



## TEMPLE OR TABERNACLE?

September 23, 2018, Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Leviticus 23:33-44

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“The mood was like a wedding. Some played the flute, others harps, lutes, cymbals...It was said that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel used to juggle flaming torches...Sages became acrobats. Scholars did somersaults. They considered it the ultimate dignity to sacrifice your dignity in the sacred cause of joy. So lighthearted and exuberant were the celebrations that people began to be concerned that they might turn into the kind of revelry associated with the Greek Dionysia and the Roman Bacchanalia.”<sup>1</sup>

Sounds a little like the Brick Church Dinner Dance. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ description of the festival of Sukkot, which begins today for our Jewish neighbors.

At some point in your travels around the city this week, it is entirely possible that you will come across a sukkah, a temporary structure, looking like not much more than an incomplete booth, the walls are often canvas, the roof, which is a bit of a stretch to call it that, is usually some ragtag semblance of branches. If you are lucky you might even see my personal favorite, one of these huts being towed behind a bicycle. Absurd perfection.

So what is the holiday about and what is the significance of all of this shoddy, incomplete construction? Well, we will get to the imperfect construction in a minute. But let’s begin with the broad outline of this Jewish festival. Sukkot is many things and there are too many nuances to discuss in a single sermon, nor am I the most qualified to unpack all of them. But primarily, Sukkot is a celebration of the harvest – a broad parallel to our secular Thanksgiving. It is an opportunity to be grateful for what we have been given, specifically for what God has provided. It is



a time of joyful thanksgiving – not for anything we have done, but for what God has done for us.

Which brings us back to the question of why a poorly built booth is a central element in the joyful, thanksgiving that is Sukkot. The sukkah booth is a tangible reminder to the Jewish people of the time they spent wandering in the wilderness, after God freed them from slavery in Egypt and before they reached the Promised Land. During that time they spent wandering in the wilderness, they lived with the unavoidable truth that they were completely dependent upon God. Their bellies would ache with hunger. They would cry out, “We are starving!” And they would realize only God could feed them. Their lips would grow dry and their mouths parched. They would cry out, “We are desperate with thirst!” And they would remember only God could provide them with quenching water.

Every day people woke up wondering and worrying about their survival. When they prayed to God it was not a prayer of vague pleasantries. Their prayers were not “Thanks for the sunny day and please let the 6 train run on time today.” Their prayers were, “Help me, help me, help me, without you I will die!”

The sukkah booths and the far from adequate shelter they provide are a reminder of when every day was a struggle to survive. So why seek to relive such a dire time? And how does that connect with a joyous festival of thanksgiving? Well, you see, there are two kinds of thanksgiving celebrations. The first I would call self-satisfied celebration. This is when we are very pleased with everything we have in our lives and we say, “Look at all we have accomplished for ourselves!” And then there is the second kind of celebration, which I would call a gratitude celebration. This is when we are completely amazed at what we have received and we say, “I can’t believe how blessed we are by what has been given to us.”

At first glance the two kinds of celebrations can appear to be quite similar. In both cases there is something worthy of celebration. The difference lies in the context and the implications. The self-satisfied celebration can occur when times are good and all is well. We look around at our lives and are happy about the job we have



and the place we live and our family and we pat ourselves on the back for a life well lived. We feel happy.

The gratitude celebration, on the other hand, is not as dependent upon immediate context. It is not really about us. It is not driven by what we have earned or accomplished. In fact, sometimes it may be easier to engage in this gratitude celebration when our own efforts are far from successful; when life is hard and we realize we do not have all the answers; when we remember we are reliant upon things beyond our control. Then we have an opportunity to turn toward God, recognizing our dependence. The prophet Habakkuk said it like this, “Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the oil fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.”<sup>2</sup>

When we find a way to give thanks and rejoice in God when we are vulnerable and life is uncertain, we experience not the run of the mill happiness that comes when things are good, but something deeper and richer and far more valuable, joy. Joy transcends circumstance. Rabbi Sacks describes it like this, “Joy alone...has the power to defeat despair. It does not speak the language of reason...Joy belongs to an older, deeper part of the brain. Like music, it gives expression to the inexpressible. It says, yes, life is sometimes unfair and the world is unjust, but the very brevity of life makes each moment precious...Celebrate, sing, join the dance however undignified it makes you look...Joy solves no problems but it gives us the strength to keep searching.”<sup>3</sup>

Those barely-a-shelter sukkahs can remind us that even if we live in the sturdiest and toniest of brownstones we are never invulnerable to the vicissitudes of this world. Any and all of us can find ourselves wandering in the wilderness at one time or another. And all of us, all of the time, need our God more than we can imagine.



When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness they were called to trust that God was with them, present in the tabernacle that joined them on the journey. The tabernacle was exquisitely fashioned, but it was in actuality a tent, a tent in which they believe God was present. It was a tent that was on the move as it journeyed with these people who were on the move, struggling to reach their destination.

After the nation of Israel was long established, King Solomon built a temple where the people believed God was present. The temple was sturdy and strong and large, a feat of human ingenuity and effort worthy of filling its builders with pride. And it sat in one place. And it appeared God was no longer on the move.

That is the risk with temples. They suggest that God can be found standing still, in one place. They are so formidable they belie a sense of completion to our relationship with God. They can have us believe that we have taken care of God instead of God taking care of us.

Next week we will have the opportunity to celebrate all of the remarkable construction that has been done as part of the Capital Campaign. We will rightly revel in our vastly improved 92<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance which is both safer and more welcoming; the glorious new twos classroom and childcare space complete with skylight on the youth floor; and our stunning new garden/playground space. Thanks to the generosity of this congregation and the hard and faithful work of many people, our building has been vastly improved. It is very appropriate that we take a victory lap.

But there is a risk to all of this, a temple risk. If we are not careful, we might look upon all of this remarkable construction and find ourselves focusing upon what *we* have done. If we are not careful, we may find ourselves with a sense of completion that we have accomplished our goal. If we are not careful, our celebration may be one of self-satisfaction in the midst of a temple. We could just stand still and announce that we have arrived.



But we are not called to be temple people. We are called to be tabernacle people. This remarkable construction is not the completion of a journey. God will not stand still in this place and admire the fancy finishes. Just as that tabernacle journeyed through the wilderness, God is on the move. And so we will travel beside our God. Now we can begin our journey of deeper faithfulness and more effective ministry with a building better equipped to do so. With this new construction, we will seek to do an even better job of educating all of the children that enter into this place. With this new construction, we will seek to be even more welcoming to every visitor that crosses our threshold. With the resources we have set aside in the Capital Campaign for Transformational Mission, we will continue to work with our partners in East Harlem to cross the boundaries that often divide this city. With our about-to-be commissioned Mission Review Team, we will learn more about who we are and who we feel called to be as followers of Christ in the days and weeks and years to come.

We will trust God's Holy Spirit to lead all our efforts. And we will have a celebration of gratitude. We will thank God for making this all possible. We will thank God that in these times of success and in times of failure and in all times, God sustains us. And if we do indeed do all of this we will experience the joy that Rabbi Sacks describes. The joy that only can be drawn from a deep well of recognition that we are dependent upon God throughout our lives and distinctly in this very moment. This joy is more valuable than anything built with bricks and mortar, or anything we can ever fashion ourselves.

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We may not set up a sukkah this week, and absurdly tow it around on a bicycle. But as we celebrate what has been built and built so well, let us revel in the joy that



can only come by recognizing that our journey with the one who sustains us continues. Let us do somersaults and keep searching. The one who gives us life is both beside us and before us, leading us forward on this day and every day to come.

*Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.*

1 Sacks, Jonathan, *Ceremony and Celebration*, Maggid Books, New Milford, CT, 2017, p. 99.

2 Habakkuk, 3:17-18.

3 Sacks, p. 129.

4 Sacks, p. 129.