

# Happiness: The Secret of the Sukkah

*What happens when a young rabbi tries to build a sukkah himself?*

## The Flimsy Sukkah

Good Yom Tov!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England, tells the story of how when he was a young man shortly after his wedding, it was just a few days before Sukkos when one fine morning, right after the morning services, one of his friends asked him to come along with him to the hardware store to buy wooden beams and other materials with which to build a sukkah.

Rabbi Sacks was only too happy to join his friend. In those days, he didn't have a car, and he wondered to himself how he was going to bring the beams and materials from the store to his house. So now, he was happy to have been invited by his friend to accompany him to the store. So off they went to his friend's house to grab the shopping list that he had written up containing everything he needed to build a sukkah.

Now, this friend was a meticulously organized person. He had sketched out the size of the sukkah: the measurements, the height of the walls, etc. It was all ready to go. He had planned to build a sukkah that would be free-standing, not leaning on any wall. It also had windows and a big door. But to build such a sukkah, you need expertise and experience, and this guy actually had experience. He

took the long list of all the building materials and off they went to the store.

Rabbi Sacks stood by his friend's side, embarrassed. He had never managed to build anything in his life, certainly not a sukkah. In school, he was always last in his class when it came to woodworking and building, and at home, the maximum he knew how to do was change a light bulb. And so he had joined his friend here, hoping that he'd be able to learn something from him.

At the hardware store, his friend rattled off his list of needed items to the store guy like a pro. When they got to checkout, he had a pile of materials in his cart: Beams, poles, screws and nails—everything you could think of. Rabbi Sacks, for his part, stood off to one side, embarrassed, holding a few plywood panels and another few wood beams and a bag of nails. They both went home to build their sukkahs.

Before the holiday began, each one visited the sukkah of his friend. Rabbi Sacks' friend's sukkah, as you can imagine, was a sight to behold. It was a veritable summer home in its own right. Rabbi Sacks' sukkah, however, was made of three wooden walls that he had connected to each other with nails, with the walls affixed to the rear wall of the house with a nail so that it wouldn't collapse.

On the second night of Sukkos, there was a strong windstorm in town. The next morning, on the second day of Sukkos, Rabbi Sacks encountered his friend in shul—with a Tisha B'Av look on his face. His friend told him that the wind had destroyed his sukkah. But then he asked him, Nu, what's with your sukkah?

Rabbi Sacks replied that "My sukkah is still standing."

The friend could not believe it. He could not believe that his big strong sukkah was down but that his friend's little sukkah had survived the

storm. He insisted that he had to come down and see the miracle with his own eyes—how it could be that any sukkah had stood up in such a storm.

When the friend arrived to see the sukkah himself, he discovered the reason why the rabbi's sukkah had survived the storm. Unlike his sukkah, which was self-standing, Rabbi Sacks' sukkah was attached to the rear wall of his house with just one nail.

It was that one nail that had saved the sukkah.

And then his friend told him, "Now I understand the meaning of Sukkos. You can plan and build the strongest sukkah. But if it's not connected to something firm like a house, then it can fly away in the wind. You could have a shabby, weak shack—but if it's connected to something firm, even if only by one nail, then it will stand against all the winds in the world.

## "And they traveled, and they encamped"

There is a powerful lesson here, my friends.

On Sukkos, we leave our safe and secure houses that protect us and go out to live in a sukkah that reminds us of how our fathers lived when they left Egypt and wandered for 40 years. For one whole week, our sukkah becomes our temporary home in which we eat, study and welcome guests.

But when we contemplate the matter, we discover that there is nothing that symbolizes Jewish history more than the sukkah.

Throughout most of Jewish history, the Jews were constantly "on the road." We always felt that we were in a sukkah. Ever since G-d told our ancestor Avraham Avinu, the very first Jew, "Lech L'cha," go forth for yourself, the bulk of our time as a nation was in exile, in "temporary dwelling."

Jews always wandered from country to country, sometimes of their own free will but mainly against their will. We were exiled from England in 1290, from Vienna in 1421, and so on with many other places. Then you have the greatest trauma, the Spanish Expulsion that occurred in 1492, ending the 300-year Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Generations later, the pogroms in Russia caused millions of Jews to immigrate to the west—and Jews to this day emigrate from one country to another. Jews from Russia move to Israel, or to Germany; Jews from South Africa move to Florida or Georgia or California, and so on.

The history of the Jewish People carries on exactly as the Torah describes the 40 years of our ancestors' wandering the desert: "And they traveled, and they encamped." In our history, there were more than enough times when we thought that we had finally found "permanent residency," a safe and secure place to live, to our pain we discovered that it was only "temporary dwelling." Jews never knew what the next day would bring.

We can ask the question: What gave the Jews the power to stand strong in all the years of their wander? What is the secret that gives us the strength to not give up in 2,000 years of exile? But we can find the answer right here in the name of this holiday.

## The Holiday of Joy

In our prayers, we describe the holiday of Sukkos as "Zman Simchaseinu"—the time of our rejoicing. Seemingly, however, this name would be more fitting for Pesach, at which we went out to freedom and which we celebrate every year by gathering around the Seder table with our extended family, with the table laden with every good thing. That's the holiday that should be called "the time of our rejoicing."

Alternatively, a Jew who just loves the Torah and delights in it should

call Shavuos, the holiday on which we received the Torah, “the time of our rejoicing.”

Why, then, does the Torah assign the rejoicing specifically to the holiday of Sukkos? The Torah doesn’t tell us to be happy on Pesach! And with Shavuos, the Torah only uses the phrase “and you shall rejoice” once. With Sukkos, however, the Torah states no less than three times the command to be happy. (See Toras Menachem, Vol. 41, pg. 92, et al.)

Perhaps we can answer by saying that there is another reason for rejoicing on Sukkos: Because the secret to Jewish endurance throughout all our years of wandering the desert, and in 2,000 years of exile, was happiness. The nail that kept the Sukkah of David from falling was happiness and joy. When a Jew is happy, nothing can destroy him. And when the Jewish Nation is happy, it lives forever.