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Impermanence, Empathy, and the Shadow of Faith

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It can feel odd that just as it begins to get chilly, and just after the long High Holiday prayers may have left us wanting to simply stay home, we must go outside to sit in the sukkah—an impermanent dwelling that brings us closer to the elements. And it may seem odd that precisely at this moment of impermanence, the Jewish tradition places extra significance on the welcoming in of guests—*hakhnasat orhim*. Why is it that that we must now enter a place of discomfort? And why is it that we must be extra careful to welcome in guests at this time? In order to answer these questions, we can turn to the representation of Sukkot and its rituals in the Jewish mystical tradition, beginning with the Zohar.

In the Zohar, sitting in the sukkah is likened to sitting in the "shadow" or "shade" "of faith"—*tzila di-meheminuta*. Faith is usually imagined as a state of being that is personal, even one that is inherently internal; we usually experience and talk about faith as something that exists within us. But according to the Zohar, by sitting in the sukkah, we *surround* ourselves with faith. In presenting the sukkah as "the shadow of faith," the Zohar is playing on an aspect of the ritual that appears already in the Talmud (Sukkah 11b). The Talmud makes a connection between contemporary sukkot and the booths in which the Israelites resided while wandering the desert, which Rabbi Eliezer claims were not physical structures but divine "clouds of glory." When cast in this light, the sukkah becomes a place of faith precisely because of its impermanence: stepping out of our comfort zone, putting ourselves in a liminal space like a temporary booth, prompts us to be faithful, as we reflect more on our reliance on God's protection.

The Zohar and the ensuing Jewish mystical tradition continue to transform the sukkah into a place of faith through the ritual of *ushpizin*, Aramaic for "guests." On every evening of the holiday, a different figure from the Jewish past is ritually invited to join those sitting in the sukkah. Originally, this meant the forefathers. But over time, Jews have added additional guests, including women and figures from more recent memory.

The Zohar argues for the importance of bringing in these heavenly guests by pointing to the repetition of the commandment to sit in the sukkah in Leviticus 23:42, "בַּסֻּכֹּת **תֵּשְׁבוּ** שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל **יֵשְׁבוּ** בַּסֻּכֹּת"; "**You shall live** in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel **shall live** in booths." Rabbi Aba explains this repetition as follows:

וְאָמַר רִבִּי אַבָּא, כְּתִיב 'בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים', וּלְבָתַר 'יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת'-

בְּקַדְמִיתָא תֵּשְׁבוּ, וּלְבָתַר יֵשְׁבוּ.

אֶלָּא, קַדְמָאָה לְאוּשְׁפִּיזַיִּ; תִּנְיָינָא, לִבְנֵי עָלְמָא.

> R. Abba said, "It states, 'You shall live in booths seven days,' and then 'shall live in booths'—first *you* shall dwell and then *they* shall dwell. The first refers to the guests, and the second, to people of the world."

Before one enters the sukkah, one must bring in the heavenly guests, and this ritual models for us the importance of bringing in earthly guests. What makes the sukkah a place of faith is not only that being outside makes us reflect more on our reliance on God. Rather, the Zohar teaches that when we force ourselves into these places of discomfort, into liminal spaces that are neither fully inside nor fully outside, we can actually encounter the divine—so long as we

invite others to join us. Thus, it is by creating community that the sukkah becomes a site of holiness.

But what is holy about being somewhat outside, and somewhat inside?? Why do we got into a hut in order to learn this lesson? Can't we just invite the heavenly—and earthly—guests into our dining room? These questions feel especially acute here in New York City, when going into the sukkah often means being closer to the streets and to the alleys, places we may not normally find ourselves—places that we may associate with the unhoused, or with people who are otherwise on the margins of our society.

By forcing us into a liminal space, the sukkah thus bring us to a place of empathy. We cannot have a truly holy community without also thinking of those who live with impermanence year-round. Going out into the sukkah, dwelling both in and on impermanence, should be an opportunity for us to think about those in the liminal places of our society, who regularly deal with the issue of what the roof over their heads will look like.

After the intensity and spiritual highs of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, it is enticing to withdraw during the fall and winter. Yet Sukkot comes to remind us that our community's work is far from over.

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