



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## Sukkot 5768 By Rabbi Richard Jacobs

*"For seven days you must live in thatched huts ... This is so that future generations will know that I had the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of Egypt." (Leviticus 23:42, 43)*

Two years ago, over the holiday of Sukkot, I traveled to Chad with a small delegation of Jewish leaders from American Jewish World Service to meet with refugees who had survived the genocide across the border in the Darfur region of Sudan. When we signed on, it wasn't clear just how much we would be able to observe the central mitzvot of Sukkot, like sitting in the sukkah or waving a lulav and etrog.

As we entered the sprawling Amnabak refugee camp, we were greeted by the sight of flimsy huts, with thatched roofs and wooden sides. Until that point, it had never made sense to me that the building of sukkot could connect us to the wandering in the Sinai wilderness. Sukkot, covered as they are by branches and supported by wooden walls, seemed to me an obvious vestige of the practices of a settled agricultural people, not that of homeless desert wanderers. Yet here we were, in the dry wilderness of Chad, surrounded by huts that closely resembled sukkot. I thought about the commandment in Leviticus 23:42: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days." These Darfuri refugees were living full time in what looked like harvest booths – four sticks holding up a simple thatched roof made of scrawny desert vegetation.

On the first day of the festival, we sat on the floor of one of these modest huts with a group of Darfuri children and recited "*layshev ba'sukkah*," the blessing that sanctifies the moment of sitting in the sukkah. When said at home in the United States, in a temporary hut adjoining a permanent and secure home, the act of sitting in the sukkah is meant to be a reminder of the fragility of life. We leave the comfort of our homes, and, sitting in our sukkot, we are meant to feel a bit vulnerable. We leave ourselves open to the rain, wind and cold, though the knowledge of the warmth and security right nearby tempers our sense of vulnerability. Sitting on the ground in Chad with refugees from the war in Darfur, the reminder of life's fragility was all around us. The very trip that I was warned might preclude my observance of Sukkot had actually helped me to understand the holiday more deeply.



*Darfuri refugees, Amnabak Refugee Camp, Chad.  
Photo: R. Richard Jacobs*

On the Shabbat of Sukkot, we read Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), whose mantra, repeated throughout, is "behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind." (Kohelet 1:14) "Time and chance," its author reminds us, "happen to them all." (Kohelet 9:11) It was an awareness that coursed through my time in Chad. Did you ever wonder what would have happened if the ancient Israelites had taken a different turn leaving Egypt? What if instead of going east across the Sea of Reeds they had traveled south? Our ancestors might have ended up in Sudan, plagued by the war. Or if they traveled southeast, our ancestors might have settled in Somalia. If they had, they would be suffering today through the famine, disease, droughts, poverty and political strife that plague so many African countries.

Though our ancestors didn't settle in Sudan, Kohelet reminds us that this is but a happenstance. Some of God's other children did, and they surely dwell within our religious responsibility. Rambam reminds us not to let our observance end with our own enjoyment: "When a person eats and drinks in celebration of a festival, that person is obligated to feed strangers, orphans, widows and others who are destitute and poor." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18)

Dwelling in sukkot, even for a short period, offers us the opportunity to connect to our own history of wandering in an African desert and links us to our African brothers and sisters who are still displaced and in need of our help.

*"V'Yashvu ish tachat gafno, v'tachat te'enato ve-ayn machrid – And every person shall sit under his vine and fig tree and none shall make that person afraid."* (Micah 4:4)

May the day come speedily and soon, when our Darfuri brothers and sisters will be able to sit under their vines and fig trees and "none shall make them afraid."



**Rabbi Richard Jacobs** has been the Senior Rabbi of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York since 1991. He has served on the Board and Executive Committee of the CCAR and on the Board of the URJ. He currently serves on Boards of American Jewish World Service, New York's UJA-Federation and Synagogue 3000. He has been on the international board of the New Israel Fund from 1992 to 2001. Rabbi Jacobs is married to Susan K. Freedman and is the father of Aaron, David and Sarah Jacobs. Rabbi Jacobs can be reached at [Rabbijacobs1@cs.com](mailto:Rabbijacobs1@cs.com).

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45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018

212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146

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