Fragile Structure, Strong Community

Celebrating the Jewish Festival of Sukkot

Ilana Lerman

PRE-READING VOCABULARY:
Sukkah means booth or hut or temporary structure in Hebrew. Sukkot is the plural of sukkah.
The Festival of Sukkot is a Jewish holiday that falls on the fifth day after Yom Kippur—usually in September or October.
Torah is the first five books of the Bible.

My favorite Jewish holiday is Sukkot because it celebrates the power and permanence of community. It is a time for remembering our history and for giving thanks.

During Sukkot, Jewish people build a sukkah, which is a loosely built, impermanent structure. For seven days, we bring our community together to eat and play games and have fun in the sukkah. The sukkah is meant to be fragile. It reminds us that while physical structures may fall down, our community is not fragile at all. We will persist even if our structures do not.

Community is important to Jews because we have a long history of displacement. According to the Torah, Moses led the Jews out of Egypt where they were slaves. They spent 40 years wandering in the desert and living in temporary structures or sukkot. Over the centuries, Jews have suffered persecution and genocide, and they have been displaced from their homes many times. Yet we have kept our traditions going, and our communities and people are strong.

Sukkot is the third holiday in the line-up of the high holy day season. During this time, we take stock, reflect, and ask forgiveness. What a wonderful way to clean the slate before the new year, Rosh Hashanah. Ten days later is Yom Kippur, where we fast and go through a cleansing process. Then comes Sukkot! After the intensive self-reflective holidays, Sukkot invites us to squeeze into these shaky structures and revel in the community that gathers inside.

We are only allowed to have a blast in the sukkah—sing, pray, eat delicious food, sleep, and study. The ancient rituals remind us to give thanks for the harvest. In my family, we decorated the sukkah with gourds, cards from family and friends, and our own art. We ate huge dinners and played games together in the sukkah. If we were feeling bold, my family would pile a bunch of blankets in our sukkah and try to sleep in it for as many October nights as the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, weather would allow.

As a young person, I loved this holiday that required us to go outside, build a fort, and sleep under the stars with people I loved. Now, it is a powerful reminder that structure and institutions may fall or fail, but we always have the strength of family and community.

Ilana Lerman works with Jewish Voice for Peace and enjoys singing with people that she loves. She intertwines the spiritual and the political in her work, in her faith community, and in her personal practice.

Ilanas family sleeping outside in the sukkah.

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