



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## Sukkot 5772 By Jane Eisner

When I grew up, Sukkot felt like an after-thought following the intensity and purpose of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. No one in my Reform community in a lower-middle-class suburb of New York City ever built a sukkah; instead, we decorated the one at the synagogue—stringing together dried cranberries and making endless links with colored construction paper—and then sat in the finished project a couple of times through the week, as long as the weather held.

Only years later, when I had my own family and my own backyard, did my husband and I put up our own sukkah. It is his design—unique and surprisingly sturdy—and when the children were little they would camp out together until the cold, uncomfortable ground drove them inside for hot chocolate and a warm bed.

That's the blessing of Sukkot in my community. There's a warm bed to go to when the night air becomes inhospitable; there's a dry table inside if rain leaves giant puddles on the outside furniture and the *s'chach* droops so low that relaxed dining is impossible.

We enjoy the sukkah best when it is just an alternative to home—a symbolic reminder, an echo of the past. But what if it is the present? What if a temporary shelter like this is actually home?

For too many people on the planet, "home" is a temporary notion—a series of flimsy, unreliable shelters—as fragile forever as our sukkah is meant to be for a week. The housing crisis in the United States has led to record foreclosures; the housing crisis in Israel has led to unprecedented demonstrations in the streets. But the housing crisis in developing countries has no such public face, and its circumstances are arguably more dire. The United Nations estimates that 1.6 billion people live in inadequate shelter around the world, and one billion of those live in slums.<sup>1</sup> To raise awareness about the right to shelter and the responsibility to ensure it, the U.N. created a World Habitat Day, which fell this year on October 3<sup>rd</sup>.

I visited Haiti last year with AJWS, just eight months after the earthquake of January 2010 decimated huge swaths of the country, and in Port-au-Prince, Ruth Messenger, other Jewish leaders and I visited one of the many refugee camps that had sprung up around Haiti to accommodate the millions of homeless and displaced persons. I wandered into a tent to speak with Middy Josselin, a 50-year-old grandmother, subsisting on donated food and water. Inside her tent were some blankets and bare mattresses, a jug for water, a few bits of clothing and not much else. It was August, and the air was so oppressively hot that I could not stay inside for more than ten minutes. And yet Middy seemed resigned to this life.

"It's been a long time trying to deal with the misery," she told me. "It's not what I want, but there is no other way."

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<sup>1</sup> Miloon Kothari, *UN Press Briefing by Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing*, November, 2005. <http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2005/kotharibrf050511.doc.htm>. UN-Habitat, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2003: The Challenge of Slums*. [www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org)

While my trip with AJWS introduced me to grassroots organizations that are working to help Haitians living in the camps rebuild their homes and their lives, there are millions like Middy around the world who have not yet found their way out of their temporary shelters.

It seems to me that Sukkot should be a time to remind ourselves of people like Middy Josselin, and to work toward ensuring that there *is* another way: that decent, affordable housing should be available to anyone who is willing to make it a home.

Last year, Union Square in New York City was the site of a remarkable exhibition called “Sukkah City,” with 12 innovative sukkah designs selected by an esteemed jury and mounted in the middle of the nation’s largest city. Each sukkah adhered to the parameters of a “kosher” sukkah but presented a radical perspective on the traditional form. One of the chosen entries, Sukkah of the Signs—created by Ronald Rael and Virginia San Fratello—was built from the signs of homeless people that the artists purchased and then arranged in a cone-like structure open to the sky.

“Just as the sukkah commemorates shelter provided during the forty desert-wandering years of Exodus, the design for our sukkah brings attention to the contemporary state of homelessness and wandering,” the artists explained.<sup>2</sup>

We who have the luxury of sitting in our own *sukkot* for just a week have an obligation to remember those for whom temporary structures are shelter for a lifetime, and home an elusive blessing.

*Chag sameach.*



**Jane Eisner** became the first female editor of the Forward in 2008, and under her leadership, the newspaper has won national and regional awards for its original journalism. Previously, Eisner held executive editorial and news positions for 25 years at the Philadelphia Inquirer and served as vice president for national programs at the National Constitution Center. She has taught journalism at Wesleyan University, the University of Pennsylvania and Bryn Mawr College, and recently won first-place awards in editorial writing from the Society of Professional Journalists. Her book, *Taking Back the Vote: Getting American Youth Involved in our Democracy*, was published by Beacon Press in 2004.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sukkahcity.com/sukkah/sukkah-of-the-signs.php>