



Torah Reflections on Sukkot

As one of the staff rabbis at the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center I am often asked to pray for people who are facing severe physical or mental illness or care-giving for someone who is sick. These are the most challenging times in life and I struggle with what to say in these moments. Praying for recovery often feels impossible and insulting to even suggest. When faced with a particularly painful situation I just want to pray: "Hey God – what are you thinking?!"

In these situations, I often find myself saying the words to the *haskivienu* prayer, a prayer for protection that is traditionally said only at night time when we are most exposed to danger. This blessing ends with the words "*u'fros alienu sukkat shlomeicha*" which means "spread over us a *sukkah* of your shalom." The word *sukkah* in this prayer is often translated as a canopy or shelter of peace. But, can I really expect there to be a shelter of peace in the future for someone who is facing a poor prognosis, contemplating the death of a child or living through a depression so deep they can not even see their hands in front of their face much less hope for the future?

Last year when Sukkot came around this prayer began to make sense to me in a different way. San Francisco was foggy and cold, and eating dinner in a *sukkah* led to cold soup and grumpiness. Traditionally a *sukkah* is an impermanent hut that we dwell in during the holiday of Sukkot as a way of remembering the shaky tents we stayed in while wandering through the desert in the Bible. Jewish custom is to eat each meal in the *sukkah* surrounded by family and friends and invite into the *sukkah* strangers and the memories of our ancestors. By definition a *sukkah* does not have a solid roof – it must allow for an equal amount of shade and sun and let in both starlight and rain. What this means is that a *sukkah* is not a very comfortable place to hang out in. It does not protect us from rain, sleet, or wind at all.

The term "sukkat shalom", a *sukkah* of peace, sounds like an idealized image of peace, but an actual *sukkah* is a very imperfect form of shelter. So why does our prayer for protection in this uncertain world ask for a *sukkah* of peace? Why not pray for a solid roof of peace? Or, even better, a bomb shelter of peace?

When we pray for a *sukkat shalom*, we are not praying for complete protection. We are acknowledging that life is full of risk and rain. And we need to be open to the rain if we are going to get to see the stars. Similarly, if we are not open to suffering in life, we are also probably not open to the unexpected moments of glittering joy.

Likewise, when we pray for a *sukkah* of shalom to enfold us, we are not praying to be sheltered from the truth of life, but praying to be surrounded for only a moment within a temporary, permeable hut that brings together friends and welcomes strangers; a dwelling that contained our ancestors while they were wandering in the desert. A *sukkah* reminds us today that we are not alone, but encircled by the memory of our forbearers and held within a structure of divine and human care.

(over)

This Sukkot may each of us be embraced during the most vulnerable and painful moments of our lives. May God spread over us a *sukkat shalom*, a shelter of peace that is open to the rain and open to the stars. And may we not be alone in this imperfect shelter, with our joy, fear, and suffering, but accompanied by our families, friends, ancestors and the Divine presence.

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- Rabbinic care, chaplaincy, counseling and spiritual direction—at home or in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes or other care facilities
- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals

Whether through prayer, study materials, or simply a listening presence, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center is here to support you during difficult time.