



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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SUKKOT

Permanence and Impermanence

Context: In order to properly fulfill the mitzva of sukka, the Rabbis declare, “[Over the seven days of Sukkot] *asei sukatcha keva v’diratcha arai*, treat your Sukka as permanent and your homes as impermanent.”

This deceptively simple statement is much more powerful than first appears. As our year begins, the festival of Sukkot is designed to transform our view of permanence and impermanence.

Our homes, our neighborhoods, our cities—all that we feel to be stable and real—are, in the long run of history, fleeting and temporary.

What, then, is truly permanent?

The frail sukka, the seemingly temporary dwelling that not only captures our nation’s beginning; but mirrors the totality of our people’s passage, nationally and individually, across the face of history. *The festival of Sukkot is designed to teach us that the sukka, and the enduring journey it represents, is all that is truly permanent in our lives.*

If the mandate of this festival is to work, however, the sukka must physically be a *dirat arai*, a temporary dwelling, according to halachic specifications.

Only if the sukka is itself physically impermanent, will our dwelling within convey the dual message: *What appears to us as permanent is*

actually temporary; and what appears to us as temporary is actually permanent.

There is only one problem...

If you were to write a handbook concerning the construction of a temporary dwelling, what would you write?

I assume that you would instruct the reader to create a structure that is entirely impermanent; a structure that, as a whole, is not built to last.

Strangely enough, however, that is not the path taken by Jewish law.

According to halacha, the walls of the sukka can be as permanent as brick and mortar. Only the *schach*, the ceiling of the sukka, must be impermanent in character; temporary material, with enough openings to allow in the rain.

The question is, therefore, obvious...

If the sukka is primarily defined by its impermanence, why doesn’t Jewish law insist on a sukka that is temporary in its entirety?

Why allow for walls that are insusceptible to change; relying on the schach, alone, to define the sukka’s character as a dirat arai?

The answer lies in understanding that the variability allowed concerning the Sukka’s walls, counterintuitively, teaches us a lesson of constancy.

Our experiences over the course of our people's journey have varied greatly. At times, as a nation, we have felt safe and secure; at countless other times, we have been vulnerable and exposed. Personally, we experience moments when we feel ascendant; while, at other times "cold winds blow," and we are threatened with descent into despair.

As different as these phases may seem, however, they are fundamentally the same.

In each case we travel along a path open to the sky. We struggle to fashion secure and meaningful life paths through our efforts, but we ultimately remain subject to God's will from above.

The message of the Sukka's construction thus becomes clear...

Sukkot created out of solid bricks and mortar, and Sukkot created out of flimsy

plywood planks, are halachically identical; each are temporary structures, covered by schach, open to the sky.

We should never take times of national or personal security for granted. And, conversely, we should never despair completely when the going gets rough. Our history and personal experience have taught us that life can, and will, "change on a dime."

The character of the "walls" surrounding life's passages vary widely. The appearances created by those walls, however, can be deceiving.

Truth lies in the "temporary" schach above our heads, symbolizing the transient nature of our efforts and accomplishments in the face of God's eternal will. ■

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."

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