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## IS OUR JUDAISM PORTABLE?

A colleague, Rabbi Jonathan Gross, served as a rabbi in Omaha, Nebraska for close to a decade. Nebraskans, as you may know, take their football and their home team — the Cornhuskers — very seriously. And so, it wasn't unusual that someone from the local community posted the following question on the rabbi's blog: "Is it permissible to hang a Huskers banner in my sukkah, and can I watch the Huskers game in my sukkah?" The rabbi answered yes to both questions, "if that's what you normally do in your home." The rabbi went even further, explaining that if those were activities normally done in his home, then he *should* hang the banner and watch the game in the sukkah because, for the week of the holiday, our sukkot are

supposed to become our true homes.

The Talmud, *Sukkah 2a*, famously tells us: "*tzei mi-dirat keva: go out from your permanent home, veshev b'dirat arai, and enter into your temporary home.*" Recreate the atmosphere of your regular home in this temporary hut, which is why the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 639:1*, instructs us to not only to eat in the sukkah but to also sleep in it, bring your nicest things into it — treat it like your real home, hang your banner, watch the game.

But why should we relate to something that is clearly a temporary dwelling as our permanent home? Why not simply treat the sukkah for what it truly is — a *dirat arai* — a temporary hut? Does not the halacha disqualify a sukkah that is created in

a permanent way? If so, the sukkah should be treated as the transient dwelling it is. We can visit it and even recite the Kiddush inside its flimsy walls, but not *live* in it. The Torah, however, commands us *basukkot taishvu* — to *live* in our sukkot as we do in our permanent homes all year.

Which is it? Are our sukkot temporary dwellings, or are they our real homes to live in as we do our permanent ones?

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, *zichrono livrachta*, taught that the sukkah comes to symbolize the wandering Jew in exile, going from place to place, trying to make his home in someone else's country — in another people's culture. The secret to surviving in another nation's land, suggested Rabbi Lamm,

is to fill our sukkahs — to imbue our foreign surroundings wherever we find ourselves — with our Torah values and unique way of life. This approach to the sukkah is illustrated by the well-known halacha that a sukkah constructed on a boat, train or wagon is valid because Torah can be observed anywhere and everywhere.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters* no. 8, offered a similar explanation as to why the Torah was given in the wilderness and not in the holy land of Israel: although Israel is the ideal place to practice the Torah, it is not the only place. Revealing the Torah in the wilderness, Rav Hirsch asserts, shows that the Torah was meant to be observed anywhere in the world.

To me, this is how Judaism has survived to this day. One Sukkot, I was privileged to spend the holiday with my brother and his family together with my sister-in-law's Grandma Blanca, of blessed memory. At the time, Grandma Blanca was 99. She had fled Germany in 1936 when she was just a teenager. She watched as my wife observed the mitzvah of the *arba minim*, benching over the lulav and etrog in the sukkah. My wife turned to Grandma Blanca and asked if she would like to perform the mitzvah herself. Grandma Blanca was not an observant woman, so she was at first reluctant but, at the same time, I saw she was excited. She took the lulav and etrog and before reciting the blessing, pulled the etrog closer to smell its beautiful fragrance. As she breathed in the scent of the etrog, she immediately began to cry and blurted out: “we had such a nice life until Hitler!” She continued to cry.

My wife tried to be of some comfort telling her: “Grandma Blanca: Hitler is

gone, but we are still here.” Grandma Blanca composed herself and together they made the bracha and shook the lulav.

It was a powerful moment I will never forget, for it symbolized the great success of Jewish history and continuity. In my mind, the Jewish people still exist and thrive *because* we still shake a lulav and etrog — *because* we still practice our Judaism. We have survived centuries of persecution because we have learned to maintain our traditions in whatever culture or country we find ourselves. We exist as a vibrant community in America today because of our grandparents who carried their Jewish traditions from Europe. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who did *not* toss their tefillin off the boat when they came to these shores and to the many Jews who, despite not being raised with much Yiddishkeit, nonetheless have embraced their Jewish heritage. *They* are the reason we remain a strong and vibrant people.

The British Historian Arnold Toynbee said that what the world can learn from the Jew is how to live in the diaspora. He foresaw a time when minorities and ethnicities would no longer live in their native countries and would be challenged to preserve their culture in other people's lands. The holiday of Sukkot, suggested Rabbi Lamm, possesses the secret to any people's continuity — transporting our unique identity to new and foreign cultures.

Perhaps that is why the prophet Zecharia, 14:19, speaks of non-Jews one day observing the holiday of Sukkot and being punished if they do not. Rabbi Lamm suggested that the punishment of extinction is simply the natural consequence of not learning

the lesson of the sukkah: to transport our values to a new culture. If a given minority fails to retain their own heritage in whatever new environment they find themselves, they will quickly lose their identity and eventually they will cease to be.

And therein lies the fundamental idea behind the *Ushpizin*, the special guests (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David) who visit our sukkahs every day of the holiday. Each personality of the *Ushpizin*, suggested Rabbi Lamm, symbolizes the idea of surviving spiritually in an alien setting: Abraham was told “*Lech Lecha*” — to leave his birthplace and travel to an unknown place. Isaac, although he remained in the same place his entire life, was made to feel almost like a stranger in his own home, never understood by own his wife and children. Jacob was forced to run from his brother Esav for fourteen years, all the while carrying on the traditions of his father Isaac. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and lived out his life in a foreign country, but somehow maintained the *demut dyukno*, the image of his father and the values of his family. Moses, before he rose to greatness, also had to flee from Pharaoh and hide out in Midian for many years. Aaron, at the most critical juncture of his life, was left alone to lead the people when Moses ascended Har Sinai to receive the Torah. Finally, David spent much of his life running from various enemies, Jewish and non-Jewish alike.

Each member of the *Ushpizin* was forced to manage in a foreign environment, but they all maintained the traditions of their forebears. All brought their unique Jewish values and lifestyle with them, no matter where they went.

We are no different today. We send our children off to secular colleges where staying Jewish is challenging. Our work and careers often place us in environments less than conducive to Jewish values. With the rising numbers of young men and women becoming more observant than the rest of their families, many do not have parents or siblings who share their new-found passion for Judaism. How do we conduct ourselves on campus, at work, or when we are with our own friends or family who may be less observant or have a different outlook on life? Do we remain proud of our heritage or do we make excuses for our religious observance so we can fit in? Are we trying to inspire others to follow in the ways of Torah?

All of these situations require us to ask ourselves: are we living the lesson of the sukkah? Are we bringing our Torah to all these places, demonstrating that Jewish values apply *everywhere*, not only in the synagogue or beit midrash, but to all parts of our existence?

In my 25 years of engaging our less affiliated brothers and sisters in Jewish life, I have found this aspect of Judaism to be its most compelling feature: that the Torah pertains to *every* part of our lives. Recently I was having lunch with an MJE participant — Josh, a medical student studying for an MD/PhD. Although Josh's Judaism consisted only of a Pesach Seder and Yom Kippur services, he has since become more committed to Torah observance because of his

fascination with Jewish medical ethics. The whole idea that Judaism pertains to what he does professionally was such a turn-on for him. He had no idea that the Torah had anything more to do with his life than what he saw at the Seder table or in synagogue on Yom Kippur.

I shared with Josh a powerful teaching by the great Jewish judge, Rabbi Dayan Grunfeld: Three of the four sections of the *Shulchan Aruch* deal *not* with ritual law — with how we pray or celebrate the holidays, but rather with how we confront everyday life. The *Choshen Mishpat* section of the *Shulchan Aruch* deals with torts, property law and contracts, namely, how we handle power. *Even Ha'ezer* contains laws pertaining to marriage and divorce, i.e. relationships and *Yoreh Deah* focuses on food (kashrut) and laws of family purity (*nidah*). Three of the four sections of the *Code of Jewish Law* deal with how we approach the basic human drives for power, food and physical intimacy. Only one of the four sections of the *Shulchan Aruch*, namely, *Orach Chayim*, deals with ritual law, the laws of prayer, holidays, Shabbat etc. The majority of Jewish tradition pertains to everyday life. Judaism has as much to do with what happens in the marketplace, the kitchen, and the bedroom as it does the synagogue. Yiddishkeit was never meant to be confined to shul. Like the sukkah, the Torah was meant to be brought into every part of our lives, into everywhere and anywhere we find ourselves. The vessels of the

Tabernacle were carried on poles so they could be taken from place to place. However, once the holy vessel, be it the Menorah or the Altar, was brought to its resting place to be used as part of the service, the poles would then be removed until it was time for it to be transported again. This was the case for all the vessels of the Tabernacle except for the Ark of the Covenant, to which the Torah (Shemot 25:15) prohibits: *lo yasuru mimenu* — “Do not remove the poles.” Why were the carrying poles permanently affixed to the Ark and why is the Torah so emphatic that Ark's poles never be removed? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on that verse, suggests that it is because the Ark housed the Tablets representing the Torah and the Torah must always be portable. The Torah must be ready at a moment's notice to be brought to wherever it is needed, be it in the workplace or on college campus.

I truly believe this is how we, the Jewish people, are still here. The secret to Jewish continuity is the secret of the sukkah. Never to allow the Torah to be confined to any one place but instead apply it to all facets of human existence.

If we can meet that challenge, we will not only have learned the lesson of the sukkah but we will also have fulfilled our mission to be an *Ohr la'goyim*, to bring the light of Torah to all people and to all places.



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