



Bamboo Sukkah

What did the Chinese think about a Sukkah? Tales from Shanghai

Black Magic and Family Fights

Rabbi Avrohom Greenberg, Chabad Rabbi in Pudong, China (a suburb of Shanghai) once rented an apartment in a complex where most of the residents were foreign expatriates or upper-class newly rich Chinese.

So here it was, one month before Sukkos, and Rabbi Greenberg turned to the real estate broker and asked her to ask the management for permission to build a sukkah somewhere on the premises.

Now the broker, who had already worked for a number of years with his brother, Rabbi Shalom Greenberg, the Chabad rabbi of Shanghai, China, already knew what the holiday of Sukkos was.

So she promised that she would arrange it. And indeed, within a few days, he had a special place designated in the middle of the complex right next to the restaurant where he'd be able to build a sukkah.

Well, how do you build a sukkah? You build a frame of wood or metal and wrap it in boards or cloth, and you put vegetation on the roof: Bamboo, palm leaves or bunches of cedar branches, as they do in New York.

So Rabbi Shalom Greenberg suggested to his younger brother Avrohom: "Listen. Why make your sukkah walls of wood? Here in

China, everything is bamboo. So why not make your sukkah walls of bamboo too? This way, you'll blend into the local décor. So that's what he did—and he built a beautiful sukkah, invited lots of guests and celebrated the holiday of Sukkos.

Now that year, the first two days of Sukkos were like this year: Thursday and Friday followed immediately by Shabbos. Thus, Rabbi Greenberg was not able to use a phone for three straight days.

On Sunday, he got a panicked phone call from the broker: "What did you build next to the restaurant?" Rabbi Greenberg told her it was the sukkah. She asked him, "Can I come and check?" He said, "Sure!"

Then he asked her why she had called. What had happened?

She told him that in China, there is an ancient custom that when someone passes away, a "mourners' hut" is built out of bamboo... in which the body is placed for the course of several days... during which everyone comes to mourn with the bereaved family.

Now what had happened was that the secretaries of the apartment complex had gotten dozens of phone calls from furious tenants, complaining that someone had brought this pagan custom into this modern neighborhood. "We renters pay a very high price to live in a progressive neighborhood with enlightened people—and then this guy comes along and builds a mourning hut right in the middle of our retail area right next to the restaurant!"

When the broker came to check out what was going in the sukkah, Rabbi Greenberg was stepping out of the sukkah at that very moment holding a lulav and esrog in his hands and dressed in black like Chasidim do. She said to him, "Now I understand why they were saying that some kind of sorcerer was going into the mourning hut every day to do all kinds of black magic inside..."

But it gets better.

The next year, Rabbi Greenberg moved to a different building. He again turned to the same broker, and she arranged permission for him to build a sukkah at his new place. But this time, Rabbi Greenberg had already learned from his past experience, and so he didn't build a sukkah out of bamboo.

After the first days of Yom Tov were over, as soon as he could use a phone, Rabbi Greenberg got another call from the broker.

"Um, hi... How's everything? Is everything alright with your family? Is everything all right with your wife?"

"Sure! Yes, of course! Why do you ask?"

The broker told him that this time around, she had gotten a lot of calls from the neighbors again, complaining that there's a new tenant who built himself a shack outside and he sits in there by himself eating all alone. Apparently he's gotten into some kind of fight with his wife...

What had actually happened was that Mrs. Greenberg had had a baby that very week, and obviously, she was in no shape to eat outside in the sukkah, never mind host dozens of guests.

But not to worry—after the holiday, the neighbors called the broker again and said that the new guy had taken apart his shack and moved back into the house, so it seemed that domestic peace had come back to his family.

Rabbi Greenberg asked her, "Why didn't you just explain that it's a Jewish holiday and that's why I'm building that shack?" She told him, "You'll seem much more normal in their eyes if they think that you had a fight with your wife than if you were building the shack for religious reasons..."

Jewish Pride

My friends, there is a very powerful lesson here.

If you ever met a Holocaust survivor or refugee, he'll likely tell you that before he came to live in the United States or wherever it is that he lives, they first had to cross the border from the Soviet Union into Poland, and then into Czechoslovakia, and then a few months in a German DP camp, and then England, and finally New York and then here. Or something like that.

But the point is, every place a Jew ends up is not a random occurrence. G-d guides our every step, and wherever it is that we end up, that's because that's where G-d planned for us to be.

Even in faraway China.

The Rebbe teaches us that wherever a Jew winds up, it's by Divine Providence—it's because G-d wanted to have a presence there, that a Jew do a mitzvah there, that another human being be reminded that there is a G-d in the universe.

And that there, in that far-off place, among people who never before saw a Jew and certainly never saw a sukkah, to build a sukkah and see to it that they, too, learn about the Jewish Nation and hear that it was this Nation that brought G-d to the world— and thus come to recognize that there is a Creator in the Universe.

Let us take inspiration from the sukkah. Let us be proud, bold and unafraid to display our sukkos in public. Let our neighbors see them, and ask us about them. "Hey, what's that hut you're building in your backyard?" And let us then tell them that it symbolizes G-d surrounding us and protecting—and that there is a G-d in the universe all around us.