

The Sukkah as Religious Poetry

Sometimes it feels like it would be nice to live in a world of alternative facts. Facts are hard. Most of us want to run away, hide in the sand. Can you imagine a world where we had to have the news blaring at all times and there was literally no respite? Yikes. For a minute, I want to live in an imaginary world... somewhere over the rainbow where I can be at peace. A little illusion that all is well.

The good news is that Sukkot provides exactly that illusion. an imaginary world for us... Think about all the things we are supposed to imagine on Sukkot. Maybe the sukkah represents the *Ananei Kavod*, the clouds of glory that covered us through the wilderness, or the actual Sukkot that were built as we walked through the desert. Maybe it represents the *Mishkan*, a tabernacle. We even invite imaginary guests in the form of *Ushpizin*.

The rules of the walls of the sukkah underline this idea of an imaginary world.

Halachically, the rules for the walls of a sukkah are, to say the least, FLEXIBLE. There are at least FOUR “let’s pretend” laws in building the sukkah. First, If the walls of the sukkah are 10 tefachim tall, but they do not reach up to the sechach the law of *gud asik mechitzta* treats it as if it goes all the way up to the heavens. Second, A wall can have a gap of up to three tefachim (handbreadths) and still be valid. This is based on a concept called '*lavud*.' *Lavud* means that we consider any gap of less than three tefachim as though it's connected. Third, if there is an awning attached to the wall of a sukkah, the law of *dofen akumah* says we just pretend it's a crooked wall and sit under the *schach* which is attached to the awning, as if it were attached to the wall itself. And finally, there's *tzurat ha-peTach* which states that if you don't have sufficient material to build the requisite number of walls, then it is enough to place two poles on either end and a beam across them. As long as it's 20 amot high, it counts as a doorway, which then counts as a wall.

“I think a little imagination is exactly what we need if we are to live the religious life.”

There is a cool sermon from 1964 by Rabbi Norman Lamm, the former president of Yeshiva University. He points to these illusions as the cornerstone of faith. He points to the line in the Gemara: *Teshvu k'Ein Taduru*. You dwell in the sukkah AS IF you live there. The whole thing is based on an ACT!

I love this.

Lamm: “Freud saw religious illusion as a dangerous thing. I see it as a key to surviving in our world. ... A little illusion makes possible those things in life that are beyond exact, consistent measure: love, beauty, faith. It is also precisely what we need to build a life of meaning.”

I think that's the way *Simchat Hachag*, the joy of the holiday, works, as well. Being joyful on command requires a bit of illusion... living AS IF we are living in a world that is

functional and that all is well. But we live in an illusion of *simcha*. We decide that even if our walls aren't perfect, we are going to choose to be happy.

It's what Paul Ricoeur called Second Naivete. Let's say a child grows up to believe in the Tooth Fairy. Then one day, when he's about eight years old, he sees that Daddy is actually putting a dollar under his pillow. But he decides, just because it's a lot more fun and a lot more interesting, to keep believing that the Tooth Fairy.

We're not idiots. We know that the walls of some sukkahs don't exactly look like walls. We know that the world is a bit of a mess. We know that people are sick and injustice is everywhere. But we decide to believe that all is okay-- not because we want to deny that truth-- Cheshvan will come soon enough, but because we need a little time off, a little time of living AS IF.

Think of the idea of *Sukkat Shalom*. What kind of a peace is a *sukkah* of peace? Do we really want *shalom* that is so flimsy? Are we actually asking God for peace that is so temporary? I would rather have a *binyan shalom* (a building-- made out of brick!!! of peace), or better yet, a *mivtzar shalom* (a fortress-- with titanium gates and moats-- and security guards). Something strong, something that lasts. But like a *sukkah*, peace and happiness require a bit of flexibility, a few ambiguities and a blind eye to some of the imprecise measurements. Not everything is going to fit exactly right. To have real peace, to have real *simchat hachag*, joy, you're going to need a little imagination and a few patch ups whenever a new storm comes around.

I'm okay with a little illusion every so often. It's how we celebrate when life is hard. It's how we pray for healing even as someone lies dying. It's how we survive, generation after generation.

The truth is, back inside the house, the bills pile up, dishes need to be cleaned, and real life does not hide. Cheshvan is literally a few days away. We'll get back to the reality of life soon enough. But for now, we get to hang out in the *sukkah*, where we can have a Messianic vision of sitting down together in peace. We sing the Hallel as if we have not a care in the world. For a short time, *chag* is a chance to step out of our reality a bit.

With a little imagination, Sukkot can help us to envision a world of peace and real joy, where walls, or perhaps more importantly, doors, can be rebuilt again and again, imperfectly and with plenty of loopholes. Chag Sameach.