



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 28, 2015  
Sukkot Day 1

**Is Sukkot a Shady Business?**



# Meaningful Sermons

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## ABSTRACT

There are some 400 billion trees on planet earth. That's about 58 trees per person. And that's a lot of shade. So why do we need sukkahs to make even more shade?

Indeed, a sukkah under a tree is as kosher as a sukkah in a house – that is, not kosher at all.

So what then is the purpose of sukkah shade? And does not the *schach* – the palm fronds or evergreen branches that make it up – come from the tree?

In this sermon, we will explore why we Jews merited this great mitzvah in the first place (it has something to do with Abraham, shade and three angels), as well as the deeply-rooted anatomy of the tree.

And we will discover that the difference between a tree and a sukkah is forests apart – one represents predictability while the other is so unpredictable that you could never guess its power.

Come branch out and sit in the shade of this sermon.

## IS SUKKOT A SHADY BUSINESS?

### 1. The Green Party

Good Yom Tov and Chag Sameach to all!

Sukkot is the greenest of all holidays. It's a time when we all join the green party as we party with greens.

Sukkot is all about vegetation – trees and plants and eco systems and nature.

The *schach* that forms the roof of the sukkah is made of plant matter – of palm fronds or of evergreen tree branches or of bamboo matting. The *lulav*, *hadassim* and *aravot* are all plants, and the *etrog* is a fruit of a tree.

And all are green – literally – even sometimes the *etrog* (though most often it is yellow-green).

Because of this, I'd like to share a few words about trees and their connection to Sukkot.

### 2. Tree Quips (Humor)

Oftentimes, humor is the best way to open a subject and capture listeners' attention. Therefore, before *branching* out, I'd like to quote a few quips to *root* our subject:

Woody Allen: "As the poet said, 'Only God can make a tree' – probably because it's so hard to figure out how to get the bark on."

Bill Vaughan: "Suburbia is where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them."

George Carlin: "Some national parks have long waiting lists for camping reservations. When you have to wait a year to sleep next to a tree, something is wrong."

### 3. Tree Trivia

And now that we are on the subject of trees...

The largest tree in the world is called General Sherman, after the Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman. (Incidentally, the Sherman Tank is named after him as well.) The largest tree is a Giant Sequoia (*Sequoiadendron Giganteum* is the proper Latin term) and it is located in the Sequoia National Park near Fresno, California.

By volume, the General Sherman is the largest living single-stem tree on earth. However, it is neither the tallest living tree on earth (that distinction belongs to the Hyperion, a redwood), nor is it the widest (both the largest Cypress and largest Baobab have a greater diameter), nor is it the oldest (that distinction belongs to a Bristlecone Pine).

With a height of 275 feet, a diameter of 25 feet, a trunk size volume of 52,513 cubic feet, and an estimated age of 2,300–2,700 years, it is just plain the largest! (And it ranks also among the tallest, widest and longest-lived of all trees on the planet.)

While the General Sherman is the largest currently living tree, it is not the largest tree known to humans. The Crannell Creek Giant, a redwood, once stood near Trinidad, California, and was estimated to have been 15 to 25% larger than the General Sherman tree by volume. But sadly, it was cut down in the mid-1940s.

### 4. More Tree Trivia

If that's not enough tree trivia for you, let me tell you that there's a whole category of trees whose life-mission is providing shade. This kind of tree typically has a large, spreading canopy.

Some of the most popular shade trees in temperate countries are oaks, maples, ashes and elms. In Africa, the most popular shade tree is the Umbrella Thorn tree which (you guessed it) is shaped like an umbrella.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vachellia\\_tortilis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vachellia_tortilis)

In Israel, the most popular shade tree is the Sycamore (famously painted by the Israeli artist Reuven Ruben).<sup>2</sup>

A great deal of what we know about trees comes from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, better known as NASA. Yes, NASA explores outer space and does not make botany its main mission. But NASA also looks on Planet Earth from on high and documents its oceans, mountains and forests. NASA then shares this information with ecologists and botanists.

Thanks to NASA, we can calculate roughly how many trees we have on earth. Trees, both leafy and otherwise, reflect sunshine in very particular patterns, making it possible for satellites to map – and computers to count – strips of land where trees grow. Botanists can then sample those places – forests, suburbs, parks, even city streets – assume a tree density, multiply by acre or hectare, and calculate.

In 2005, there were 400 billion, 246 million, 300 thousand, and two-hundred-and-one trees on our globe.<sup>3</sup>

That means the earth had 58 trees per person! And that's a whole lot of shade.

Considering how many trees there are, it would seem pretty difficult to find an unshaded place to build a sukkah.

## 5. A Sukkah under a Tree is a House

There is an entire tractate in the Talmud dedicated to the sukkah and, “coincidentally,” it is entitled ... *Sukkah*. It states:

One who constructs his sukkah under a tree, it is considered as if he constructed it in his house.<sup>4</sup>

Just like a sukkah that is built in someone's home is not kosher, so too, a sukkah built under a tree is not kosher.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qODDwrIIQwQ>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96758439>

<sup>4</sup> Sukkah 9b.

But this wording seems peculiar. Why compare a sukkah under a tree to a house?

And, anyway, what's wrong if a sukkah is built under a tree? Sure, we know the law that the *schach*, the foliage that covers the sukkah, must be a tree/plant product which is disconnected from its root. But why? If your sukkah is covered with a kosher *schach* (which is a product of a tree), why can't it be situated under a tree?

This becomes even more perplexing when we read a Midrash regarding the origins of the sukkah.

## 6. The Midrash: A Shady Story

The Torah portion of *Vayeira* begins after Abraham circumcised himself. It was an unusually hot and sunny day – even for the Middle East. As he was convalescing outside his tent, Abraham saw three travelers (angels in disguise) approaching. Ever the hospitable embracer of guests, Abraham bid them rest from their journey in the desert.

In descriptive detail, the Torah tells us how Abraham pampered his guests, wining and dining them to their hearts content.

It starts off with Abraham telling the travelers:

*Please take a little water and wash your feet. And rest yourselves under the tree.*<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned, it was a blazingly hot day and reclining in the shade of a tree in the desert is no small luxury.

The Midrash<sup>6</sup> tells us how God paid Abraham back for this great mitzvah of welcoming guests and acting with kindness towards them:

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<sup>5</sup>Genesis 18:4.

<sup>6</sup>Genesis Rabbah 48:10.

“You [Abraham] said, *and rest yourselves under the tree* – by your life I shall reward your children when they are in the desert, when they are settled in the Land of Israel, and in the time of Redemption to come.”

[From where do we know about the reward to the Children of Israel in the desert?] *He spread out a cloud for shelter*<sup>7</sup> – this refers to the desert. From where do we know about [the reward in] the Land? *You shall sit in sukkot for seven days*.<sup>8</sup> From where do we know [about the reward] in the time of Redemption to come? For it says, *And a sukkah shall be shade [for you] by day from the heat*.<sup>9</sup>

## 7. What this Midrash Teaches Us

God promised Abraham that because he provided shelter and shade to these three wandering travelers, God would provide shelter and shade to Abraham’s offspring in three different places: 1) in the desert wilderness with the Clouds of Glory; 2) in the Land of Israel with the festival of Sukkot; 3) when the Redemption comes and the sun will blaze with unfettered energy, God will provide a protective sukkah then too.

This Midrash teaches us that the mitzvah of sukkah that we celebrate today is all in the merit of our father Abraham’s actions back then,<sup>10</sup> when he provided shade and hospitality for his weary guests.

But if the whole purpose of the sukkah is to provide shade, and if the whole merit for the mitzvah of sukkah is due to Abraham providing shade under his tree for his guests, than shouldn’t a sukkah *under a tree* be even more holy and more kosher than a sukkah which is not under a tree?

<sup>7</sup> Psalms 105:39.

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 23:42.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 4:6.

<sup>10</sup> See Etz Yosef ad loc.

After all, the shade is greater under the tree, and we would be emulating our father Abraham exactly.

Why then does the Talmud disqualify a sukkah under a tree comparing it to a sukkah built in a home?

## 8. The Kabbalistic Answer

The answer lies in the Kabbalah.

*Ohr*, light, is the Kabbalistic word for energy. The Jewish mystics teach that there are two types of energy in the universe: *ohr yashar* and *ohr chozer*, directed light and redirected light, active energy and redirected energy. The sun is an example of *ohr yashar* – a luminary that emanates light.

The moon is an example of *ohr chozer* (lit., returning light) – which reflects the light of the sun. A teacher transmits ideas in a form of “direct energy” – giver to recipient. A student “returns” energy, and sharpens the mind of the teacher, *m’talmidei yoser m’kulom*,<sup>11</sup> from my students I learned the most (more than from my teachers and colleagues).

Light shines from above to below; energy flows from heaven to earth, from the Creator to the creatures, energizing and sustaining them. This is called *ohr yashar*, the direct energy that sustains all things, including nature, which of course includes trees.

Then there is another type of light and energy that is unique to human beings on earth – energy generated by human initiative. Through our deeds and actions, through our Torah, mitzvot and prayer, we – you and I – have the power to reflect God’s divine light, and shine it back from below to above. Like moonlight, our holy actions take the energy that God pours into our world and creates an unprecedented new energy that did not exist before we did our deed.

This is called *ohr chozer*, an indirect energy, or redirected light that shines back up from below.

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<sup>11</sup> Talmud, Taanis 7a.



Think of this analogy:

Imagine the Creator emanating a tremendous amount of light, like a massive spotlight, whose light energizes the entire universe. Now imagine that one individual person takes a tiny mirror and reflects some of that light back up to heaven. The direct light from the spotlight is *ohr yashar*, it is nature – part of the creation, utterly consistent and predictable. The reflected light generated by the human act is *ohr chozer*, an unexpected, unprecedented and unpredictable light, which results only when a person does something new.

This human initiated energy is generated especially through teshuvah, when we repent for our iniquities and return to our core selves.

## 9. Sukkah Light and Tree Light

In a Chassidic discourse, delivered on the second day of Sukkot 5674 (1913), the Rebbe Rashab<sup>12</sup> (elaborated upon in 5720 (1959) by the Lubavitcher Rebbe) used this Kabbalistic principle of *ohr yashar* and *ohr chozer* to explain the phenomenon of a sukkah under a tree.<sup>13</sup>

Trees are part of nature; they grow predictably and provide a full array of benefits to the universe and the human race. They have a root, trunk, branches, leaves, fruit. Trees are *ohr yashar*. Among their many contributions, trees provide shade because trees, by nature, are shade providers. When God created the world, He established that trees would help us breathe, provide food, wood and shade.

A sukkah, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. A sukkah is the result of human actions. A sukkah doesn't grow; it is built by man. A sukkah is a temporary hut with a flimsy roof, which casts a shade – the shade of *ohr chozer*, a light that is generated by our actions.

Indeed, the mystics teach that the sukkah is a result of our return to our essence (*teshuvah*) over the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur holidays.

<sup>12</sup> Hemshech Ayin Beis vol. 1 p. 413.

<sup>13</sup> See also Ohr HaTorah Derushim L'Sukkot p. 1708.

Following the *ohr yashar* light created on Rosh Hashanah and committed to on Yom Kippur, we then unpack this power on Sukkot. We transform the “direct” *ohr yashar* light of the High Holidays into the indirect *ohr chozer* energy generated by our sitting in the shade of the sukkah. The shade of Sukkot creates an even deeper form of light, which overcomes darkness and reflects back upward through our actions.

This explains why sitting in a sukkah under a tree disqualifies the sukkah. Because the entire idea of the sukkah is about the human being initiating and creating a new light and new shade -- the new and unpredictable light of *ohr chozer*. If one builds a sukkah under a tree -- under the natural shade of *ohr yashar* -- it defeats the entire purpose.

This is also why the Talmud uses the unique language of comparing a sukkah under a tree to a sukkah in a house:

A house represents *seder hishtalshilut*, the cosmic structure -- the normal and conventional order of things. It is normal and natural for a human being to reside in a house, a predicable structure. In this sense, a tree and a house are both results of the same direct energy, *ohr yashar*. Thus, if one builds a sukkah under a tree, energy-wise it's exactly as if the sukkah were in a house and disqualified from generating the *ohr chozer* energy.

## 10. Difference between Abraham and Us

But there's one more question to be answered:

So why then did Abraham shade the travelers under a tree and not in a sukkah? If Abraham, our father, was the catalyst for this great mitzvah of sukkah, a mitzvah which reveals *ohr chozer*, why then did Abraham not build a sukkah for his guests?

There are two great distinctions between the new, refracted light we create today in our sukkahs and Abraham's: 1) Abraham lived before the giving of the Torah; 2) the three travelers that Abraham shaded were angels.

Before the giving of the Torah, there was a schism between heaven and earth. Heaven shone down on earth but not in a way that earth could shine back up to heaven. With the giving of the Torah, heaven and earth kissed and joined as one – and forever after the lights from above fused with the lights down below.

Abraham's action was limited because the world then was structured in such a way that *ohr chozer* couldn't yet happen. Thus Abraham tapped the only energy possible, the energy of the predicable order as embodied in the shade of the tree. Abraham could only help his fellow man – shade him from the sun – in structured and natural ways.

Secondly, Abraham wasn't dealing with his fellow men but angels. Angels are predictability personified. Angels have no free will, cannot change their nature, and move only in their divinely pre-programmed rhythms.

When dealing with such creatures, the shade of a tree, predicable *ohr yashar*, is fitting. You and I – and you and I alone – have the power to be unpredictable, to be daring – to go where no one has gone before – to build and enjoy such an unexpected structure as the sukkah, and thus it is only you and I – and not the angels visiting Abraham – who sit in the shade of the sukkah.

## 11. Lesson For Us (Conclusion)

This teaches us an invaluable lesson about the power of man and the power of Sukkot:

As we sit in the sukkah, we realize how revolutionary this experience is. With our hands and minds and hearts, we have generated and drawn new divine light into this world; by constructing and sitting in a man-made but heaven-blessed sukkah, we have constructed a new light, a light that has never existed before!

With our human effort we have built a new world, greater in many ways than the mighty edifices built from on high.

How?

As Abraham taught us from the beginning: the sukkah is a result of and reward for helping strangers; for shading, protecting and caring for and welcoming our fellow human beings. The sukkah teaches us that the greatest *ohr chozer* we could ever generate is when we help and befriend, when we shade and shelter, when we shield and welcome our fellow Jews.

But not just Jews; all human beings. Indeed, on Sukkot we welcome and elevate the entire world. Sukkot is a universal holiday, which in Temple times featured 70 offerings brought for the 70 nations (as we recite in our Sukkot *musaf* prayer).

The natural world around us is beautiful, full of light and energy – as the 400 billion trees in the world attest.

But through our actions, turning the leaves of trees into *schach*, we can, you and I, truly shade the world and bring about the promise that God made to us through the Prophet Isaiah:

*And a sukkah shall be shade [for you] by day from the heat.*<sup>14</sup>

May it be so with the coming of the Redemption speedily in our days.  
Amen!

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 4:6.