

## *Sukkot Day 2 - 2017*

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/6/17

Based on the latest information I could find, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people around the world has topped 65 million according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. January 1, 2016 was the first time in the organization's history the number has surpassed 60 million. Here is an astounding statistic: One in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations. Two other ways to wrap your mind around that number: Each minute, 24 people around the world flee their home because of violence or persecution. And if the world's displaced people were their own nation, it would be larger than the United Kingdom.

Three countries - Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia - accounted for more than half of the refugees under the U.N.'s mandate. And most of those refugees, 86 percent, are hosted in developing countries. Lebanon hosts 183 refugees for every 1,000 inhabitants, the highest ratio in the world, while Turkey hosts the highest total number of refugees - 2.5 million people. More than half of the world's refugees in 2015 were children, the report finds. A little more than 200,000 refugees were able to return home in 2015. Meanwhile, just 0.66 percent of the world's refugees were approved for resettlement in another country.

I share all this with you against the backdrop of an argument from the Mishna, the first code of Jewish law. Two famous sages disagreed on what exactly the "sukkah" in Sukkot originally was. Rabbi Eliezer held that the sukkah represents the clouds of glory that surrounded the Israelites during the wilderness years, protecting them from heat during the day, cold during the night, and bathing them with the radiance of the Divine presence. Rashi in his commentary takes this as the "p'shat", the "plain sense" of the verse.

Rabbi Akiva on the other hand says "Sukkot Mammash", meaning a sukkah is a sukkah, no more and no less: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. It has no symbolism other than it was what our ancestors built when they were travelling in the desert.

If we follow Rabbi Eliezer then it is obvious why we celebrate by making a sukkah. It is there to remind us of a miracle. All three pilgrimage festivals are about miracles. Pesach is about the miracle of the exodus when God brought us out of Egypt with signs and wonders. Shavuot is about the miracle of the revelation at Mount Sinai. Sukkot is about Gd's tender care of his People, mitigating the hardships of the journey across the desert by miraculously surrounding them with His protective cloud as a parent wraps a young child in a blanket. And as I said, Rashi says this is the straight-forward meaning.

Rashi's grandson, the Rashbam, gives what I think is the "plain-er" meaning of the sukkah. Rashbam says the sukkah was there to remind the Israelites of their past so that at the very moment they were feeling the greatest satisfaction at living in Israel - at the time of the ingathering of the produce of the land - they would remember their lowly origins. They were once a group of refugees without a home, living in a shanty town, never knowing when they would have to move on. Sukkot, says Rashbam, is integrally connected to the warning Moses gave the Israelites at the end of his life about the danger of security and affluence.

I never really thought about it this way, but Rashbam creates a very telling image for all of us. What did the camp of the B'nai Yisrael look like? A shanty town. Like those in South Africa, and India, and South America. And the people who lived there - OUR people, were refugees, not knowing where they were going. And it all sounds so terribly depressing when you put it that way. But two quick points to be made here:

1. Our story from the Torah is one of refugees who relied on the kindness of strangers, some of whom let us pass and some who fought to keep us out.
2. In spite of the fact that we were refugees living in a big shanty town, the holiday is still called "Z'man Simchataynu." The people did not know exactly what the future held in store for them, but they were free. And they celebrated the freedom they had in that moment. They did not need luxury, in fact they did not need anything more than food and a roof over their heads. And throughout our long history as Jews we have indeed been refugees many time, but we have not lost the ability to celebrate by being together.

This calls to my mind an image of the late Erna Bratt, who was in shul every Shabbos until she passed away earlier this year. When I went to her home after the funeral, I saw a picture of her and several friends dressed up, laughing and having a good time; celebrating life. I asked her son, Stuart Sauer, when the picture was from and he said it was take in 1949 when Erna came to this country. Just a couple of years earlier she was in Auschwitz. She lost a lot of her family and many friends. She endured incredible hardship, pain and suffering. And yet there she was celebrating her freedom just a short time later. She was making the most of life and courageously celebrating her freedom in the moment.

I find Rabbi Akiva's explanation more compelling because it took guts to trust Gd, and celebrate life, even when you were a refugee in a shanty town. According to Rabbi Eliezer all the Jewish People's needs were attended to. What guts did that take? But to remain optimistic no matter the circumstance- that takes courage. The mitzvah of sukkah tells us that we cannot wait for every problem to be solved, for every hole in our lives to be filled, before feeling happy and content. We will always live in a "sukkah"; there will always be legitimate concerns that weigh heavily upon our minds and cause us to feel unsettled. Nevertheless, we can and must experience the simcha of celebrating our freedom, enjoying life and serving the Almighty, even amid the struggles and difficulties that we encounter on a daily basis.