frustration as just another immature tantrum, reflecting a loathsome aspect of myself. Instead of seeing it as a cry for help I not only ignored you; I actually punished you further by shutting you up and invalidating you yet again. I am so sorry.

Sitting in this sukkah, and listening to the explanations given by my host about the power of the holiday, I realized the truth in his words – the sukkah exposes the superficial impermanence of our man-made structures. And at long last, I understood what you were truly cherishing and craving: the beauty of a simple home – simple and plain, but one that is filled with an inner glow and comes alive with a loving family.

This is what you wanted all along: a warm cozy sukkah, rather than a numb fortress.

So now, my dearest Debby, as the Sukkot holiday approaches, I want to make it up to you. I want to build a sukkah for us. I want to invite you to enter this little hut with me and feel embraced by the Divine Presence spreading its wings from above. Always know that you are wanted and needed. Always know that you have a safe and secure place in my home, in my life – in my heart and soul.

I have missed you terribly.

Your loving mother

5. Discovering Reality

[As this mother belatedly found out,] the material world is not our true home.

We must never succumb to the illusion that our man-made structures and mortal edifices are our natural environments. Physical life is a means, a road that leads us to a deeper, higher spiritual reality. The transitory *sukkah* reminds us that we are just travelers in this world – we are spiritual beings on a material journey, not material beings on a spiritual journey.

By no means is this reminder a simple matter. Fighting the illusion of material reality is no easy battle. The world has a powerful hold on us – so powerful that it sucks us in, like a black hole, making us think that this material existence is the only real thing. And then there comes a point where we are no longer neutral, and we become part of the illusion. In a vicious cycle, we feed it, and it feeds us. It's the blind leading the blind in a seemingly airtight matrix.

Indeed, mystics have a name for it – *alma d'shikra* – a deceptive world.² Why is it deceptive? Because it lies all the time. What you see is not necessarily what you get. Some would even say, what you see is *never* what you get. PR professionals put it this way: It's not important what happened, but what people perceive happened. Hence, spin, buzz, positioning, hooks and angles – all to create the proper package that will project an image that may or may not reflect the substance within.

A friend's grandfather used to tell him that newspapers are filled with untruths. "Look here," he'd insist, "even the date on the paper is false: today's paper was printed yesterday!" My friend used to dismiss his grandfather's ire as the distrust of the older generation. But as he grew older himself, he saw the wisdom of his grandfather's words. True, the media may tell an objective story, but there is always the possibility – which unfortunately happens quite often – that the story is subjective, distorted or worse.

That's the bad news.

The good news is that we have Sukkot – a reminder that the material world is not where it's at. Or more accurately – that the material existence conceals within profound truths that must be uncovered by us humans. Our role is to reveal the beauty that lies hidden within our deceptive world.

With all the falsities in life, there are also majestic truths. With all the hypocrisy, there can be found astonishing nobility and virtue.

Half the cure of the disease is knowing that you have it. To free yourself from the shackles of this lying world, you have to first recognize the falsity around you and not get caught up in it.

Sukkot focuses our attention on distinguishing the real from the false. Seven days of the year we are asked to physically move out of our comfort zones, and actually live in a makeshift shack, in order to internalize the lesson that our physical homes are not our definitive source of security – our true security comes from above!

² *Olam* – "world" in Hebrew – is rooted in the Hebrew word *helem*, meaning "hidden."

Sukkot provokes us to readjust our priorities. It helps free us from the shackles of material success and the illusion of power that it creates. It reminds us that our children need – more than anything else – a loving and nurturing home for their souls. Sitting in the simple *sukkah*, without the distractions of our elaborate furnishings, we can look into each other's eyes, sing together and celebrate.

Let us allow the *sukkah* to connect us like never before with our children. Let us tell them [citing the mother writing to her daughter]:

So now, my dearest child, I want to invite you to enter this little hut with me and feel embraced by the Divine Presence spreading its wings from above. Let us celebrate together and never forget the source of all our true blessings in life.

PART II: THE NATIONAL AND GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SUKKOT

6. America in Trouble

Sukkot's powerful lessons also extend into the national and global arena.

These days, some are predicting the imminent fall of the United States as a superpower. According to these doomsayers, America is about to bite the dust, following the pattern of so many other empires who have risen and fallen throughout history. The theory goes that after a nation rises in prosperity and strength, its citizens begin to wallow in wealth and luxury, and as they do so, their nation's power begins to erode due to their indulgence, arrogance, corruption and decadence.

Essentially, the thinking is that only at the outset of a nation's rise – only in its infancy and modest beginnings – can it maintain the humility necessary to keep it honest and driven toward healthy growth and success. But once the nation reaches its greatest heights in wealth and power, once it dominates the world around it and becomes an empire or a super-power, then it will inevitably succumb to human conceit and greed. These, in turn, will lead to the nation's decline and, in many instances, demise.

Every empire in history, without exception, has suffered this ultimate fate. No matter how great its power, every nation has fallen under its own weight. Can this cycle be prevented? Will the mighty United States of America ultimately go the way of all flesh?

Sukkot holds the answer to this monumental question.

7. Sukkot to the Rescue

Sukkot is the antidote to moral decadence, precisely because it calls upon us to conduct our lives within a make-shift, fragile hut, offering little protection from the elements.

Material success and prosperity can create the powerful illusion of invincibility. Despite the utter irrationality of feeling secure with anything temporary – and wealth is temporary as we have painfully seen demonstrated in the last few years – the power of success is such that it can actually brainwash us into thinking that we are safe. But the fact is that the more dependent we become on the material, the less secure we really are. Like an addiction that can never be sated, the more we rely on forces that inherently cannot provide true security and safety, the harder it is to break the habit.

Comes Sukkot and wrenches us free from the stranglehold of material comforts. Dwelling in a *sukkah* reminds us of the source of true security in this hostile world. Our man-made structures, our poured-concrete, steel-reinforced, walled and gated homes cannot truly protect us. Nor can any mortal creation.

Knowing that forest fires routinely swept through the hills above Malibu, one movie mogul built a structure of steel and glass in Topanga Canyon that could never burn down. Sure enough, when the fires came, his house did not burn – instead, it *imploded* from the intense heat.

True security does not come from our material structures but from our spiritual ones. Sukkot reminds us that true and lasting power is derived not from human innovations, but from the all-enveloping Divine presence.

The impermanence of the *sukkah* reminds us of our total dependency on a Higher Power – that our seemingly sturdy man-made shelters are nothing in the absence of His care. It reminds us that we are just travelers in this material world.

A story is told about a wealthy visitor to the home of the great 18th century Hassidic Master, the Maggid of Mezeritch. A wealthy man was appalled to find that the great rabbi's abode consisted of nothing more than a bed, a table, a chair and some books. So he asked, "Rabbi, where is all your furniture?" The Maggid replied, "Where is yours?" The visitor was taken aback, "What do you mean? I am just passing through." "So am I," said the Maggid, "I, too, am just passing through."

We are just passing through. Our physical dwelling places, as beautiful as they may be, are not our true homes. Our true home – where our true self is most comfortable – is not here in this material home or this physical body. It is in the abode of our soul, which is much more grand and beautiful than anything that money could buy.

8. The Ultimate Antidote

Sukkot is the ultimate antidote to the illusion of material security. Just when we feel completely comfortable and secure in our mansions and properties, we are told to leave our homes and sit in modest, thatched huts.

This small move can be the difference between life and death – between being smothered by the arrogance of material success and the freedom that comes from knowing that we are not slaves to man-made institutions or to other men.

The brilliance of the *sukkah* lies in its sheer simplicity. This small little hut, so fragile and flimsy, teaches us the mystery of true invincibility:

Only when we are ready to surrender our own self-made delusions of power and comfort ... only when we are ready to replace our dependence on material comforts and trust in financial wealth for dependence

on God ... only then can we ensure that we will not self-destruct ... and only then can we achieve true freedom.

9. Lesson for the Future of America

Therein lies perhaps the most important lesson for the future of the United States.

The Founding Fathers, in their brilliance, recognized that for a nation to endure it has to be built not on transient and temporal underpinnings, but on an unwavering foundation. An empire built on self-made success and material affluence ultimately will self-destruct under the weight of its self-worship. Therefore, the core foundation of the nation they established is built *not* on business prowess and financial prosperity, but on the “self-evident” truths, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

The simple *sukkah* reminds us all that our security comes from the “unalienable rights” endowed upon us all by our Creator.

As the world economy is being shaken to its very core – and questions are being raised about the future of capitalism in general, and the role of its primary steward, the United States – Sukkot gives us all pause to decide which way we will choose:

The path of the self-glorifying empires before us, whose self-absorption brought on their own demise? Or the path of humility, one that reclaims the Divine values that this country was built upon, and reintroduces those values into our homes, businesses, economies and man-made structures?

10. Unity through Joy

As we enter these joyous days, we are given power to transcend our uncertainty, our fears and vulnerabilities. We can access a greater strength that gives us the reason and the power to celebrate. Sukkot is called a

“time of our rejoicing” – a time of *our* rejoicing, us together with God. We celebrate with God our Creator, and God celebrates with us, His creatures.

Joy has some special energy that can help us now, more than ever. Joy has the power to transcend barriers. When we express joy – be it through song or dance or just a smile – we break down walls and all forms of limits and constraints.

Joy unites people. Indeed, because joy cannot be celebrated alone, we are obligated to invite guests on Sukkot. We all sit together in one unifying *sukkah*. We bind together the four kinds, which teach us that our diversity is our strength, as each one of us has a unique contribution to make to the greater good.

So, let us gather together during these upcoming days of Sukkot and celebrate. Celebrate our lives and the gift we have been given. And let us listen to the *sukkah's* silent message: Nothing is more secure in this world than the love we have for each other. Nothing is more invincible than the divine blessings in our lives. Amen.

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