

Sukkos for All Generations by Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt

בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים כל האזרח בישראל ישבו בסכת למען ידעו דרתיכם
כי בסכות הישבתי את בני ישראל בהוציא אותם מארץ מצרים . . .

“You shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are homeborn in Israel shall dwell in booths; that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. . .” (Leviticus 23:42&43)

Why was the Torah so concerned to remind us that we dwelt in booths after leaving Egypt? If G-d wants to remind us of his protecting hand and the miracles he performed for us during that period of transition from slavery to statehood, we ought to celebrate the descent of Manna, the miraculous fountains of the desert, the victories against various attacks, the frustration of Bilam’s designs, etc., etc. We may be guided to a deeper understanding of the Sukkos experience by examining other references to Sukkos in the Torah. When Jacob returned from the House of Laban, and after the potentially dangerous encounter with Esau, we find him stopping over in a locality called Sukkos. In fact, it was so named by Jacob. ויעקב נסע סכתה ויבן לו. “And Jacob journeyed to Sukkos and built a house unto himself and he made booths for his cattle. Therefore he named the place Sukkoth (booths)”. (Genesis 33:17)

What is utterly surprising in this little story is the fact that he called the city Sukkos for the booths he built for his animals. He also built a house (or houses) for himself and his family. It would have made more sense, it would have been more dignified to call the city ‘Bayus’ (House) or Battim (Houses) for his building efforts for humans?

Human beings have essentially the same basic needs as all living organisms, more specifically members of the animal world. We need food to survive; we need shelters to protect us against a sometimes hostile environment; we must procreate to preserve the species. Human genius, human creativity, human skill has

the capacity to surround these basic needs with cultural splendor. We can cover these rudimentary requirements with layers of glamorous often aesthetic garbs which may, at times, obscure the inner core, the fundamental basic need.

This seems to have been particularly true when it comes to human shelter. Man has always been a builder; from the tower of Babel to the skyscrapers of the 20th century. It is customary in the history of civilization to identify eras and their architectural styles; Roman, Gothic, Baroque, etc. It is almost an act of defiance; look I am not as vulnerable as an animal; I can protect myself against my fate. The builders of the tower of Babel and many modern builders, at that, believe they can even defy G-d himself. Our ingenuity can give us the security that we do not have naturally.

Our forefather Jacob wanted to teach his children and us an important lesson. Yes, I built a Bayis, a house, with my technological skills and cultural devices; but do not forget! What it all boils down to, is Sukkoth, it is nothing more than a "shelter" a feeble protection of our very vulnerable, temporal and precarious existence. Under all the glory and glitter, all our buildings are the same Sukkos that I built for the animals.

Egypt was the master builder, the land of the pyramids; the prime of ancient culture, defiant of G-d and man. It is in the shadows of these pyramids and the culture they stood for that the Jews lived for 400 years. It is not surprising therefore, that we read in the Torah regarding the first station as the Jews left Egypt: ויסעו בני ישראל מרעמסס סכחה "And the Jews travelled from Raamses and they rested in Sukkos" (Exodus 12:37). The first stop after Egypt had to be Sukkos—the beginning of a deprogramming process that continued for 40 years in the desert, not to trust brick and mortar but to trust G-d.

So, G-d said, when you come to your land and you will build and create superstructures with your great ability and architectural and engineering skills, celebrate Sukkos so: "that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell

in booths when I brought them out of Egypt.” There they were safe, as safe as you if not more so, under the protecting hand of G-d. Do not be fooled by your own creations. Remember your dependence on G-d and trust in Him alone.