



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Sukkot 5773 *Sukkah* of Peace¹ By Rabbi David Saperstein

Few symbols associated with our holiday cycle are as colorful and interesting as the *sukkah*. Following the biblical command that we should dwell in this temporary and frail shelter for seven days, many Jews today will not eat under a fixed roof during the entire period of the festival, taking their meals in the *sukkah* and eating, conversing, singing—truly a moving experience.

What is the meaning of this commandment? I offer one insight from a line in the *Hashkivenu* prayer, contained in each evening service, which reads: “*Ufros Aleinu Sukkat Shlomecha*—Spread over us the *sukkah* of Your peace.”

Of all possible images to describe God’s peaceful presence, why did the author of this prayer choose the *sukkah*? After all, peace is one of the highest of all Jewish values, while the *sukkah* is relatively basic and simple, common and ordinary. Why did he not write, “build over us the stately mansion of your peace,” or “the majestic palace,” or “the grand castle”? Such structures are built on strong foundations, out of concrete or stone; once they are built, they will stand by themselves for hundreds of years. In contrast, a *sukkah* is fragile and vulnerable, exposed to the elements. A strong wind can easily blow it over. It can be undermined by water seeping through the ground or burnt if someone drops a lit match. You have to watch it almost constantly, care for it incessantly, lest it be suddenly destroyed.

Peace, too, requires this care and attention. We erect structures of peace with care, but they are all too easily blown over by the strong winds of group hatred and extremism, or undermined by the seeping waters of suspicion, or consumed by the fires of nationalistic self-righteousness. In order for the edifice of peace to remain standing, we have to be constantly on guard; we cannot take it for granted that peace, once achieved, will automatically endure—a lesson learned all too bitterly in our own time.

This is true everywhere: in our own families, communities, cities and our nation; and in the poorest of communities across the globe, where so many people live precarious existences so frequently shattered by armed and violent struggle. Maintaining peace requires nurturing a fragile balance of political, judicial and law enforcement structures; the protection of human rights; effective means for individuals and communities to resolve their differences peacefully; and cultural, educational, political and religious norms that delegitimize violence while legitimizing diversity, pluralism, the rule of law and democracy. Without these things, peace—true *shalom*, not just the absence of strife, but wholeness and healing—is not possible. The metaphor of the *sukkah* reminds us that maintaining *shalom* is not a given, but a process that requires constant work, focus and care.

The *sukkah* of peace also teaches us the importance of open communication. Many people believe that the way to peace is through strong, impregnable borders, through which the enemy is unable to pass. They might be ones to choose to describe a “fortified castle of peace” rather than a *sukkah*. But while impregnable borders and strong walls may make fighting difficult, they do not bring true peace. The *sukkah* has an open entrance and thin or open walls

¹ Based on a teaching by Professor Marc Saperstein.

that allow us to hear or see through them. So, too, peace must be based on the openness of each side to the other; on the willingness of various parties to encounter one another and resolve their underlying differences. So much suspicion is built up by lack of social interaction between groups—Israelis and Palestinians; fundamentalist and moderate religious groups; Muslims, Christians and Jews; between the haves and the have-nots; between racial, ethnic, religious minority groups in our own communities. People change when they encounter the human face of the “other”; and without such change, here too, true *shalom* is not possible.

There is one final quality of a *sukkah* that seems most relevant at this crossroads in world history. According to Jewish law, a *sukkah* must have a roof made of twigs, so that you can look through the spaces and see the stars of the heavens. This reminds us of the infinite potential of humankind. Imagine how much more could be accomplished under conditions of peace, rather than in our current world fraught with war. If we could channel but a fraction of the resources and energy that are squandered on military expenditures and redirect those resources to social betterment, how far could we move to fulfilling the values of human possibility that we Jews have dreamed of over the centuries? The world spent \$1.7 trillion on military expenditures in 2011.² According to the UN, it would cost only \$30 billion (1% of our military budgets) a year to eradicate hunger worldwide.³ The economist Jeffery Sachs estimates that it would take an annual \$175 billion, a mere 1/10 of the global military budget, to end extreme poverty worldwide.⁴ Failure to make real progress today towards a world of justice and peace is a failure of moral vision and political will. With that will, we could truly reach for the stars.

These, then, are things we learn about peace from the *sukkah*: that it demands our constant vigilance because it is vulnerable and easily destroyed; that it must be based on openness and access, rather than on placing barriers between people; that it can enable humanity to achieve its greatest potential. As we sit in our *sukkot* this year, may we be emboldened in our pursuit of *shalom*. And until we have fully built that world of justice and peace, let us at least derive both comfort and renewed hope each time we pray: *Ufros Aleinu Sukkat Shlomecha*—Spread over us the *sukkah* of Your peace.



Rabbi David Saperstein is the Director of the Religious Action Center (RAC) of Reform Judaism. Also an attorney, Rabbi Saperstein teaches seminars in First Amendment Church-State Law and in Jewish Law at Georgetown University Law School. He serves on the board of numerous national organizations including the NAACP, People for the American Way, National Religious Partnership on the Environment and the World Bank’s “World Faith Development Dialogue.”

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² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/resultoutput/trends>

³ Elizabeth Rosenthal and Andrew Martin, “UN says solving food crisis could cost \$30 billion,” *The New York Times*, 4 June 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/04/news/04iht-04food.13446176.html?_r=0

⁴ Jeffrey Sachs, “The Budget for True National Security,” *Huffington Post*, 7 October 2011. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-sachs/the-budget-for-true-natio_b_999867.html