



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Sukkot 5774 By Rabbi Menachem Creditor

What is it about the holiday of Sukkot that makes it so powerful? Tradition teaches that the energy of Sukkot is so intense, so visceral and delightful, that seven mythic figures leave the Garden of Eden to join in the light of our earthly *sukkot* (temporary shelters). But why? What is it about the *sukkah* that compels even those who have tasted Paradise?

These spirit guests, known as the *Ushpizin*, are invited each night into our *sukkot*. Groupings of *Ushpizin* vary by community, and include biblical prophethood, revered sages and modern heroes, invoked in turn each night of Sukkot. Jewish mystical tradition suggests that each guest also serves as a reminder of an action through which the brokenness of our world is repaired.

Ironically, the *Ushpizin* and their message of an aching world typically function as spiritual enhancements during the physical experience of plenty. Many of us live lives far removed from direct contact with those truly in need of shelter. The week we spend dwelling in the *sukkah*, enjoying bountiful and joyful meals, does little to help us identify with their experience. The temporary walls and roof of our *sukkot* are, paradoxically and luxuriously, positioned near enough to our permanent home to facilitate the smooth flow of good food and sweet guests we are blessed to share during the holiday. We'd understand better the sacred urgency of the *sukkah* if we had nothing else.

I experienced the urgency of Sukkot just over one year ago when I participated in an AJWS Rabbinic Delegation to Ghana, West Africa. We went to support and learn about Challenging Heights, a child-centered organization dedicated to promoting children's rights to education and freedom from forced labor, in order to end child poverty. Since that journey, neither Jewish ritual moments nor interpersonal encounters have been the same. One experience stands out, and has changed Sukkot (and everything else) for me.

One day, a circle of a few rabbis and children took turns telling each other stories. During one story, the girl on my right, Gladys, rested her head on my arm, obviously glad for human contact, something we were told would likely occur, as every experience of affirmation was part of the healing process for these children saved from slavery. I truly can't remember the stories we were telling, but I can feel the warmth of Gladys' head on my arm right now.

And then Gladys looked at me and asked if I had eaten. I told her I would eat later. She nodded, and said, "*I hope you eat tomorrow, too.*" I nodded, accepting her blessing, wishing it back to her a million fold.

My teacher Gladys changed me profoundly, giving me new eyes through which to see as a Global Jewish citizen. She transformed my Jewish life, by blessing me to realize that every ounce of strength we put into building our

joyous, temporary structures must, in effect, be a sensitizing training for the higher purpose of building a world in which everyone eats tomorrow. Gladys has become my precious Sukkot spirit guest, my *Ushpiza*, whose message I commit to amplify until it is, one day soon, unnecessary in our world.

Discussing the *Ushpizin*, the mystical text, the Zohar teaches:

One must also gladden the poor, and the portion that would otherwise have been set aside for these *Ushpizin* guests should go to the poor. For if a person sits in the shadow of faith and invites those guests and does not give their portion to the poor, they all remain distant from him. ...The first of everything must be for one's guests. If one gladdens guests and satisfies them, God rejoices over him. (Zohar, Emor 103a)

So what makes Sukkot so powerful that it compels the attention of heaven and earth? The answer can be discovered within the wisdom of the *Ushpizin*. The force of the *Ushpizin* custom, infusing our present with mythic possibility, invites us to consider internalizing spiritual values each day, transforming the sukkah into a safe space for sacred justice and radical welcome, for intentional encounter and deep feelings. In short, the *Ushpizin* teaches that a sukkah is, after all, an ancient microcosm of the world as it could be, as it must become—a universal shelter of peace.



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