

Rabbi's Reflections: *Sukkah*: Protection, Universalism

People usually think about how unprotected the *sukkah* (booth) is. From the roof being more open to the sky and elements than covered, we downplay the material for the spiritual, the physical for God. Yet some rabbis reach a different conclusion: the *sukkah* represents God's protecting presence. Rabbi Eliezer and others (*Talmud Sukkah* 11b) claim that the *sukkot* in Leviticus 23:43 were not physical structures but the protective clouds of God's glory. Every Friday night service attendee recognizes this from the prayer *Hashkivenu* (*Cause us to lie down*) where we ask God three times to spread over us the *sukkah* of peace.

The Gerer Rebbe, Yehudah Leib Alter (19th century Poland), notes that in Genesis 33:17 Jacob made *sukkot* for his possessions (most translate it as "cattle"), and then he refers us to the prayer *Hashkivenu* asking God to "spread out the *sukkah* of peace." In addition to the meaning of the *sukkah*, the Rebbe is interested in the accompanying verb *spread out*, *pores*, which also means "divide, choose a portion," and God chooses a portion, the people Israel (Deuteronomy 32:9). The Rebbe wonders why God, who is wholeness, would choose just one people? He answers that God dwells with the lowly and humble (Isaiah 57:15), and that the *Zohar* says that a person with a broken heart is whole for everywhere God dwells is wholeness, making a whole out of a half. Since the people Israel represent this wholeness among God's creatures, they sacrificed on every nation's behalf (70 bulls=70 nations) on *Sukkot*. The Sages said that the people Israel should pray for God's kingdom to spread over all creation. The Rebbe then concludes with a third meaning of *peras*, "reward": "Do not be like servants who serve their master expecting to receive a reward; rather be like servants who serve their master unconditionally, with no thought of reward" (*Pirquei Avot* 1:3).

The *sukkah* is what we make of it. Space is open, empty, purposeless. By building, we capture a small amount of space, convert it to our will, make it serve our purpose. Having the power to take elements of the world around us and make it serve our welfare, is not sufficient protection. For that we need God. But we should not serve God to get something. If we think only of our own good and needs, we are faithless servants desiring a reward. Judaism has always been concerned with the continuation of the Jews, for we cannot fulfill our mission without surviving. For Judaism to be meaningful, we cannot ignore the larger world even though others persecute us. Despite that suffering, or maybe even because of it, God holds us responsible for maintaining everyone and everything in the world, indeed, all of existence. The *sukkah* is not just for us, but it reminds us that our mission is to protect and better the universe.

----- Rabbi Michael Rascoe