in the Ark together—"*luhot veshivrei luhot munahin ba'aron*" (BT Bava Batra 14b and elsewhere)—the whole tablets resting on top of the broken ones (Rashi ad loc). In the Holy of Holies, in battle, and throughout their wanderings, the Israelites carried with them their wholeness and their brokenness, their success and their failure, God's love for them and their betrayal of God, all bound up together in one vessel. The evidence of both their moment of spiritual arrival and their moment of spiritual crumbling were inseparable. They embraced these two realities at once, just as the sukkah simultaneously embodies security and fragility, physicality and faith, shelter and vulnerability.

One could argue that I have now arrived. I live in a house in the suburbs, and my family is indeed blessed to build our own sukkah each year. My children's memories of Sukkot will be different from mine: putting up the poles, walls, and *sekhakh*; hanging the decorations; schlepping the trays of food and paper goods in and out; singing *birkat hamazon* in the open air and listening to our next door neighbors in their sukkah singing it again a few minutes later. I experience the sukkah now as both a signifier of arrival and also a marker of fragility—a reminder of the need for the physical structures that we build our lives in and around, and of the fact that, at the end of the day, we can really rely only on our faith, our values, and the bonds between us.

I cherish my sukkah now, arriving in it anew each year and feeling very tangibly the material blessings in my life, the blessing of health, and the greatest blessing of children. And at the same time, the sukkah causes me to reflect each year on the ultimate precariousness of what we build and enjoy; the tenuousness that defines what we hold most dear; and the reality that profound collapse is indeed possible.

May our time in the sukkah this year help us to embrace both realities: remembering that the physical sukkot in our lives are both infinitely precious and fundamentally ephemeral, symbolizing both arrival and tenuousness; but also remembering, praying, and hoping that the metaphorical sukkah of divine protection, the metaphorical sukkot of our values, relationships, and memories will remain forever resilient—so that if any of these falls down, we can find the strength and the faith to put it back up again.

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Sukkot 5779 סכות תשע"ט

When Buildings Fall

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From my childhood perspective growing up in an apartment building in suburban Boston, having a sukkah was a symbol of arrival—and our family didn't have one. Most of our friends lived in private homes, and so, with a mixture of enjoyment and jealousy, we traipsed all around town to have our *yom tov* meals in other people's sukkot.

There were certainly upsides to this. We got to see every type of sukkah you could imagine: every type of decoration, *sekhakh*, and outdoor lighting system. We saw ultra-Orthodox sukkot, enormous rectangles built to accommodate numerous children and grandchildren, their walls lined with laminated posters depicting illustrations of kosher and non-kosher sukkot. We saw New Age sukkot in octagons and other strange shapes, decorated with colorful tapestries and smelling of incense, with freshly harvested corn stalks draping down over our heads.

Along with all of these sukkot came the varied experiences that now form my bank of childhood memories connected with this holiday. There was the accessible sukkah for a family with a member in a wheelchair; getting from the house to the sukkah was a complex ordeal undertaken by the whole family with sacred focus before each meal. And there was the sukkah with flimsy fabric walls built on a steep incline, in which my father tilted his chair back to look up and admire the *sekhakh*, and ended up somersaulting backward right out of the sukkah and down the hill.

For my sister and me, this series of field trips was a terrific exercise in exploring Jewish diversity in the Boston area. But Sukkot—supposedly *zeman simhatenu* (the holiday of our greatest joy)—was always tinged with a palpable sadness that we felt from my father, who masterfully arranged our holiday adventures, but really yearned for a sukkah of his own. And so the sukkah remained that ever-elusive marker of attainment, the simple outdoor hut that in theory should be a

socioeconomic equalizer, but in reality divides the haves and the have-nots in many Jewish communities—because if one can't afford to buy a house, one most likely won't have a place to build a sukkah either.

After several more years of sukkah hopping during my young adulthood, I arrived in New York City just before the fall holidays in 2001 to begin my rabbinical studies at JTS. As I was settling into a new community, a new career path, and a new city, 9/11 happened. My peers and I came out of Bible class and heard the news of a plane hitting a building downtown. Soon after, we stared at a television screen in the student lounge, and watched the towers fall. The community gathered together in the auditorium, singing quietly and trying to make space for the confusion, shock, and emotions that no one could yet name or express. As we left the building, we encountered an endless stream of stunned commuters walking up Broadway, a terrible smell hanging in the air.

Three weeks later, I sat in the beautiful JTS sukkah, looking up at the empty sky through the spaces in the *sekhakh*, and feeling the most intense vulnerability I had ever felt. At that moment, the sukkah ceased to be a symbol of arrival for me. It became, instead, a symbol of fragility; of defenseless exposure to the elements, both natural and human; of fear; of the knowledge that no edifice—real or metaphorical—can be relied upon for permanence. I tried to leave town for Sukkot for the rest of my years as a rabbinical student; celebrating a holiday of joy in that same fragile structure where I had sat in 2001 felt too loaded with associations. But I couldn't run from the new meaning that Sukkot had taken on for me, and I carried it with me from one sukkah to another, year after year.

The Rabbis of the Talmud offer two competing interpretations of the sukkah (BT Sukkah 11b): according to Rabbi Akiva, the sukkah commemorates the physical sukkot in which the Israelites dwelt during their 40 nomadic years in the desert; according to Rabbi Eliezer, the sukkah represents the *ananei hakavod* (the Clouds of Glory), the divine presence that protected the Israelites through their wanderings. This oft-quoted disagreement implies a deeper existential question: did the Israelites feel the need to rely on actual structures that they themselves built to feel protected, or were they content to rely on the promise of divine shelter? What did they see as their ultimate source of protection in life? In what could they really trust? Was a building something to be counted on? Was God someone to be counted on?

These questions remain just as present for us today. In a world where buildings can come crumbling down around us, to what or whom can we turn for

permanence? What can give us the confidence to trust in our realities and go about our lives? To celebrate special moments and take joy in our families, work, health, hobbies, and religious lives and communities? Rabbi Akiva's understanding of the sukkah implies a sense of stability, a rootedness in the security of our historical and contemporary structures; while Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation assumes a faith in the unseen, a reliance on a greater source of goodness in times of fragility and the unknown. Where do we find ourselves on the spectrum between the two?

The word *sukkah* literally means shelter. We refer to God as *hapores sukkat shalom alenu* (the One who spreads over us a shelter of peace). Yet we also encounter in the Sukkot liturgy themes of brokenness and collapse. For example, the *birkat hamazon* (grace after meals) on Sukkot includes the line "*harahaman hu yakim lanu et sukkat David hanofalet*" (may the Merciful One establish for us the fallen sukkah of David; based on Amos 9:11). Why did the authors of our liturgy choose to put before us an image evoking the destroyed Davidic dynasty after every meal in the sukkah? Why not include instead verses and images about the joy of Sukkot and its associations of agricultural plenty? The Maharal of Prague suggests that the phrase "fallen sukkah" implies a strength born, ironically, out of the structure's very fragility. A royal dynasty is typically referred to as a *bayit* (house), not a sukkah. But when a house falls, its original essence disappears; any subsequent structure erected is a totally new, unrelated building. A sukkah, on the other hand, is defined by its impermanence—by its ability to be taken down and resurrected repeatedly. If a sukkah falls, it can easily be rebuilt and its original essence restored (*Netzah Yisrael*, chapter 35).

Some might understand the Maharal's words as typifying the history of the Jewish people, who have survived tenaciously through centuries of buildings fallen and rebuilt, of wandering while carrying our homes on our backs, either physically or metaphorically. But for me, his interpretation of this curious bit of Sukkot liturgy articulates the tension between arriving and staying vulnerable—the liminal space in which we celebrate what we have built and achieved, while recognizing that it is impermanent, lasting only as long as fate and divine grace allow.

In the Torah reading for Shabbat Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot, we find references to the two sets of tablets carved by Moses: the first set, brought down from Mount Sinai and then immediately shattered when Moses witnesses the Israelites engaged in the sin of the Golden Calf; and the second set, the whole set, created to replace what was broken. The Talmud notes that both sets were kept