THIS WEEK, Jews around the world are building sukkot—temporary dwellings that recall our people’s wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. This year, this ritual has taken on new poignancy. As we voluntarily build flimsy structures that make us vulnerable to the elements for a single week, tens of thousands of people in Haiti are taking similar actions out of necessity: seeking temporary shelter to replace the homes that were destroyed by Hurricane Matthew.

SHELTER FROM THE STORM: CONTEMPLATING SUKKOT FOLLOWING HURRICANE MATTHEW

What does it mean that we build and live in symbolic temporary shelters while others are facing the real devastation of loss of home and shelter?

Consider the following sources:

The Talmud commands that the sukkah must be a temporary dwelling, sturdy enough only for the week. It must be open to the elements and capped with a roof made of unfinished material with holes large enough for the sun and the rain to come through. The Talmud contrasts this with a permanent home, which is expected to be sturdy and shield us from the wind and the rain.

1. Sukkot 2a—on the obligation to make the sukkah temporary, based on its height

   Mishna: A sukkah which is more than twenty cubits high is not valid. But Rabbi Judah considers it valid. One which is not ten handbreadths high, or which does not have three walls, or which has more sun than shade, is not valid.

   Gemara: Up to twenty cubits [high] is considered a temporary home; higher than twenty cubits, is not considered to be a temporary home, but a permanent one.

2. Obadiah ben Abraham Bartanura (15th c.)—on the obligation to make the sukkah temporary, based on its impermanence

   The sukkah must be seen as a temporary dwelling. As it is written (Deuteronomy 16:13) “you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days.” The Torah is saying that you should have your sukkah for [only] seven days.

3. Mishna Sukkah 2:9—granting permission to leave the sukkah when it’s raining

   During the whole seven days [of the festival] one makes his sukkah [his] permanent [dwelling], and his house [a] temporary [dwelling]. If rains fell, starting when is one permitted to clear out [of the sukkah]? When a dish of porridge would be spoiled.

Seeking Shelter during Hurricane Matthew: A story from Haiti reported by AJWS staff on the ground

Louisa, her husband and two daughters live in Port Salut, Haiti. Like many families in Haiti, they have lived their entire lives on one small piece of land, with houses for each generation clustered together. On October 4th, in the middle of the night, Hurricane Matthew struck this land, destroying everything in its path.

At 3:00 a.m., heavy winds began to rip apart their roof. As Louisa and her husband and children tried to escape, they nearly died when the pressure of the floodwaters pushed up against their front door, crushing one of the daughter’s legs and pinning the door closed. When they finally broke free, the family rescued Louisa’s elderly mother just minutes before her own home would have crumbled on top of her. Together, they ran through their flooded backyard in the lashing wind and climbed over a nine-foot wall in order to finally seek refuge from the destruction.

Louisa’s family is now living in a temporary shelter—sleeping alongside several other families whose homes (continued)
Discussion Questions:

- What is the significance of leaving our sturdy homes and living in a temporary sukkah for a week?

- Is building and living in a sukkah an act of empathy? How did it feel to compare your experience in the sukkah to Louisa’s story? How should we respond to this empathy?

- Or, is building and living in a sukkah an act of privilege, because we can retreat into the security of our own homes when it rains? How should we respond to this privilege?

- What does it mean for us that we build and live in such fragile temporary shelters to celebrate a holiday, while others are living in them to survive the devastation of loss of their permanent homes? How does this juxtaposition make you feel?

- What do you make of Louisa’s daughter’s assertion that they would rather sleep in their destroyed home than stay in the shelter?

- Take a look at the photograph of what’s left of a Haitian home. How does that make you think about a sukkah differently?

Photograph from Haiti: A home in a village in Ganthier destroyed by wind and flooding from Hurricane Matthew.

Photograph by Amber Munger, AJWS

USHPIZIN: CALL TO ACTION

It’s traditional to invite “symbolic guests”—typically the Matriarchs, Patriarchs and sages—into our sukkah to share its shelter with us. This year, let us reach out to all those who seek shelter from the wind and rain and yearn for a permanent home.

One way to do this is to donate to American Jewish World Service or another organization that is aiding survivors of Hurricane Matthew.

Visit ajws.org/donate/haiti-hurricane to learn more about our hurricane response efforts.