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Sukkot **Arba Minim, Arba Devarim** **Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez** *Class of 2018*

The core essence of Sukkot, is joy. This is evident from the way in which the Torah speaks of the holiday in Bamidbar 29:12,

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.—Seven days you shall observe a festival of the LORD.

וּבַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי
מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֹאכֶת עֲבֹדָה
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְחַגְתֶּם חַג לַיהוָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

And in a Devarim 16:14-15, the quintessential song of the holiday,

You shall rejoice in your festival ... and you shall have nothing but joy.

וְשִׂמְחָתָ בְּחַגְךָ ... וְהָיִיתָ אֶךְ שִׂמְחָה:

There are a lot of things to do leading up to the holiday; building our sukkah, buying the perfect lulav and etrog, decorating our sukkah, and preparing all the meals. By the time the chag begins, we are left to sit and dwell, to just be present, to celebrate.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz teaches that sukkot is a holiday for gladness. Part of the holiday is being connected to the divine in a physical way. The sukkah's physical form is like a hug, three sides framing an open embrace. As such, the inner sense of the holiday of Sukkot is not one of remembering anything in particular, but welcoming the divine hug.

Our sukkah has three sides, and remains open on a fourth. Inviting people to draw close.

But what does that mean for how we live in this liminal space? Simplistically, it sets us up for welcoming. Without a door to open or close, our sukkot are perpetually open to whomever may come. This is something which we have to know, accept, and embody. Beyond inviting our friends and neighbors, ushpizin and ushpizot, we must also make it a place which is welcoming to all those in need of a sukkah.

Our world today needs more sukkot - places of open acceptance, places where people seeking comfort can rest, places where those in need of a meal can be fed, places filled with simcha.

As the Jewish community becomes more integrated with society, and society become more integrated with the Jewish community, sukkot is an opportunity to remind ourselves of what an important and powerful thing that really is.

We push ourselves out of our homes and into our yards, driveways, and sidewalks. We are pushed to interact with people we otherwise may never see. We push ourselves and our neighbors out of our comfort zones as we bring out Judaism into the world.

While our Jewish communities can be self-contained, they must also be open to the world. My chevruta, Jennifer Geretz (2020) taught me this week how clearly this can be seen in Sukkot.

Our sukkah has walls, not permanent ones, but enough to create a distinction between what is inside and what is outside. Meanwhile it also has a roof which we can see through, reminding us that there is a big sky under which we are but a small part. Our communal roofs and walls are only as strong as we make them, and we have the power to change them because they are not permanent.

Our sukkot only live for this one week a year, but we live amidst our communities all year. We must endeavor to find balance with our identities as both Jews and as a part of our global society.

Why do we put so much effort into making our sukkot pretty, if they are only a temporary dwelling? Why do we spend so long picking out the perfect lulav and etrog if we are only going to use them for a week?

Well, the Gemara explicitly tells us to! In Shabbat 113b, it states quite clearly:

Make before Him a beautiful sukka, a beautiful lulav, a beautiful shofar, beautiful ritual fringes, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in His name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.

עשה לפניו סוכה נאה ולולב נאה
ושופר נאה וציצית נאה ספר תורה
נאה וכתוב בו לשמו בדיו נאה
בקולמוס נאה בלבלר אומן וכורכו
בשיראין נאין

Ok, so now that we know why we do it. Why do we really do it?

I like to think that beautifying our sukkah allows us to enjoy being in the space. It makes us want to spend time in the sukkah, to feel like it is really our dwelling and a place where we want to connect to others and to Hashem.

But perhaps it goes even deeper. Perhaps by beautifying our sukkah, lulav, and etrog we find a way to bring Hashem close. To remind ourselves that everything is a gift from God and everyone is created in the image of God.

Chag Sameach!



Rabba Melissa Scholten-Gutierrez combines her personal, professional, and educational experiences to establish meaningful Jewish experiences and connections wherever she goes. She currently serves as the Community Camp Ambassador for the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, working to increase the number of children attending Jewish overnight summer camp by stewarding a scholarship and incentives program, coordinating community marketing, and serving as a central camp resource. Rabba Melissa holds undergraduate degrees in Psychology & Social Behavior and Sociology from the University of California, Irvine and received a Masters in Social Work with a health care concentration from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.