

## To Shelter the Homeless

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

### Succot

Succot is almost upon us. As soon as Yom Kippur ended, we began to build our *succot*, the temporary huts in which we dwell during the Festival which carries their name. And we are accustomed to thinking of these frail, temporary shelters as a reminder of the fragility and temporariness of even our most firm and permanent structures. If everything is so temporary and fragile, as our *succot* remind us, then we must rely on Divine Providence, on G\*d's gifts, even for our very survival.

But symbols may have many meanings, and the *succah* is a prime example.

The *succah* reminds us – it is intended to remind us – of the huts in which we dwelt during the fall harvest season. So Succot keeps us aware of the agricultural cycle, the natural cycle of the year. The *succah* keeps us aware of Judaism as an “earth religion.”

And the *succah* reminds us as well – it is intended to remind us – of the temporary shelters in which we dwelt during our forty years' wandering in the wilderness. The *succah*, thus, keeps us aware of Sh'khinah, G\*d's Presence, Which accompanied us (and continues to accompany us), protecting us and watching over us, throughout that time and at all times.

During Succot, we dwell in the *succah*. As a minimum, we take our meals in the *succah*; some even build the *succah* large enough that they can move their beds into it and really live there for the week of the Festival.

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What do we learn from living in the *succah*? Well, there is the obvious meaning – that everything in life is fragile and temporary.

But there is a more profound meaning. Our tradition takes our experience in slavery in Mitzrayim (ancient Egypt) as a lesson. **Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land Mitzrayim.** (Exodus 22:20) Our experience of being oppressed is not just a lesson of “don’t let yourselves be oppressed again” but one of “do not allow *anyone* to be oppressed, ever.”

Our fast on Yom Kippur, we are told by the Prophet (Isaiah 58:3-10, from the Prophetic portion which we read on Yom Kippur morning), is meaningless if we do not learn from it to feed the hungry (whoever they may be) and to free the oppressed (whoever they may be) and to clothe the naked (whoever they may be). It is not enough that we experience the hunger; we must learn from our own hunger to relieve the hunger of others, of *all* others.

In the same way, the Succot experience – being cast out of our homes (even though intentionally and only temporarily) to live in flimsy, fragile, make-shift, temporary shelters – if it is to have meaning beyond the mere ritual observance of the Mitzvah (G\*d said it, and I believe it, and that settles it), must lead us to an awareness of the needs of those who are out of their homes involuntarily. If we are not led to care for the homeless, then dwelling in the *succah* for the week of the Festival becomes a mere rote observance, without meaning.

To an understanding of the spiritual meaning of the Mitzvah – take care of your soul and the other’s body, as several of the Hassidic masters instruct us – may we soon be led.

*Hag same’ah*; may you have a joyous Festival.

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