

## ***Standing Strong on Shaky Ground: Sukkot & Vulnerability***

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*Sukkot* is the holiday that takes place five days after *Yom Kippur* when people create temporary structures. It is a joyous holiday, but the experience of dwelling in a three-walled structure with a roof that exposes us to both the stars and the weather can bring up feelings of vulnerability. This collection of texts is a meditation on the holiday of *Sukkot* and our own relationship to this vulnerability, and can be explored in community or individually.

### **Text 1: Leviticus 23:42-43**

<p>(42) You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, (43) in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths (<i>sukkot</i>) when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God.</p>	<p>מב) בִּסְכּוֹת תִּשְׁבּוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בִּסְכּוֹת: (מג) לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דִּרְתֵּיכֶם כִּי בִסְלוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:</p>
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- From this Torah quote, what is the purpose of the holiday of *Sukkot*?
- Knowing that the Israelites built *sukkot* in the wilderness, what emotional resonances does the *sukkah* have?
- How are we supposed to *feel* during *Sukkot*?
- Does *Sukkot* feel like a vulnerable holiday to you? Why or why not?

**Text 2: Talmud Sukkah 2a:12<sup>1</sup>**

<p><b>Rava said</b> that the <i>halakha</i> is derived <b>from here: “In sukkot shall you reside seven days”</b> (Leviticus 23:42). <b>The Torah said:</b> For <b>the entire seven days,</b> <b>emerge from the permanent residence</b> in which you reside year round <b>and reside in a temporary residence,</b> the <i>sukkah</i>. In constructing a <i>sukkah</i> <b>up to twenty cubits</b> high, <b>a person</b> can <b>render his residence a temporary residence,</b> as up to that height one can construct a structure that is not sturdy; however, in constructing a <i>sukkah</i> <b>above twenty cubits high, one cannot render his residence a temporary residence; rather,</b> he must construct a sturdy <b>permanent residence,</b> which is unfit for use as a <i>sukkah</i>.</p>	<p>ורבא אמר מהכא (ויקרא כג, מב) בסוכות תשבו שבעת ימים אמרה תורה כל שבעת הימים צא מדירת קבע ושב בדירת עראי עד עשרים אמה אדם עושה דירתו דירת עראי למעלה מעשרים אמה אין אדם עושה דירתו דירת עראי אלא דירת קבע</p>
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- What are the resonances of a temporary vs. permanent residence? What are your experiences with each? How do you feel when you are in a permanent vs. temporary place?
- What is the purpose of electing to stay in a temporary residence? Have you ever done this before?

<sup>1</sup> The Talmud is the “rabbi Reddit room,” a compendium of Jewish law and narrative from the 5th century where the rabbis of antiquity attempted to parse out urgent questions about Jewish practice, while sharing deliciously awesome and strange stories. The text can be a little challenging to understand, so the non-bolded words are added for clarity by Steinsaltz, a translator and teacher of Jewish text.

**Text 3: Mishnah Sukkah 2:3**

<p>(3) If one constructs his <i>sukkah</i> on top of a wagon or on top of a ship, it is valid, and one may ascend to it on the festival. If [one constructed it] on top of a tree or on the back of a camel, it is valid, but one may not ascend to it on the festival. If two [walls of the <i>sukkah</i> are formed] by a tree and one by human hands, or two by human hands and one by a tree, it is valid, but one may not ascend to it on the festival. If three [walls are formed] by human hands and one by a tree, it is valid, and one may ascend to it on the festival. This is the rule: any [<i>sukkah</i>] that can stand on its own even if one removed the tree, it is valid, and one may ascend to it on the festival.</p>	<p>משנה סוכה ב'ג'          (ג) העושה סוכתו בראש העגלה. או בראש הספינה כשרה. ועולין לה ביום טוב. בראש האילן. או על גבי גמל. כשירה. ואין עולין לה ביום טוב. שתים באילן. ואחת בידי אדם. או שתים בידי אדם. ואחת באילן. כשרה. ואין עולין לה ביום טוב. שלש בידי אדם. ואחת באילן. כשרה. ועולין לה ביום טוב. זה הכלל. כל שניטל האילן. ויכולה לעמוד בפני עצמה. כשרה. ועולין לה ביום טוב</p>
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The rabbis of the *Mishnah* offer wild, vivid images of *sukkot* built on top of unstable structures - ships, the backs of animals, etc.

- What do these images evoke for you?
- What are times in your life when you have had to create structure and safety amidst instability, vulnerability, etc.?
- If you are already in an unstable situation (like on a ship) - what would it be like to then celebrate a holiday that asks you to feel even more deeply into your vulnerability?

**Text 4: Your heart!**

*Sukkot* is a holiday which asks us - vulnerable beings on this vulnerable planet - to connect even more deeply to our vulnerability. This can be frightening and empowering at the same time. Take some time below to reflect on your relationship to vulnerability.

**Text 5: Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning, The Rumble, The Revolution***

While vulnerability is the birthplace of many of the fulfilling experiences we long for — love, belonging, joy, creativity, and trust, to name a few — the process of regaining our emotional footing in the midst of struggle is where our courage is tested and our values are forged. Rising strong after a fall is how we cultivate wholeheartedness in our lives; it's the process that teaches us the most about who we are.

If we are brave enough often enough, we will fall; this is the physics of vulnerability.

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### **Text 6: David Hoffman, "Vulnerability and Joy"**

The joy of Sukkot is born in this experience of self-exposure and (still) feeling loved by God. In the immediate moments following Yom Kippur, we turn our attention to the building of the sukkah and preparing for the hag.

Indeed, love may be understood as permission to be who we are without feeling a need to hide or mute parts of ourselves. The joy that comes from experiencing true love is rooted in our ability to make ourselves vulnerable.

Our relationship with the divine was enriched because we opened our hearts and entered into these vulnerable places over the Days of Awe. No hiding, no stories, no covering up.

Perhaps these ideas help explain Rashi's comments on the phrase "it is an 'atzeret' (referring to the eighth day of *Sukkot*, Lev. 23:36)":

I have detained you (azarti etchem) with Me (after the formal holiday of *Sukkot*). It is like a king who invited his children to a feast for a certain number of days. When the time comes to leave, the king says, "My children I have a request of you! Spend just one more day with me, it is difficult for me to separate from you."

The last month has hopefully generated renewed intimacy between us and the divine. God has seen us in all of our humanness, with all of

our shortcomings, and still God wants more. This narrative imagines profound divine acceptance and love.

*Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and now Shemini Atzeret* are teaching us a great truth about vulnerability, joy, and love. It is only when we can be seen—when we let ourselves be seen—without a need to cover up that true love and, consequently, true joy may be experienced.

- What type of relationship would you like to have with vulnerability?
- How would you like to use this time in the Jewish calendar to cultivate that?