



SUKKOT

Sukkot 1

From Homeless to Home: What Sukkot Teaches us about Human Dignity and Refugees

October 14, 2019

FROM HOMELESS TO HOME: WHAT SUKKOT TEACHES US ABOUT HUMAN DIGNITY AND REFUGEES

ABSTRACT

Homelessness is one of the saddest things to witness. Our very humanity, our very dignity, is violated when we don't have a nurturing home we can call our own.

Why then do we leave our comfortable, secure homes, and move into a Sukkah, a temporary hut, which is more like a homeless shelter of sorts?

The answer to this perplexing question will also provide us with a formula and with guidance in how to help solve the homeless crisis in the USA and abroad (roughly 1 in every 590 Americans is homeless), as well as address the latest refugee and immigration crisis.

And here we shall see the remarkable and prescient relevance of a mitzvah – given to us over 3300 years ago, and being performed annually ever since – to contemporary issues and dilemmas. What biblical Tent City teaches us about Tent City today.

Dwelling in a Sukkah teaches us the true meaning and root of human dignity and security, and how we can achieve it. Ironically, the only way to truly feel and be at home is if first you aren't.

Three meanings of the word Sukkot teaches us three steps to building a nurturing home in this world – three steps to transitioning from displacement and homelessness to creating a warm home which we can call our own.

Including the ultimate home – the Third Temple with the coming of Moshiach.

1. Homeless (Joke)

Gut Yom Tov! Chag Samayach! Happy Sukkot.

A decade ago, during the 2008 recession, a Wall Street investor was walking down the street when he sees a homeless beggar standing on the corner, with an outstretched arm. He compassionately gave the man a dollar, and then, trying to console him, told him: Don't worry, my broker told me that the recession will soon be over and things will get better for all of us.

The homeless man looks into the investor's eyes and replies: "I am your broker..."

2. Why the Sukkah – A Homeless Shelter?

On a positive note, we are, thank G-d, not in a recession; most of us are experiencing some level of prosperity.

And here we are coming from the High Holidays, optimistic that G-d will bless us with a healthy and prosperous year in all possible ways.

Why then, one may wonder, do we now celebrate a holiday in which we leave our comfortable, secure homes, and move into a Sukkah, which is a temporary hut, more like a homeless shelter of sorts?

Homelessness is one of the saddest things to witness. Our very humanity, our very dignity, is violated when we don't have a nurturing home we can call our own.

So why are we commanded with the mitzvah to dwell in a vulnerable booth for seven days?

The Torah¹ explains the reason for residing in a Sukkah to remind us that G-d had the Jewish people reside in *Sukkot* when they were freed from Egypt, traveling to the Promised Land.

But isn't the temporary shelter of the homeless an odd way of celebrating freedom? Wouldn't large mansions be more apt?

Would it not be a greater celebration to sit in our secure homes to feast over our success, succeeding against all odds in leaving the proverbial tent city of exile for a safe and permanent home?!

3. A Solution for Homelessness

The answer to this perplexing question will also provide us with a formula and guidance in how to help solve the homeless crisis in the USA and abroad, as well as address the latest refugee and immigration crisis.

And here we shall see the remarkable and prescient relevance of a mitzvah – given to us over 3300 years ago, and being performed annually ever since – to contemporary issues and dilemmas.

Dwelling in a Sukkah teaches us the true meaning and root of human dignity and security, and how we can achieve it. Ironically, it is only by living in a Sukkah and experiencing a certain “homeless” vulnerability that we come to appreciate the value and learn how to create true nurturing homes for all people.

But before we get to the answer and the formula, let me briefly describe the crisis.

4. Homelessness in the United States

Roughly 1 in every 590 Americans is homeless.

In December 2018, The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development released *The 2018 Annual*

¹ Leviticus 23:42-43.

*Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.*²

The goal and purpose of the 100-page document is to report on the state of homelessness in the United States so as to prevent and end it.

The report opens with Key Findings, the first being:

On a single night in 2018, roughly 553,000 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States. About two-thirds (65%) were staying in sheltered locations—emergency shelters or transitional housing programs—and about one-third (35%) were in unsheltered locations such as on the street, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not suitable for human habitation.

According to this, about 1 in every 590 Americans is homeless.³

The report defines the term “homeless” as describing “a person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.”

Over the past few years we even see a phenomenon where homelessness becomes normal! Tent cities, where homeless individuals gather together to form some sort of homeless city and community, have sprung up across the country. From Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon to Skid Row in Los Angeles to Camp Hope in Las Cruces, New Mexico to Homeless Charity Village: Akron, Ohio, homelessness has become part of society.

And this is just the United States, the richest and most prosperous country in the world, arguably the world leader in the good life and the pursuit of happiness.

What happens when you turn to Syria, Darfur, Brazil, Africa, where millions of homeless people live in streets, refugee camps, shanty towns, favelas and tent cities? How is it possible that millions of human beings are

2 <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2018-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

3 More details: Half of all people experiencing homelessness were in one of five states: California (24% or 129,972 people); New York (17% or 91,897 people); Florida (6% or 31,030 people); Texas (5% or 25,310 people); or Washington (4% or 22,304 people).

California and New York had the largest numbers of people experiencing homelessness and high rates of homelessness, at 33 and 46 people per 10,000. Hawaii and Oregon also had high rates, with 46 and 35 people per 10,000.

Nearly half of all unsheltered people in the country were in California (47% or 89,543). The state with the next largest number of people experiencing homelessness in unsheltered locations was Florida, with seven percent of the U.S. total (13,393 people).

In four states, more than half of all people experiencing homelessness were found in unsheltered locations: California (69%), Oregon (62%), Nevada (56%), and Hawaii (53%).

Four states—Maine, Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts—sheltered at least 95 percent of people experiencing homelessness.

without home in 2019?

And how about the millions of people who do not feel at home even when they may have one. Of the young men and women who are emotionally homeless and spiritually evicted. Of those who commit suicide because they have no place to be at peace.

We live in very opportune and very challenging times.

We've put people on the moon yet we cannot put people into homes?

We have cars that drive themselves yet we cannot put a roof over someone's head?

We have skyscrapers and mansions yet a teenager feels lost. We have social networks with 5000 friends yet we are lonely. How many people live in homes but never really feel at home?

Homelessness is a very real and immediate crisis. More than half-a-million people homeless in the world's foremost democracy is an indictment on humanity: How can a single person, living in an advanced society of Teslas and iPhones and Prime Now go without a home to live in? It's unconscionable.

The Torah, the book of G-d's wisdom, has a remedy and prescription for everything. Homes and homelessness is an essential and basic human need. Surely the Torah here too has much to say on this matter.

5. Sukkot: Homeless Shelter

Sukkot provides us with the answer to these and many other questions.

The root of human dignity – and the need for a nurturing home – is the fact that human being is not an animal in the wild. Every person is created in the divine image,⁴ charged and empowered with a divine mission to make his or her corner of the world a divine home, a *dirah b'tachtonim*.⁵

In order to do so, every individual has to be protected and nurtured, beginning from conception through childhood and beyond, in order to build up self-confidence and self-esteem which will empower the person to effectively use their resources to fulfill their calling.

That is why a healthy home is so vital for the human being – it provides the warm hearth, the secure nest, which nurtures the child, validating and affirming the child's inherent value and divine image. Indeed, this nurturing begins during pregnancy: for nine months we spend submerged in our mother's wombs – completely protected in a warm and loving nest. A wholesome home fosters attachment and connection.

And this is why homelessness is so demeaning and devastating to the human being – it reflects detachment and

⁴ Genesis 1:26.

⁵ See Tanya chapter 36.

disconnection, and defiles the inherent divine image in which we were all created. Our very humanity, our very dignity, is violated when we don't have a nurturing home we can call our own.

6. Homelessness Leads to Finding a True Home

This explains the role of Sukkot: Our true security and power does not come from our own man-made devices and structures. It does not come from building and living in beautiful and well-fortified mansions. By dwelling in a Sukkah for seven days we are reminded that it is G-d – in Whose image we were all created – that provides us with the ultimate security and protection.

סֵפֶת תִּשְׁבוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים פְּלִי-הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת: לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דַרְתֵּיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

For a seven day period you shall live in booths. Every resident among the Israelites shall live in booths, in order that your generations should know that I had the children of Israel live in booths when I took them out of the land of Egypt. I am the L-rd, your G-d.⁶

It is G-d Who freed us from Egyptian slavery, and it is G-d who nested us in the booths when they were taken out of Egypt.

In other words, Sukkos teaches us that our true security comes not from our strong buildings, but from the divine image in which we were created. Our inherent dignity by virtue of our being created in the divine image is the reason we need a home, and why homelessness is so humiliating and demoralizing.

It's not our homes that remedy homelessness; as we see, many people have beautiful homes and yet feel unloved; they may live in exquisite mansions, but don't feel at home. Rather, it's the other way around: Our divine dignity is what nurtures and provides us with true security, and then we know how to build loving homes.

Dwelling in the Sukkah – a *dirat arai*, a temporary residence – for a week reminds us that first we must feel embraced by the divine shelter. Once we know that we are essentially homeless without our connection to the divine, then we can go ahead and build and dwell in secure and permanent homes (*dirat keva*) all year round.

⁶ Leviticus 23:42-43.

7. How to Address Homelessness

Now we can understand how Sukkot offers us a formula to address and help resolve the homeless and refugee crisis:

Sukkot is a holiday that doesn't just address homelessness, but obligates each and every one of us to be homeless for a week a year, in order to wake us up and make us aware of the inherent dignity of every human being: that we are all homeless without G-d's protection and nurturing.

Personally knowing and experiencing Sukkah "homelessness" is the only way to ensure that every person always has a home and always feels at home.

That awareness compels us to do whatever we can to assure that every person on earth has a nurturing home.

8. The Name Sukkot: 3 Reasons

In addition to making us aware of the need to provide each person with a home, Sukkot also provides us with a three-step formula how to build a nurturing home in this world – three steps how to transition from displacement and homelessness to creating a warm home which we can call our own.

We can derive this from the Midrash, which offers 3 reasons why Sukkot is named Sukkot.⁷

*The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Sukkot...*⁸ Sukkot means literally, booths, as it's written: *And Jacob traveled to Sukkot and built himself a house, and for his cattle he made Sukkot, booths; therefore he named the place Sukkot.*⁹ These are the words of R' Eliezer. The sages say that Sukkot is but the name of a place, as it states: *They journeyed from Succoth and camped in Etam,*¹⁰ just as Etam is a place so is Sukkot a place. Rabbi Akiva says Sukkot is but the Clouds of Glory, as it says: *And the Lord shall create over every dwelling of Mount Zion and over all those summoned therein, a cloud by day and smoke, and splendor of a flaming fire at night, for, in addition to every honor, there will be a shelter.*¹¹ This refers only to the past; how do we know the future? For it states: *And a tabernacle shall be for shade by day from the heat...*¹² and it says: *And the redeemed of Zion shall return, and they shall come to Zion with song, with joy of days of yore shall be upon their heads.*¹³

⁷ Mechilta Bo 14. cf Beshalach 18.

⁸ Exodus 12:37.

⁹ Genesis 33:17.

¹⁰ Leviticus 33:6.

¹¹ Isaiah 4:5

¹² Isaiah 4:6

¹³ Isaiah 35:10.

To sum up the three opinions of the etymology of the word “Sukkot.”

1. Rabbi Eliezer: Sukkot is the literal meaning of booth or hut.
2. The Sages: Sukkot is the incorporated name of a city or place — Sukkot, or Tent City
3. Rabbi Akiva: Sukkot refers to the Clouds of Glory that enveloped the Jews as they traveled from Egypt to Israel. And will once again envelope us with the coming of Moshiach, the Redemption, speedily in our days.

All three opinions of Sukkot seem to be mutually exclusive, or at least very different. Sukkot is either a physical item, a geographical place, or a spiritual ideal. Which one is it?

9. 3 Steps To Redemption 1) Booth, 2) Place, 3) Glory.

Not only aren't the three opinions arguing with one another, they are actually completing and complementing one another. The three opinions are the 3-step solution to solving all homelessness, displacement and loss of human dignity.

And this is exactly why we celebrate Sukkot, to this very day, in 2019.

Homelessness compromises human dignity. Every form of exile, slavery, *galut*, violates our dignity, living without a true home.

The ultimate purpose of our lives is to transform our hostile world into a divine home, which by extension creates a nurturing and loving home for every person.

This process began when the Jewish people left Egypt and were commanded to build a divine sanctuary – a *mishkan* and *mikdash* – “build me sanctuary and I will dwell among them.”¹⁴

But how do we take a people from slavery, from exile, homeless and lost, dust-covered diamonds with concealed, even forgotten, dignity, to redemption, to a home, back to their dignity?

This is why G-d had the Israelites wander in the wilderness and sit in booths, and why we commemorate and celebrate this experience – *ושמחת בהגך* — every year on Sukkot: to teach us the process of transforming a hostile wilderness into a home for G-d and man.

And this is done in three stages, all encompassed in the Sukkah: Booths, place, glory.

Step 1. The first thing G-d did is provide us with literal booths, tents, huts, shelters to protect us from the physical and spiritual elements, climates and challenges.

After a prolonged slavery, with your dignity violated and shamed for years on end, the first thing you need is shade overhead and warmth in your heart – some show of love to comfort your weary soul. That's the literal and obvious

¹⁴ Exodus 25:8.

definition of a Sukkah.

But it doesn't stop there.

Step 2. Once you have separate homeless shelters and tents, they extend and unite together and create a tent city – a location named Sukkot, a place of refuge, of warmth, of peace, of being at home.

Now the homeless have a community, where they are welcome and feel they can rebuild their lives.

But this too is still not enough. You also need the spirit, the glory of human dignity and divine inspiration to nurture and nourish the homeless soul, and create a fully rounded loving home.

Step 3. This is Sukkot as the Clouds of Glory.

A true place of refuge has to not only protect the body, but also feed the soul. One could live in the biggest mansion or live in the penthouse of the most luxurious skyscraper and still feel homeless. The Sukkah, the place of a refuge, is not only a physical structure and a material shelter; it also makes your soul feel comfortable.

In addition to physically *being* at home one must also naturally *feel* at home. And for that you need the Clouds of Glory – a divine embrace that, like clouds, surrounds yet permeates, envelops yet transcends, pierces yet hovers, illuminates yet defies words.

You only know it when you feel it: Total acceptance and unconditional love. In other words: the feeling you get when you sit in a Sukkah!

10. Homey Shelter

These three meanings of Sukkot reflect the trajectory and journey of life. When we leave slavery we are all homeless. We leave slavery and begin our journey to the Promised Land without a roof over our heads. Then we build a Sukkah, the first step of freedom, the step of creating shade and beginning to manifest freedom. Then we build with and for others, building a community, creating a place, a space, a map marker known as Sukkot, Tent City. And finally, the Clouds of Glory, the glory and celebration of the divine within and surrounding us.

Homelessness is the loss of dignity, honor and human grace. This is exile. And too many forces in this hostile world of *golut* tries to strip away our dignity. Too many forces try to make us feel like we are unwelcome, like this isn't our home, like you are lost. But Jews have always known that you may be able to kick the Jew out of his home but you can never kick the home out of the Jew.

This is precisely why (in addition to commemorating) we celebrate Sukkot in a temporary hut and flimsy homeless (not home) shelter: To remind us that human dignity is inherent and ingrained, gifted and embedded into us by the most dignified force, the Creator Himself. But sometimes we are exiled and enslaved and we forget it. Sitting in a flimsy temporary hut reminds us that even here our glory, our dignity is complete. We just have to restore and remember it through the three-step process instilled in the name Sukkot itself:

A literal booth. A geographical place. An embrace of glory and dignity.

11. Homeless for 2000 Years

We Jews have experienced homelessness in various forms for close to 2000 years. We have been banished from our own homeland, our homes and Holy Temple destroyed. Ever since the destruction and exile from Israel, we have been “homeless” – squatting in foreign lands – displaced both physically and spiritually.

Throughout Europe, Russia, Africa and the Middle East, Jews have never truly been at home. How many times have we been expelled from our homes and evicted from our lands? How many Jewish families have been left without a roof over their heads? Three times (or more) a day, no matter where a Jew lives, stands, or travels, he or she turns towards Jerusalem, beseeching G-d to return us home.

Even in the Land of Israel today, where millions of Jews reside and are citizens of a Jewish State, Jews pray to return home spiritually, as they say in the holiday prayer: “due to our sins we were banished from our land.” Even in sovereign Israel divisiveness and disunity is still a sad reality (just look at the current election fiasco) and we have not completely returned to our complete and rebuilt home.

But our “homelessness” in exile has taught us the true meaning of a home and dignity, and the true way to build that home – the recipe for building the ultimate and permanent home, the Third Beit Hamikdash.

As the Midrash concludes:

This refers only to the past; how do we know the future? For it states: *And a tabernacle shall be for shade by day from the heat...¹⁵ and it says: And the redeemed of Zion shall return, and they shall come to Zion with song, with joy of days of yore shall be upon their heads.*

The Sukkah upon our heads today will surely result in the Third and Eternal Temple upon our heads immediately and in a revealed way.

Chag Sameach and a Good Yom Tov!

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¹⁵ Isaiah 4:6