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Sukkot In Jerusalem: A Feast of the Senses

Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz

Dear Friends,

The Israeli film, *Ushpizin*, which made its debut about four years ago, is the story of a destitute ultra-Orthodox couple struggling to celebrate Sukkot while hosting some unsavory guests, acquaintances from their earlier years. Over the course of the movie, there are a number of touching moments as the couple struggles with infertility, wrestles with God, and pushes the limits of their hospitality. Yet what is most striking about the film is the sense it conveys of what it is like to celebrate Sukkot in Jerusalem. You feel as if you could reach out and touch the lulav, participate with the Orthodox man in the building of his sukkah, and almost smell the etrogs as he gazes wistfully at the biggest, most beautiful ones in the shop. He wishes he had enough money to honor the festival with an extra lovely etrog, a *hidur mitzvah* (the wish to go beyond the minimum). I use this as my departure point to give you some sense of what it is like to celebrate this very special festival in Israel.

Unlike the Sukkot holiday that I experienced in New York and Florida, in which people are either sitting in their sukkot in long underwear or dousing themselves with mosquito repellent, the holiday in Israel is tailored to the climate. Sukkot begin popping up all over the city immediately after Rosh Hashanah (not earlier, as the Mishnah says they have to be *hadash* [new, made this year]). Families build sukkot in their small courtyards or on their balconies. In fact, the Turkish *shteibl* across the street from us was banging away at nine o'clock in the evening as they constructed their sukkah before Yom Kippur; and restaurants all through the town (especially along Emek Refaim) built glorious sukkot for their customers. It is a *mitzvah* to eat every meal during Sukkot in the sukkah; without sukkot in which to eat, observant Jews would not patronize these restaurants over the holiday—except maybe to take out food to their own sukkot. To supply everything people need to build their own sukkah, stands pop up on every street corner to sell everything from prefabricated sukkot (which can be assembled in about fifteen minutes flat) to *skakh* (palm branches often used as a roof to cover the sukkah) to decorations for the interior that, ironically enough, have a striking resemblance to Christmas paraphernalia (including those ubiquitous Christmas lights that you see in December in North America). Yes, people actually decorate their sukkot with Christmas lights.

As we are blessed to be renting an apartment with a generous balcony, all we had to do was climb up into the attic of the building and lower all of the pieces of the sukkah, dust them off, and figure out which parts connected where. It took Miriam and me a few hours to assemble all the parts and to roll out the straw *skakh* on the roof; which of course must be made from matter that grows from the ground. Adir and Rachel decorated the sukkah and, in one of the closets, I found three Israeli flags, so I tied them on to the side of the Sukkah and suddenly we had a Zionist sukkah. As we put the finishing touches on the Berkowitz booth, I asked Adir to get himself ready to go to the *Arba'at HaMinim Shuk*

(Four Species Market). Just before Sukkot, tables appear all over the city from which people sell the lulav, etrog, myrtle (hadas), and willows (aravot) that are needed for celebrating the holiday; sets cost anywhere from 60 to 100 shekels. And in some parts of the city, vendors join together to create a whole fair-like environment. We were going to shop and explore the sights.

Adir and I hopped on the bus and journeyed to Jaffa Road, directly across the street from Jerusalem's famed Mahane Yehudah market. Adir grasped my backpack tightly so he would not be separated from me in all the commotion. As we entered the Four Species Market, a security guard checked our bags and then we walked into a magnificent, colorful, and fragrant world. Just about every shape, size, and color of Jew was there picking out their set for Sukkot and they all stood for many moments examining the tips of their lulav and checking out their etrogs. People haggled with the sellers and fresh aravot could be seen in every direction. Adir and I bought all that we needed and took some great pictures. Adir was wide-eyed (as was I), absorbing it all and just inhaling the wonderful sense of everyone preparing for the hag.

Davening the first night of Sukkot was just beautiful, with song coming joyfully at us from all around the shul. Afterward, we were treated to a wonderful meal in a magical sukkah at the home of Gail and David Resnick. I knew Gail fifteen years ago when I was a student at the Pardes Institute—Gail was the head administrator. She and I connected immediately since both of us grew up in Freehold, New Jersey. And David is a talented Jewish educator who has been working for JESNA and teaching at Bar-Ilan University and, of course, I cannot forget the fact that he is a JTS alumnus as well. David and Gail live on Zvi Graetz Street, a road on the edge of the German Colony. Their home is warm, filled with many family pictures, and the view from their backyard (and sukkah with windows) is just intoxicating—a view of the Old City walls. We enjoyed a lovely meal, singing, and divrei Torah with David, Gail, Gail's aunt, a Kabbalah professor from Bar-Ilan, a student in the Senior Educators Program at Hebrew University, and a Russian-Israeli couple. As we wrapped up the night and were preparing to walk back home, David told us about a minyan that meets just across the street from his home in which Rabbis David Hartman and Adin Steinsaltz daven regularly. It could not have been a better way to celebrate the first evening of Sukkot.

The remaining Sukkot services sustained the feeling of being enveloped by the holiday. Everyone in the synagogue had a lulav and etrog in hand; it was just amazing to participate in the sea of lulavim and the beautiful singing during the Hallel service. I told Adir and Rachel to spot and count the number of sukkot between our home and the synagogue; at one point, they simply lost count.

Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot, the intermediate days of the holiday, have been no less exciting. The day before Sukkot, I had seen an ad in the Jerusalem Post that said, "the President of Israel will be welcoming the Israeli public to his sukkah on the second day of Hol Hamo'ed." Adir and I made a plan to go, figuring it would be a remarkable experience, if we could get in. We arrived about forty minutes before the gates to the President's residence opened and waited with great anticipation; we were surprisingly near the front of the line. I expected that the sukkah would be decorated beautifully and it would be a lovely walk-through. At nine o'clock the gates opened and we went through heavy security. A military orchestra played sweet Israeli music as we entered the grounds and we followed the path around into the foyer of the residence where people were queuing up. I looked toward the other side of the foyer where the sukkah entrance was and was astonished to see President Shimon Peres personally greeting every visitor. Adir and I couldn't believe it and, had we known, we would have brought the camera along. When our turn came, we were interviewed by Galei Tzahal radio in Hebrew. And then, there we were standing next to the President of Israel, Shimon Peres. What a special moment. We wished him a moadim l'simcha and he asked us where we were from, to which we proudly responded, "Boca Raton,

Florida!" He wished us well and Adir and I stood there in amazement. When we regained our equilibrium, it was on to the next activity.

This year, Melitz organized a special citywide program called Sha'arayich, in which just about every yeshivah and education organization participated to fill the city with learning. The difficulty was choosing which of the amazing classes to attend. Adir joined me in attending a lecture by Avraham Infeld that was held at the Jewish Agency; both of us learned a great deal. Later in the day, I attended a panel discussion on the "Halakhic Future of the Conservative Movement," in which both Rabbis David Golinkin and Gordon Tucker participated. The program was in Hebrew and the Agron Street Synagogue, Moreshet Yisrael, was packed with people.

In the evening, I attended a magical program held at Beit Avi-Chai and organized by Ari Elon. It was a dialogue between the moving poetry of Hannah Senesh and the stories of Rabbi Abbahu in the Talmud. Ari was accompanied by two talented musicians who sang the poetry of Senesh, Natan Zach, and others. This entire program was in Hebrew. I was deeply moved by the experience. I found the interaction among literature, music, poetry, and sacred text to be a powerful one, and it was fascinating for me to be a part of an Israeli crowd during this experience. Miriam went to a similar day of learning and celebration of pluralistic Judaism with a more Israeli bent that was organized by Panim, the umbrella group for the pluralistic organizations, in the middle of the country (Ramat Ifal); later she took the kids to the sukkah of a colleague, Shira, who teaches at the Conservative Yeshiva. The post-college students were enchanted with the kids, introducing them to pop music on the bus, dancing on the grass, and smiling at Shira. They all sat on rugs in the Sukkah, as if it were a Beduin tent, and sang and played.

In the liturgy, we say that Sukkot is Zman Sinhateinu (the festival of our joy). There has been an overwhelming sense of joy and learning this Sukkot. Tonight, erev Shabbat, we look forward to sitting in the sukkah of Dory and Rabbi David Golinkin.

More reflections to come soon; for now, moadim l'simcha and Shabbat Shalom!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Matt".

