

TIMELESS TORAH

SUKKOT - LEAVING HOME TO FIND HOME WHAT SUKKOT TEACHES US ABOUT WHERE WE BELONG

The Question of Belonging

Sukkot, and the journey we make from our house to the outside, raises the question of what it means to belong. At first glance, the sukkah is a temporary dwelling, reminding us of our vulnerability and dependence on Hashem. But the deeper experience of leaving our home and sitting in a fragile structure also changes our sense of place and identity.

Robert Putnam's study of social capital in *Bowling Alone* (2000) explores what happens when people remain active but become increasingly disconnected from one another. He describes a society in which participation in shared civic and communal activities has declined. People may still engage in interests and hobbies, but increasingly without the shared routines and relationships that turn individual activities into communal life. His argument is that community depends on repeated forms of shared participation, and that the erosion of these connections weakens values such as mutual trust and reciprocity.

Putnam's argument is that communal structures and routines help build social capital. In a similar way, the physical structure of a sukkah can deepen our spiritual connections. There is a well-known debate in the Gemara about what precisely the sukkah represents. According to one opinion, it commemorates the Clouds of Glory (*Ananei HaKavod*) that enveloped the Jewish encampment in the Wilderness. A second opinion contends that our sukkot commemorate the actual booths in which the Jewish people lived during their forty years of wandering. This is the dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva in Sukkah 11b.

Rav Hirsch explains that the essential point of both approaches is similar. The Wilderness was a place where the Jewish people were unprotected and lacked the natural resources on which human beings ordinarily depend. Their existence therefore depended directly on Hashem, whether through the miraculous Clouds of Glory or through the physical means by which they constructed their own shelters.

The Sefat Emet (d. 1905) takes this idea further with a fresh perspective. The opinion that the sukkah commemorates the actual huts of the Jewish people means that in the Wilderness, the Divine revelation was tangible; the people felt Hashem's protection in the same way as we feel the protection of bricks and mortar. Our duty nowadays, in contrast, is to use our sukkot to recreate the Clouds of Glory, using our flimsy structures to make our connection to Hashem more real and less abstract.

Communal Sukkah, Personal Space

American academic Brené Brown, in *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (2017), offers a different but complementary insight into communal belonging. For Brown, belonging is not the same as fitting in. Fitting in involves adapting ourselves in order to gain acceptance. Belonging, by contrast, means entering into relationship without surrendering our integrity. It is the capacity to be connected while remaining ourselves.

This is the underlying idea, according to Rabbi Isaac Sher (d. 1952), behind the above-mentioned dispute about the reason for the mitzvah of sukkah. On one level, invoking the Clouds of Glory focuses on the people as a collective. The clouds surrounded the nation as a



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whole, providing shared protection. The alternative view, however, emphasises the individual: each family in the Wilderness built its own hut. The Divine care that sustained the Jewish people was therefore not only collective but personal. Each person encounters Hashem individually and brings something singular to the shared life of the people.

That distinction speaks directly to Brown's idea of belonging. To belong does not mean to disappear into the group, but rather to stand within it while remaining oneself. Rabbi Sher's insight is that the sukkah holds both truths at once. We are part of a greater community, yet each person lives within their own sukkah. The profound spiritual space of the sukkah holds together both individuality and solidarity.

Mundane Miracles

In another approach to the reasons behind the mitzvah of sukkah, Rabbi Yoel Schwartz (d. 2022) sees these two views as describing the two dimensions of Jewish existence that the Wilderness years represented. Looking at the sukkah as a commemoration of the Clouds of Glory sees Sukkot as a continuation of the Exodus, when Hashem's presence was dramatic and unmistakable. The physical huts of Sukkot, on the other hand, remind us that the Wilderness was also a transition towards the next stage of Jewish history, where holiness must be found within ordinary life.

In this way, Sukkot reflects a recurring pattern in Jewish history. Rabbi Yaakov Emden (d. 1776) famously wrote that the continued existence of the Jewish people through exile appeared to him as a greater miracle than the miracles Hashem performed for our ancestors

in Egypt, the Wilderness and the Land of Israel. The greatest miracles are not always the most dramatic ones. Sometimes Divine providence is experienced through the ordinary structures of life, sustained over time.

This is why Sukkot matters so much after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Having been lifted into spiritual intensity, we now return to ordinary life with a renewed sense of meaning. We leave our permanent homes and enter a temporary dwelling, reminding ourselves that our physical security is never absolute. Yet the sukkah itself is a physical structure. We do not escape the ordinary world; we learn to discover Hashem within it.

This is belonging in the fullest sense of the word. Sukkot contains what we might call a horizontal perspective. As we gather our harvest, we put aside our sense of security in our physical possessions and move into a temporary dwelling, reconnecting with the people around us. At the same time, Sukkot has a vertical perspective, reminiscent of the Clouds of Glory. The sukkah teaches us to look beyond our immediate physical needs towards something higher.

The sukkah therefore brings together the two dimensions of belonging. We belong to a community, but we do not lose ourselves within it. We live in the physical world, but we do not allow it to become our entire horizon. We build a structure, while remembering that our ultimate security comes from Hashem. Sukkot teaches us that genuine belonging means finding our place among others, while remaining rooted in something greater than ourselves.

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