



Shabbat Chol Ha'moed Sukkot
October 11, 2014—17 Tishri 5775
Raising David's Fallen Sukkah—and Our Own
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

My colleague Rabbi David Wolpe tells of a conversation between a doctor and a rabbi. The doctor says, “You know rabbi, I sometimes treat patients for no charge.” The rabbi says, “I do that too.”

The doctor says, “You know rabbi, I prescribe medication for my patients, they’ll call in a request, they’ll email me all hours of the night and day, and I renew the prescription, and I don’t charge.” The rabbi says, “I do that too.”

The doctor says, “You know rabbi, I do surgery for a patient, sometimes a very long, complicated, six hour surgery, and whatever the insurance pays me, it pays me, and I won’t bill the patient so that they don’t have to pay a penny out of pocket.”

The rabbi says, “I do that too.”

At this point the doctor is clearly exasperated. He says, “With all due respect, rabbi, you are a rabbi, not a doctor. You don’t treat patients. You don’t prescribe medicine. You don’t do surgeries. Why do you keep saying I do that too?”

The rabbi answers: “You don’t understand. I don’t practice medicine. But I like to say nice things about myself. I do that too.”

We are in the midst of a season of collective communal experience, a time where each of us can say I do that too.

Rosh Hashanah was a time of new beginnings and fresh starts for all of us. I do that too.

Yom Kippur was a time of introspection, judgment and atonement. I do that do.

Now comes Sukkot. What is the collective message of Sukkot? The heart of Sukkot is of course the Sukka, which is designed to be impermanent, flimsy, tenuous. It is open to the elements. It can be pelted by the rain, whipped by the wind, invaded by bees. Our collective experience is to be unprotected, fragile, vulnerable. And by Jewish law, our Sukka must be missing a wall. It can only be made of three walls. The missing fourth wall emphasizes that something is missing in our lives.

Our tradition knows of sturdy structures made of sturdy materials—the tabernacle and the Temples were made of high grade wood and rich silver and gold—but the Sukkah is designed to be just the opposite. The Sukka is designed to send the message that we, like the Sukka itself, could topple over at any moment.

In *birkat hamazon*, grace after meals, the special line for Sukkot highlights the fragility of the Sukkah and of those who inhabit it. The special line reads: *Harachaman hu yakim lanu et sukkat david hanofelet*, which means May God, the Merciful one, help us lift up David's fallen sukkah.

David's fallen sukkah? What does David have to do with this? Sukkot is supposed to be about the Israelites in the wilderness, at the time of Moses. That's hundreds of years before David. Did David even have a Sukkah? Why does our liturgy shlep David into a Sukkah, and into a fallen Sukkah at that?

I have been thinking a lot about David recently because I recently read this superb book called David: The Divided Heart by David Wolpe. This book drove home the amount of suffering, much of it self-inflicted, in David's life. Talk about fragile, unprotected, broken. Talk about missing a fourth wall. That was David.

He loses an infant child, his son born to Bat Sheba.

His son Amnon rapes his daughter Tamar.

Another son, Absalom, kills Amnon for doing what he did.

And Absalom himself rebels against his father's kingship and is killed in battle by David's general Joab.

This is suffering on an unimaginable, epochal scale.

So here we are, in the Sukkah, on Sukkot, having eaten a festive holiday meal, and our grace after meals has us recall a former King of Israel who suffered unbearably and repeatedly. What is our tradition going after here?

David was not only the King of Israel, but also according to tradition, the author of our psalms, including psalm 30 which we say every day. *Mizmor shir chanukat habayit l'david*, a psalm of David, a song for the dedication of the Temple or of the house. The key word here is *chanukat habayit*, dedication of the house.

David Wolpe points out that there is no day on the Jewish calendar to celebrate the dedication of the Temple. But we do have a day to celebrate the *rededication* of the Temple. Chanukkah. On Chanukkah we celebrate that the house that once stood, and was ravaged, was repaired and restored and renewed and rededicated.

The key to life is not dedication, but *rededication*. Not celebrating a shiny new beginning. But being able to get up when we have fallen and start again.

Perhaps the key line in this psalm is: *ba'erev yalin bechi v'laboker rinah*. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning." David's faith allows him to believe that, however sad and broken he is at the moment, one day, one day, he will know happiness again.

But how do we get there? How do we hold on until the morning so that we can know joy again? How do we fulfill David's promise at the end of the psalm that God will transform my

mourning into dancing, my sackcloth into robes of joy? As Rabbi Shai Held has taught us, Judaism is great at telling us what to do. Have that faith. Find joy in the morning. Lift up the fallen Sukkah. But somehow never manages to tell us *how* to have that faith, *how* to find that joy, *how* to lift up the fallen sukkah?

We don't say this psalm *once*. We say this psalm *once a day. Every day*. Rededication is a process that takes place every day of our lives as we deal with what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. I don't have a magical formula. I don't have a how to manual. I don't have a three-part plan. But I do have a story where I actually saw what psalm 30 looks like when it is embodied by real people. This happened in the holy city of Sarasota, Florida.

Last winter I took Shira away for her birthday weekend, and for various reasons we ended up going to Sarasota. We wake up Shabbat morning. She asks: What should we do with our day? I say I have a perfect idea: Let's go to shul. Jews. Services. Prayers. Songs. A nice sermon. Kiddush. See how a different community does Shabbat. It doesn't get any better than that. So off we go. It turns out that there is not a Conservative shul we can get to, but there is a lovely Reform temple that is an easy bike ride away—Temple Beth Israel of Longboat Key. We're in the pews, singing and davening with the congregation, and it is lovely. But I have to say that the mind does wander a bit during a typical Shabbat morning service. What to do?

I did what Jews do the world over. I started reading the printed synagogue materials that are kept in the pews. A very colorful brochure, this brochure, caught my eye. Entitled "An Introduction to Temple Beth Israel of Longboat Key.... 50 Reasons to Join Now." My eyes were drawn instantly to reason number 37, Women on Our Own (WOOO). There was this picture of twelve women, smiling, their faces shining, together at a meal. The text read as follows: "Many

of us are at the stage in life where new linkages, new friendships are especially valuable.” After services, we had Kiddush lunch and talked to the women of WOOO. They told their stories.

One woman came when her husband was struggling. The Florida sun was good for him. He was able to get a grace chapter of several more years. Now that she is on her own, she has all these friends, many at the shul, that she does life with.

These women are rededicating their lives. They are saying: My husband is gone. But I am not gone. I am alive. I plan on living. And when you look at the picture of their smiling faces, and when you talk to them in shul, you see that the promise of King David in psalm 30 has been fulfilled. After their loss, after their weeping at night, they have somehow, some way come to know the joy of morning once again.

This is the season of shared experience, of I do that too. Sukkot reminds us that life is fragile, and we are vulnerable. I do that too. Our Sukkah is missing a wall. We do that too. Our Sukkah is unprotected from sudden storms, even as King David’s Sukkah was fallen. I do that too. And the response to the fallen Sukkah is the rededication of our Sukkah, the rededication of our home and family, the rededication of our life, every day. It is an act of will, an act of faith, an act of grit, every day. Women on Our Own in Sarasota, Florida do that. May we do that too. Shabbat shalom and chag sameakh.