

“The Unfinished Succah”

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Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn

Temple Sinai

New Orleans, Louisiana

Well over 40 years ago, I traveled from Glen Burnie to downtown Baltimore on a brisk fall Saturday with my Grandmom Cohn. By transfer to a streetcar, we made our way to the Shabbat Succot day service at the Bolton Street Temple of Har Sinai Congregation. Grand-mom was a member there, but my parents joined the Eutaw Place Temple, a few blocks away. This day, I was visiting Grand-mom's temple.

Upon entering that 1896 structure, we saw the beginnings of a magnificent Succah, full of hydrangea, cornstalks, and pumpkins – but the entire back and sides were incomplete. My young mind wondered what had happened and why the Succah stood unfinished on the temple's Bemah?

I can't remember the explanation, but I remember being terribly disappointed. I mean, had the Sisterhood members not shown up? Was the chairperson called away or had someone fallen ill? Who knows? Many, many years later, remembering that strange year, I even asked the rabbi – Abraham Shusterman – who installed me here at Temple Sinai. He remembered that year, but couldn't recollect why the Succah had remained unfinished.

I. Gratitude

Well, Succot 5766, this is a year for an unfinished Succah if there ever was one! So, this side is undecorated! Our unfinished Succah will allow us all to come forward in just a little while, to place our finishing touches upon it, as it symbolizes our gratitude for being spared from serious physical destruction and injury, for the bountiful blessings of family, faith, and heritage.

In this manner, it is meet and right that we give thanks to the Creator, and help to decorate the Succah of Gratitude. But for now, it is an unfinished Succah. Why? Because, number one, our gratitude is incomplete! Let's be honest.

I wonder if poet Jane Kenyon doesn't captures this post-Katrina-and-Rita spirit and our new keen awareness in her poem, entitled "Otherwise." Listen and consider her wise words:

I got out of bed
 on two strong legs.
 It might have been
 otherwise. I ate
 cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless
 peach. It might have been otherwise.
 I took the dog uphill
 to the birch wood.
 All morning I did the work I love.
 At noon I lay down
 with my mate. It might
 have been otherwise.
 We ate dinner together

at a table with silver
 candlesticks. It might
 have been otherwise.
 I slept in a bed
 in a room with painting
 on the walls, and planned
 another day
 just like this day.
 But one day, I know,
 it will be otherwise.

Now, I ask you, is there a soul so clueless that he doesn't know how much worse those two storms could've been? For all who survived, and for the other 360 days a year when nature proves benevolent, we need to acknowledge that, though unfinished, our personal Succah is not without its bountiful blessings. Our health, our children, our talents, our circumstances, our spirits still not broken – we are blessed to marvel at the sunrise and beauty.

I read of a mother who took her son to Salt Lake City on a melancholy mission. The young man was losing his sight, and she wanted to show him the majestic mountains of Utah before his darkness set in, so he could take that splendid image with him into his sightless future.

Helen Keller acknowledged how many of us who are blessed to see have no real "sight." She once wrote:

I have walked with people whose eyes are full of
 light, but who see nothing in woods, sea, or sky,
 nothing in the city street, nothing in books...It were
 far better to sail forever in the night of blindness
 than to be thus content with the mere act of seeing.

So, the unfinished Succah ought to jar us into thankfulness and appreciation for what we have and what remains.

II. Nature

Moreover, even beyond gratitude, the unfinished Succah ought to poignantly remind us that nature is often both beauty and the beast. We are so often impressed by our strength – we feel invulnerable. We kid ourselves with the illusion that we're independent, secure, strong and able to deal with anyone and anything. But, it is all a myth! Self-made – what a joke!

We still cannot comprehend the hurricane's level of destruction, can we? Standing by helpless, we watched the storm grow and grow, and then, like pygmies before an approaching giant, we took flight – leaving so much that we owned and prized – hoping to evade the flood waters and fierce wind.

Yes, our Succah stands unfinished because, all by ourselves, there isn't one among us who can stand before the ravages of nature: be it a hurricane or a microbe gone mad.

That same seashore that we sit beside on a blue-skied summer day has the capacity to wipe away entire cities and towns and people's lives along with them. It can destroy them without a moment's remorse or a qualm of conscience! For all of its spectacular beauty, nature remains an amoral entity. Its wrath makes no exception for "good" people. Life is vulnerability. You want constancy, don't look to a benevolent nature! Faith and God are companionship and unwavering love, even when we flee the storms of life.

To live is to do so in an unfinished Succah. What fate will bring us each day is no more a guarantee than the roll of the dice. All that we know and can count on is the rock-firm foundation of faith, family, and friends – and the necessity for loyalty to all three – no matter what. So, the unfinished Succah calls us to gratitude, and to the realization that Mother Nature is fickle. Nature is ambiguous.

III. Share and Care

And finally, the unfinished Succah demands our sharing and caring with those who are without – the ones whose homes and belongings have been so cruelly and unexpectedly ripped from their hands into mountains of refuse.

To lose these things – these material things and precious mementos – is to have one's unique story hijacked. Though most importantly, it is true that we remain. Nevertheless, so much that testifies to who and what we have been and are, has vanished. Bitterness, shock, trauma, and hurt, are all natural.

With every source of material support and unbounded human compassion, you and I must embrace our dear ones in their agony of uncertainty and despair. This is the moment when our faith is proven, every bit as theirs, by how we rise to this emergency and generously, unceasingly, and creatively assist, by every means possible, the families and dear ones of all ages, whose worlds have been uprooted and whose security has been stolen from their grasp.

The reality of our existence is that we all live in an unfinished Succah: temporary, fragile, beautiful, and yet, not to be depended upon. The bounty of the fall harvest (when all is right and the sky is blue) may give way, with no notice, to the cry of winter and the fatality of now-frozen possibilities.

Ours is to move on and ahead. Unafraid, resolute, and with determined dedication to the ongoing duty we have to our families, our synagogue, and our community, this is no time for shallow or timid spirits.

Let me leave you with this: here's a key with which to unlock our future. In 1513, the poet Giovanni offered us this saving advice, when he admonished:

The gloom of the world is but a shadow; behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. Take joy.

Succot is known in our taciturn as Z'man Simchatem – the Season of our Rejoicing. This is the season for joy! Even living in the shadow of the unfinished Succah, let us rise up, dear ones, and summon heart and nerve.

Behind the gloom and the shadow, yet within our reach, there is joy! Let us take it and with it together build the future.

Amen