SUKKOT DRASH 5777
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TEMPLE SHOLOM
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Homelessness and wandering pervades much of the Tanach and Jewish history.

- In the initial chapters of Genesis, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden.
- Abraham begins his relationship with God, leaving his land of origin.
- Jacob spent much of his life wandering and struggling: first leaving home after feuding with Esau, struggling along the path, later in his life needing to go to Egypt in time of famine.
- Having escaped slavery, the Israelites spent 40 years wandering in the desert.
- After the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem, there were 70 years of exile,
- After the destruction of the second Temple there were two millennium of homelessness that only ended with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

To remember all of this we build temporary dwellings to commemorate our wanderings and homelessness.

These structures provide shelter, but they are not secure, complete or comfortable.

We're expected to eat, drink and sleep in the sukkah. And yet the sukkah is intentionally fragile, pointing to the fragile nature of life and our own narrative as a people.

We are not meant to live in a sukkah permanently

Our tradition reminds us that for forty years the Israelites were totally dependent on God for food, shelter and protection. This experience taught an important lesson about the difficulties of being without a permanent home. Only when arriving in Israel could they enjoy the full weight of their gift. Each year we are reminded of what it feels like to lack security and we are compelled to help those in a similar situation.

Think back to Yom Kippur and your fast. Why do we fast? What constitutes an authentic fast? The prophet Isaiah teaches a fast is much more than not eating.

Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush
And lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast,
A day when Adonai is favorable?
No, this is the fast I desire:

To unlock fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed, go free;
To break off every yolk.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.
(Isaiah 58:5-7)

His prophetic cry reminds us that ritual is meaningless if it does not lead to action. The fast is there to compel us toward those things that are raised up in our fragility and hunger. In the context of Sukkot it defines the relief of homelessness as a religious duty, preferable to fasts, sacrifices and other ritual observances!

The midrash teaches that "when R. Joshua ben Levi went to Rome, he saw marble pillars there which had been carefully covered with wrapping to keep them from cracking during the heat and from freezing during the cold. By contrast he saw there a poor wretch who had no more than a reed mat under him and a reed mat over him [to protect him from the heat and cold]."

So the question before us as we go back to our warm homes, and our comfortable sofas and a nice bowl of soup on a cold and blustery night is what can sukkot teach us about those for whom every day is sukkot? What can it teach us about our obligations to them?

DISCUSSION

OPENING REMARKS:

Why does it always rain on Sukkos? It is supposed to be the festival of joy, and after building our Sukkah and getting all excited about eating in it we end up getting a downpour. Why does G-d do this to us?

Answer:

This question has puzzled meteorologists the world over. How is it that no matter when Sukkos is celebrated, it brings rain? Here's the answer I heard from my wife, Nechama Dina.

The weather is the one thing that none of us can claim to control. We can plan our day down to the last detail, and then our plans can be washed out by a rainstorm. This can be frustrating. But it can be liberating too. Rather than getting annoyed, we can laugh and acknowledge just how little is really in our hands. And that's when we find happiness.

Happiness and joy come most when we let go and surrender to a higher power. Much of our misery is the result of thinking we can control what happens to us. As soon as we realise that we have no say in what happens to us, we can only decide how we react to it, we can find happiness.

So every year we sit in the Sukkah, we make ourselves vulnerable to the elements, and we say, what will be will be. If it pours, so be it. It's not my call. I leave it up to G-d, I am in His hands, and that is reason to be happy.

Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov,

Rabbi Moss