

A Jewish man remembers the sukkah in his grandfather's home
 And the sukkah remembers for him
 The wandering in the desert that remembers
 The grace of youth and the tablets of the Ten Commandments
 And the Golden Calf and the thirst and the hunger
 That remembers Egypt.

The sukkah helps the Jews remember their history and their covenant with God. The image of the 19th century sukkah from the collection of the Paris Jewish Museum expresses this notion with its elaborate panels depicting not only images of an Austrian village, the dwelling of the owner of the sukkah, but also a view of Jerusalem, the walls of the old city, and the Decalogue.

I hope that this year you invite into your sukkah not only your friends and family but also those who are no longer with us yet remain part of our memories of the past.



Painted sukkah with a view of Jerusalem, late 19th century, Austria.
 Photo: CC BY-SA 4.0, Moise Nedjar.

To view this image in color and high-definition, visit:
www.jtsa.edu/a-sukkah-remembers

Sukkot 5780

סוכות תש"ף



Human Lives and the Natural World

Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Provost, Irving Lehrman Research Professor of American Jewish History, and Sala and Walter Schlesinger Dean, Gershon Kekst Graduate School, JTS

For many of us who live in dense metropolitan areas, spending time in national parks gives us a unique opportunity to experience in more immediate fashion the majesty of our world. Vacationing in the Canadian Rockies this past summer—hiking in the mountains, walking on glaciers, boating in deep blue lakes, cooling off in the spray of gorgeous waterfalls, identifying rare birds and seeing moose, elk, deer, and the occasional bear (thankfully from a distance)—I felt awed and fortunate to behold this.

But it was the odd-looking overpasses on the highway that proved to be the most powerful sight of all. These were not ordinary overpasses, intended for cars or pedestrians. Brimming with flowers, grass, and trees, and bounded by tall wire fences on each side, these were wildlife overpasses developed to address the unanticipated problems that surfaced after the Trans-Canada Highway was completed. Developed to provide people more convenient access to the natural wonders of the Canadian Rockies, the highway inadvertently wreaked havoc on the natural habitat. Numerous animals were killed trying to cross the road, and over time, scientists realized that the animal population was diminishing because various species had been artificially separated by the highway. By constructing numerous overpasses and underpasses, the Canadian national park system eventually succeeded in both dramatically reducing animal deaths and ensuring the flourishing of various wildlife species.

I was moved by the human ingenuity represented by these overpasses and by the humbling recognition that motivated it, for these overpasses signify the human imperative to constantly attune ourselves to the natural world that we inhabit.

And it is just this awareness that is heightened for us when we build and use a sukkah, a structure that in its temporariness and its openness to the elements symbolizes our interconnectedness to the natural world. Its covering, called *sekhakh*, must be made of material that grows from the soil but that has been detached from the ground, usually tree branches or bamboo mats. Second, the covering must be layered in such a way that the daytime sky and nighttime stars are visible through it. This ensures that when we sit in the sukkah, we are attuned to the natural world: we encounter natural vegetation as well as the celestial world and we almost certainly encounter rain, wind, and variances in temperature.

Even after the structure has been completed, myriad decisions are dependent upon the weather and the animals around us. And the answers have changed over time—even in the course of one’s own lifetime—as the world around us evolves. As a child, I prepared for the holiday by stringing cranberries and popcorn; then on the eve of the holiday we hung up the strands along with fresh lemons, oranges, apples, grapes, and other fruit as well as colorful dried corn stalks. I painstakingly colored decorations for the sukkah walls but they were inevitably ruined by a downpour, dampening my spirits.

A generation later when my own children were decorating the sukkah, we had reluctantly given up the cranberries and popcorn and most of the fresh fruit because they attracted bees and were eaten by squirrels. We still hung lemons and dried corn but substituted water-resistant imitation fruits and vegetables that we reused year after year. We also laminated favorite decorations to protect them from the rain. My now-adult children hang nothing fresh in their sukkot; the squirrels and bees have prevailed. Only weatherproof decorations are hung. All of this helps ensure a joyous Sukkot—but nothing guarantees it. In recent years, stronger hurricanes, winds, and storms have necessitated concrete blocks to anchor the poles against toppling, and some years, even they proved ineffective against the elements.

Many of these Sukkot challenges and adaptations are minor in the moment, but their symbolic message has only become larger and weightier over time. Despite the massive technological advances that humans have achieved, controlling the natural world will always elude us. To survive on this earth, humans must figure out how to adapt to forces beyond our control, to make certain that we don’t harm the fragile equilibrium of our

ecosystem, and to do all that we can to redress any problems we’ve inadvertently caused. The Ten Days of Repentance that recently ended gave us a chance to confess our shortcomings before God and make amends with the people in our lives. Sukkot provides us with the opportunity to restore our relationship with the natural world.

The 19th-century American naturalist John Muir aptly described the human interconnectedness with nature that we experience on Sukkot: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords that cannot be broken, to everything in the universe.” Just as we continue to adapt our decorations and reinforce the poles, so too must we recognize how intertwined human lives are with nature and use that knowledge to protect, preserve, and restore it. National parks are responsible for guarding and preserving the natural treasures within them and to do that, they must correct the damage that humans inflict. On Sukkot, as we exit our climate-controlled homes and immerse ourselves in the awesome volatility of nature, we too are encouraged to appreciate the joy of the holiday—the joy of the natural world—while also embracing the responsibility.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Holiday Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (ז”) and Harold Hassenfeld (ז”).

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Sukkah Remembers

Dr. Ofra Backenroth, Associate Dean, the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education, JTS

In his poem “The Jews,” Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000) bestows on us a full typology of the Jewish people—from the standpoints of both Jews themselves and outsiders. Some of those images remain with us: the Jew wearing a Turkish turban in a Rembrandt painting, the Chagall Jew holding a violin as he flies over rooftops, and other vivid images. In the middle of the poem, Amichai mentions a sukkah—his grandfather’s sukkah, in particular. Amichai turns the memory of the Israelites’ wanderings in the desert that the sukkah usually evokes on its head, and describes the sukkah as an object that itself remembers and reflects back to us the history of the Jews.