

## Sukkot 1 5778

In a well-known comedy routine George Carlin used to do a comparison between baseball and football, which ended this way: “In football the object is for the quarterback, also known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line. In baseball the object is to go home! And to be safe! - I hope I'll be safe at home!” The metaphor that he points out that baseball uses, of going home and of safety, is also a theme for the holiday that starts today. But unlike baseball, in which the goal is to go home and be safe, the symbol of the *sukkah* is to leave home and be slightly unsafe in order to appreciate what home and safety really feel like. To live in a *sukkah* for a week is, for most people, an inconceivable hardship made just bearable because we know it is temporary. Most Jews don't even pretend to make the *sukkah* their regular dwelling during that week, even when they build one, and who can blame them? One of the most powerful desires we have is for safety and comfort, the very things that define ‘home.’

Throughout the Yamim Nora'im, from Rosh Hashanah through Hoshanah Rabbah, we add Psalm 27 to the daily prayer service each morning and evening. It is a song in which the speaker calls out to God for protection. Using a number of different metaphors,

as the psalms do, it beseeches God for sanctuary. The use of that word, in the sense of protection, is taken from the ancient practice of seeking protection at the altar. To seek sanctuary is not to go shul shopping; it is to seek God's mercy – to be safe – when all other avenues have been closed off to us.

Some synagogues stop reciting Psalm 27 at Yom Kippur, but our practice is to continue reciting it through Hoshanah Rabbah, which is to say until the end of Sukkot. One reason I think that is preferable is the connection between the theme of seeking sanctuary in the psalm and that of building sanctuary – in the form of the sukkah – in the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. That connection is explicit in the words of the psalm itself. When we read, or sing, “One thing I ask of the Lord, for this I yearn: To dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold God's beauty, to pray in God's sanctuary,” the words specifically refer to the Temple in Jerusalem. The following lines also refer back to the Temple, but do so using alternate language: “Hiding me in His shrine, safe from peril, God will shelter me beyond the reach of disaster, and raise my head high above my enemies.” The problem is that the English words ‘shrine’ and ‘shelter’ don't convey the meaning of the original well enough. Because while they make it clear that the speaker is still talking about the Temple, the Hebrew word translated as ‘shrine’ is actually *sukkah*; the word represented by ‘shelter’ is *ohel*, tent. Now the Temple in Jerusalem was no *sukkah* and it was no tent, especially in the case of the second Temple, which was a large stone structure. But in other registers of meaning,

calling the Temple a *sukkah* or a tent is perfect, especially during Sukkot, because the Temple was certainly the place where those who were endangered could seek sanctuary.

Sukkot began as a harvest festival, and was in fact known simply as ‘the festival,’ without any other qualifiers, as early as the biblical period. But when the *sukkah* ceased being temporary housing for the agricultural workers in this season and became a symbol of the holiday, it gained immensely in meaning. Like so many symbols of agricultural or wilderness culture, the *sukkah* gained its significance specifically because we don’t have any direct experience of it like the ancient farmers did. As a real, used entity, the *sukkah* is worse than a mobile home; it is more like a homeless person’s cardboard box. But as a symbol, the *sukkah* is terrifically potent, because it represents shelter from any kind of danger that we can imagine: physical, economic, ecologic, spiritual, you name it. Its potency comes from the same imagery through which a team succeeds in baseball, from its association with home. The *sukkah* is the temporary, even rickety home we erect each year to remind ourselves of life’s fragility, of how little separates a life of prosperity from one of want. In a year when so many people are literally losing their homes because of hurricanes, the *sukkah* reminds us of how close each of us is to a life of permanent danger and homelessness.

On a more existential plane, the *sukkah* symbolizes the precariousness of Jewish life. With the grand exception of Jewish life in modern Israel, and perhaps even there, we are constantly fearful of losing the permanency of Jewish belief and tradition to the

ramshackle existence of life in a non-Jewish land. The *sukkah*, originally used in the land of Israel to harvest, has in that way become a symbol of Jewish life in the Diaspora. It reminds us that we may live in comfortable homes in America, or Europe, or wherever, but ultimately those homes are the temporary dwellings that we have erected in lieu of a permanent home in Israel. It reminds us that however comfortable we are here, we are never completely at home.

To go back to the sports analogy once more, there is another connection to Sukkot: the holiday falls at the beginning of football season and the end of baseball season. To pick up where George Carlin left off, that can either be understood, as in football, as beginning a new year of struggle toward the goal line, fighting and clawing our way down the field of life, or as in baseball, ending a long season in shul by going out to the sukkah, by going home and being safe. I am not, of course, arguing a bias, merely making an observation. A reminder: Kiddush today will be at home plate, I mean in the sukkah.

Shabbat shalom and hag sukkot same'akh