



CHAG v' CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Go out, Look up: Sukkot 5775 By Rabbi Noa Kushner

An architect once told me that even the opening of an umbrella constitutes the creation of a designed space. Simple and temporary as it is, an umbrella shelters us from rain. And anyone who has been caught without one knows there's a big difference between being underneath an umbrella and being exposed.

A *chuppah* (wedding canopy) is also designed to be simple and temporary and yet has the power to completely alter a space. In the moments before a wedding ceremony, I have often seen a *chuppah* leaning against a tree, unassuming and dormant. But as the wedding begins and the *chuppah* is unfurled—symbolizing the home the couple will build together—not only is the space underneath it transformed, the space all around takes on a new charged meaning. Even those of us who only witness the *chuppah* in action can't help but feel a rush of hope.

A *sukkah* (the outdoor structure we build and live in for the holiday of Sukkot) also carries this potential to change our perspective. Like the *chuppah*, it is temporary by design. Traditional laws teach that we cannot just move to a summer house or an Airbnb flat and have it count as our dwelling in a *sukkah*. No, the majority of the *sukkah* has to be built just for the purpose of Sukkot, just for those seven days. And it must be an open structure: We must be able to see through the roof to the stars overhead.

It's one thing to be under an umbrella or even in the presence of a life-altering *chuppah* for a few minutes, and another thing altogether to live and sleep in a designed-to-be-temporary space for seven days. And Sukkot takes place right after Yom Kippur—when we have literally taken our souls down to the studs, and looked squarely in the face of our flaws. It seems counter intuitive: Right when we would most want to retreat to habit, or hide in our rooms, we go out in our yards, build flimsy spaces, and stay there, without much between us and the sky.

Why do we live in these temporary, open structures at the very moment when we have already made ourselves so vulnerable? It could be that spending day after day outside gives us enough time and space to get perspective. Without a secure roof over our heads, but surrounded by community, we realize that what protects us and brings us joy is not only reinforced walls, or locks on our doors, but our openness to relationships with each other and with God.

This understanding is expanded when we consider that many people around the world lack permanent shelter to begin with. In fact, we face the realization that our temporary *sukkot* may provide more privacy and protection than many people's homes.

Perhaps this is why the celebration of Sukkot takes place outside at the very time we would want to hide in our homes. Maybe the holiday teaches us that our protection is inextricably tied to the protection of others. The kind of security we seek will only come once we see ourselves as part of a larger whole, once we witness and respond to the needs of those outside our locked doors and beyond our circle of immediate concern.

My dream for this Sukkot is that as we look through the *skakh*, the open ceiling, to the sky, we consider that anyone looking up around the world is looking at the same stars. The sukkah can help us remember this basic truth: we are all living under the same roof—the roof of heaven.

And just like an open *chuppah* carries the possibility to bring about real change, my hope is that the view from in and around our *sukkot* will push us to work together to enact change in the world: to overcome violence, poverty and injustice. So that one day very soon, anyone who is looking up, anywhere in the world—maybe from her *sukkah*, maybe from his home—no matter how vulnerable that person might once have been—on that day each and every one would have access to a peaceful place to lay down at night. At last, all of us would be safe under the same roof of stars.

I believe much of this dream is within our power; it is in our hands. Maybe this is what our prayer means when we ask God for a “*sukkat shlomeicha*—your sheltering *sukkah*, your *sukkah* of peace.” Maybe we are praying for the compassion and determination to build a *sukkah* together that would shelter us all.



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Kushner received her B.A. in Religious Studies from Brown University and was ordained by Hebrew Union College, New York. She then served as the Hillel Rabbi for Sarah Lawrence College and Stanford University. After founding [The Kitchen](#), Kushner was profiled in San Francisco Magazine's "[Who Runs SF](#)" Power Issue and was featured in the final [Newsweek / Daily Beast 2013: Rabbis to Watch](#) list. Kushner is on faculty for Wexner Heritage and speaks nationally. She is married to Rabbi Michael Lezak and is the mother of three daughters: Zella, Bluma and Minna.

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