

Building A Home Beyond The Physical

Yom Rishon Shel Sukkot

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I always loved houses. From a young age, you were likely to find me drawing blueprints and exterior renderings of homes on the back of my kids' menus at family restaurants. Flash forward a few more years. My love of houses grew, and I started to look at real estate online (mind you, that required me to use dial up, which probably most of you don't remember!) My mom and I would go to open houses each Sunday. In fact, it was my reward for studying my bar mitzvah Hebrew. I loved exploring new residential spaces. Flash forward some more. I decided to go to The Ohio State University to study architecture I thought I wanted to be the one designing homes. Yet, here I am, a freshly minted rabbi. How did that happen?

Our Torah portion today may shed some light. This week is a special one in honor of the first day of Sukkot, from the book of Leviticus. Twice we are told there shall be a festival of Sukkot, or booths. The question I have, is why? The rationale for such an important ritual has always seemed less clear to me than the other two seven-day festivals, Passover and Shavuot.

We read "You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am your God."

I found two compelling explanations for this ritual; one physical and the other metaphorical. One explanation which makes logical sense is that the Israelites actually lived in the booths. According to this opinion, the Israelites began making them at the start of the rainy

season because of the cold, as people do when they camp, and that is why our text commands that booths be made at the beginning of the rainy season. In that case, what the future generations are supposed to know is that the Israelites made their way in the wilderness and today we recount the historical journey of our ancestors.

Rashi, a medieval torah commentator, says we are actually misunderstanding (sukkot). He says they sukot aren't physical booths. Rather, sukot means "clouds of glory" which God spread upon the Israelites to protect them when they were in the wilderness and "found no settled place" for 40 years. But God was with them, and they "lacked nothing."

Friends, many of us feel as if we too are in the wilderness and have lost what we considered to be our physical homes. Our Hillels, our schools, our synagogues, etc. This year, we even decided not to build a physical sukkah at Hillel due to the pandemic. However, does that mean we cannot celebrate sukot? Does not having a Hillel building mean that we cannot be a community this year?

No, in fact, I would argue Sukkot reminds us that many of the things which we think are permanent, like our homes, really are not. If we read Sukkah as Rashi suggests, it does not matter as much if we can be in our Hillel, our schools, our booths. Because when we look around, at the zoom boxes, our friends who we can see distantly, the activities we do now that we used to think we did not time for, we can remind ourselves of what our ancestors may have felt as they came outside to see the clouds of Glory. God was with them and they lacked nothing.

Now let me come back to my opening story. I thought I wanted to build physical homes. Really, I felt empty. Years later, I decided I wanted to build Jewish community. Now I feel like I have everything I need.

This is a year to remind ourselves of the metaphorical meaning of Sukkah. The Israelites were wondering for 40 years, never having a permanent home. However, they still built a home, with God, friends, family and everything that matters. Together, we can build that home too.