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It is Sukkot, Zman simchateynu, season of our joy, and we Jews who have always sought security, rootedness, even when we feel insecure and uprooted, are commanded at this time to build a flimsy structure that both starlight and rain can penetrate. We then must dwell in it and celebrate for seven or even eight days no matter our emotional reality acknowledging our connection to the change of seasons, our place in nature, and our hope for coming rains that will sustain us.

As we celebrate Sukkoth a few questions arise. First how to define what a sukkah is? Yes, the Torah itself tells us “leshev b’ sukkah” - to dwell in one-but unlike the commandments for building the ark of the covenant, with all of its detail, so many cubits wide, so many cubits high, adorning it with ornately prescriptive materials, when it comes to sukkah there are no special instructions. It is the Talmud that works out the loose sukkah framework we follow today creating a temporary structure with four sides, but one of them open, and a roof, covered with natural material, that is not sealed, but allows in starlight. Even this clarification leaves plenty of room for creative interpretation-There is no IKEA instruction manual upon which to rely - you can go online and order a premade sukkah with metal or plastic poles, or you can let your imagination run wild and create a booth of any material as long as you are willing to celebrate in it.

Another question - what is the essential reason that we are commanded to make them? Are these flimsy booths truly structures of joy? Now, The booths may have been derived from a utilitarian purpose. We acknowledge that it is the time of harvest- farm

workers in the Middle East would temporarily live in such structures, sleeping there overnight as they rushed to bring in the produce of the fields before it spoiled. There was no time to be wasted going back and forth from home to field.

But interestingly this commandment is first given to a nomadic people - who are not yet farmers and have nothing to harvest- and are already dwelling in such booths. Can it be possible that their simple fragile tent of refuge will one day be a center of celebration? It is a little bit convoluted logic, but that is Judaism for you!

And that brings us to another question: What if there is no harvest - or as an urban you are not connected to a harvest process anymore- not to mention - in times like today, when we don't feel like it is a season of joy? How can we possibly celebrate Sukkot? Naphtai Ziv Yehuda Berlin, also known as the Natziv notes that one celebrates anyway - pointing out that in the seventh year -the sabbatical year, when you refrain from harvesting and live off of stored food, you still build a sukkah and observe the festival. You see, even if we feel alienated from joy, or the process of harvesting - that is the time when we precisely need to put ourselves into the sukkah to both remember where we came from and what we truly are about! We as Jews are not to be defined by our challenges, but by our values and our traditions!

Now here we are in Boston, one of the most settled places of this country. And there is something so evocative, especially after the metaphysical and psychological struggling of Yom Kippur, about entering a sukkah and being surrounded by nature.

In this time when many of us are alienated from our natural surroundings, going from temperature controlled house to temperature controlled cars, perhaps dwelling in the sukkah is a call to return to our true place in this earth - and with humility,

understand what we have built around ourselves- steel and concrete- is yet fragile and temporary. Is the tradition reminding us that we who think we are so powerful are just ephemeral dwellers ourselves? Our longevity as a species depends upon our impact on the earth itself -we can be either a blessing or a curse. Will our connection to the holy and a reminder from whence we came, help us make the right choice? Dwelling in the sukkah can remind us to seek to rebalance our connection with nature and not live over and apart from the natural world or from each other.

I find it fascinating that the first text we read after Sukkot is Breshit -with its two creation stories - and I think that there is a connection. There we recall Eden as a *pardes* - an orchard. *Pardes* is the same word for paradise. When we read that text and remember the eviction of Adam and Eve from the garden, I wonder, Is the Sukkah really a *zecher*- a reminder of that time -to which we might long to return? I read that text with a bit of ironic humor, for if you read carefully there you understand that Adam and Eve's punishment is to be tillers of the garden and life makers. They are told to go forth and imitate the deity, given ultimate responsibility for the earth's well being.

The great mystical scholar of our time, Daniel Matt in his book, "The Essential Kabbalah," shares an obscure text supporting this reading. He writes, "We all know the famous story near the beginning of Genesis about the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It is clear that God expels Adam and Eve from the garden. But the Zohar asks a startling question: Who threw whom out of the Garden? Through a very artistic and radical reading of the text, the Zohar suggests that Adam expelled God from the Garden! (You see the Zohar tries to give us the hidden meaning - it says he threw Et from the garden - which the Zohar understands is the *shechina*)-This seems impossible

or heretical. But one way to understand this is that in some sense we're still in the Garden — we just don't realize it because we've lost touch with the spiritual dimension of life. The challenge is to reconnect with the divine reality that we have banished from our lives, to welcome God back in.”

We are still in the garden - think about it! This earth is such a unique place in the universe, so beautiful, so supportive of life like no other of which we know. Is Sukkoth a call to really remind us that we live in a majesty we have failed to comprehend. For our own good, and the good of the earth itself, it needs us not to dominate it but actually to care for it. When we throw it out of balance in our delusions of grandeur we really end up hurting ourselves. Just look at the floods in Tennessee and North Carolina , and the crazy heat in California

The hope is that this holiday renews in us the belief that the fragile can protect the beautiful. We are stronger than we think - and can return to being keepers of the garden. We can begin living in balance, partnering across national lines with each other to lessen global warming, to care for the diversity of life, and to celebrate the blessing of being able to live in this amazing garden.

Perhaps the essence of Sukkot is a reminder that that mystical teaching really got it right.

We are in Eden and it is time for us to understand and live accordingly!

Shabbat Shalom