

Rabbi Chanan Morrison



# Our Protective Fortress

The *sukkah* we live in during Sukkot is by definition a temporary dwelling. The Sages ruled that a very tall structure, over 10 meters high, is invalid as a *sukkah* because it is a permanent structure. On the other hand, an exposed hut consisting of only two walls and a handbreadth for the third is perfectly acceptable.

This rickety booth is our protective fortress. As King David said, “You protect them in a *sukkah* from the strife of tongues” (Tehillim 31:21). Why should such a flimsy structure be a paradigm of protection and safety?

## The Sukkot of the Great Assembly

To better understand the metaphor of the *sukkah*, we should examine a remarkable Talmudic passage. In Nechemiah 8:17, it states that the Jewish people had not dwelt in *sukkot* from the time of Yehoshua until the *mitzvah* was reinstated after their return from the Babylonian exile. How could this *mitzvah* have been neglected for so many centuries?

The Talmud (Arachin 32b) explains that the Jewish people always performed the *mitzvah* of dwelling in a *sukkah*. However, the *sukkot* erected by the Great Assembly in the time of Nechemiah were special *sukkot*, possessing a protective quality that had not existed since the days of Yehoshua bin Nun. According to the Talmud, these were not even physical *sukkot*, but rather a unique spiritual act of Ezra and the Great Assembly: “They prayed and abolished the passion for idolatry, and this merit protected them like a *sukkah*.”

## The Ultimate Fortress

Clearly, the protective aspect of the *sukkah* is of a spiritual nature. The eternal truth is that the *sukkah* — purposely defined as a structure so flimsy it cannot even be called a proper dwelling — is a fortress that protects us from all adversaries and foes. What is it that transforms the exposed *sukkah* into a shelter and stronghold? Certainly not any of its physical properties. Rather, its source of inner strength is none other than G-d's word. The *sukkah* protects us by virtue of the Torah law that declares this structure to be our shelter during the holiday of Sukkot.

This is an important message for all times, especially in our generation. We need great courage to return to the Land of our fathers and rebuild our national home. Where can we find the moral and spiritual resolve to withstand the challenges of those who oppose our return and deny our right to a homeland in *Eretz Yisrael*? Like the *sukkah* dwelling, our national home is based on the spiritual strength of G-d's eternal word. The most advanced weapons may be able to penetrate the thickest walls, but they cannot prevail over the stronghold of G-d's word.

This is our fortress, our ultimate shelter of security. G-d's eternal promise that the Jewish people will return to their Land and the House of Israel will be built once again.

The protective *sukkah* of the Great Assembly was the merit provided by their spiritual efforts to abolish the desire for idolatry. Similarly, our right

to the Land of Israel is based not on our military prowess but on the moral strength of our eternal covenant with G-d and the merit of the Torah's *mitzvot*.

## Beautifying the Law

However, we should not be satisfied with keeping only the minimum requirements of Torah law. The Sages taught that Jerusalem was destroyed because the judges ruled according to the strict letter of the law. They failed to take into account the spirit of the law and seek a ruling both just and compassionate — *lifnim mishurat ha-din* (Baba Metzia 30b).

The *mitzvah* of *sukkah* is based on Divine law, but there is an ancient custom to adorn the *sukkah* with decorated fabrics, fruits, and grains (Sukkah 10a). We should similarly seek to “adorn” the Torah law. We should go beyond minimum requirements and aspire to the highest level of G-d's word, in its purest ethical form. Then we will merit that “David's fallen *sukkah*” (Amos 9:11), the prophet's metaphor for Jewish sovereignty, will rise again, speedily in our days.

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