

Yizkor - Shmini Atzeret 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Krupnick 10/5/15

It is so nice to come together to celebrate this joyous holiday, a true time of simcha. When it comes to the three Pilgrimage Festivals, the word "simcha" is not used to describe Shavuot. It is only used once to describe the holiday of Passover. But for Sukkot the word simcha is used twice in Torah and then many times subsequently. Only Sukkot is described as "Z'man Simchataynoo," a phrase that we repeat often in the Amidah. And it makes sense: This is the harvest festival, when we count our blessings and, in joy give thanks. We have reached the end of the holiday cycle that started six months ago with the seder and so we for having completed another year. For that we are happy and thankful, too. Soon we will be celebrating Simchat Torah, when we complete the Torah reading cycle once more. We'll joyously dance with the Torah. Sukkot is the quintessential "Zman Simchataynoo" - the Time of our Happiness.

And so it is, in a sense, puzzling that we have Yizkor now on the holiday of Sukkot. It is by all measures still Z'Man Simchataynoo - so why bring it down by observing Yizkor? And there are historical reasons for this that I won't get into now, but there are symbolic reasons that I find rather compelling.

The first connection between Sukkot and Yizkor is that the Sukkah is a reminder of just how fragile life is. We think that we can build homes that will make us impervious to the elements, as if brick walls can hide us from the issues that encroach on our lives. But we all know that life is much more fickle than that. Things can change as quickly as the weather has this week, and the Sukkah is a reminder that life can be that way sometimes: fragile and unpredictable.

But lately I have been thinking of the Sukkah as a metaphor for life in other ways, as well. During the Birkhat Ha-Mazon, the Grace After Meals, we add a special blessing on Sukkot. We pray that, "The Merciful One will restore the Sukkah of King David that has fallen." Why do we dwell on the fact that the Sukkah (in this case King David's Temple, but for many of us this week, due to the winds, it was our actual sukkah) is broken? A Sukkah, as you all know, has four walls. That's what the beautiful Sukkah in our courtyard looks like. It is solid and stable, closed on all four sides except for the doorway. And in a sense, we'd all like our lives to be four-walled Sukkot, steady, stable and covered on all sides. We all want to have steady and stable homes. We all would like a stable marriage, good health, gifted children, a successful career and long life. But life does not always go as planned. We are thrown a curve, we have health issues, our children have unexpected challenges. Our career path takes an unexpected detour. A loved one dies. And suddenly that solid four-walled Sukkah does not look the same. But Halacha tells us that a three-walled Sukkah, even though it seems to be missing a wall, is just as kosher as one with four. And I think that the reason the Tradition emphasizes this is to teach us that we can learn to find beauty in a three walled Sukkah, too. No, it's not what we expected, and it might not have been our original ideal, but we learn to live with it, to appreciate it, and to find meaning in the three remaining walls.

And a three-walled Sukkah is open on one side, as if to suggest that now you can better see the world around you. When we have a three walled Sukkah we can see others whose Sukkah is not complete either. We can see how one of their walls might have come to be missing as well. A three-walled Sukkah implies empathy for others. My father used to say that everyone has their own "Eggeneh Tzuris" - their own unique challenges, and sometimes only people who have gone

through similar challenges on their own can appreciate the challenges that others are facing, too. We all want four walled Sukkahs, but most people have learned to live with three.

Tradition, however, does not stop there. A four wall Sukkah might be our ideal, and we can even have a three-walled Sukkah, but Jewish law teaches that a two walled Sukkah is kosher, too, so long as it is not only two walls. It has to be two walls and the smallest part of a third.

A tephach, a hand breath, a pillar, can make up the third wall. Why? Because a two walled Sukkah is just a sail, it lacks stability, but if you add a small third side it gains greater stability. To me this suggests that when life really gets challenging - when a person loses two walls - when life gets even more challenging than anticipated, even a small gesture - an extended hand (a tephach) of support can make a big difference. How many times have you found yourself suffering and a small note, or a call, or a conversation has renewed you? We can't always be the third wall of a person's Sukkah, let alone the fourth. But maybe that person doesn't need us to be that. Maybe they just need us to be that small wall, that extra measure of support; the tephach, the helping hand...

When we think back over our lives, we come to realize that some of the people we remember at Yizkor were our fourth wall. They made us whole when we were broken in very big, sweeping ways. But more often than not, there were small gestures, likely not appreciated until after the fact, that made us stand strong when it seemed that we were just barely keeping up. We remember those who helped to restore our Sukkah, just as we pray for the restoration of King David's too. We remember the fragility of life and that enables us to appreciate what we have all the more. We remember those we have lost, for even in their passing, they continue to give us strength.