

Sukkot: Come Together



It was Sukkot in Israel, and Amy and I traveled to Sefad, up the mountain from the Sea of Galilee. Sefad was once the center of Jewish mysticism and it contains an offbeat but holy energy to this day. After dinner, we wandered through the side streets and alleyways. People were out everywhere sukkah hopping. It got late and at some point we heard a distant but distinct sound of tribal drumming. We followed the beat down the jagged hillside. The sound grew louder and now we heard that the drumming was accompanied by Hebrew chanting. The sacred sounds were coming from a sukkah. We sat outside and listened for awhile. The drummer sensed our presence and invited us in. There we were--an American Reform rabbinical student, his wife the shoe executive, and Ronen, an Israeli-born, orthodox yeshivah student. We talked religion and music until the sunrise.

It is no accident that this scene occurred on Sukkot. This is a holiday that demands we spend time outside. We emerge from our closed-in shelters of brick, concrete, plaster and glass where we are safe but often isolated. We build our temporary huts, then eat and sometimes sleep in them in full view of neighbors and passers by. No need to ring the doorbell or knock, just walk by and there is a good chance for connection. During Sukkot, everyday life reveals the true, interconnected nature of the universe that we are able to ignore when we close our doors.

Recently, the Jewish Light published a number of letters from individuals in the Orthodox community that denigrate Reform Judaism. I am a

passionate advocate of progressive versions of Judaism and all religions. I believe in the liberal way of preserving the most meaningful aspects of our ancient traditions while rejecting those aspects that are in opposition to modern ideals such as egalitarianism, scientific progress, freedom of conscience, and inclusion of diverse lifestyles and cultures. Yet, remembering my long ago Sukkot night with Ronen, I know that I do not wish to simply dismiss those who choose a more traditional path even if some in that camp wish to dismiss me. The distance between us was shattered by the ideal of Sukkot, the vision of openness, hospitality, and a neighborly exchange of ideas.

Our experience in Safed has become the paradigm for our family Sukkot traditions. Our annual sukkah raising is a neighborhood affair. People of many races, cultures and religious traditions join us. One year, a Baptist minister and a member of the local Black Muslim temple worked together to pile schach on the roof. Later in the week, as ushpizim (sacred guests), the diverse group of students from my children's Flynn Park school classrooms walk over to the sukkah and together we shake the lulav, honor the directions and the natural world, and share hot chocolate and popcorn. Finally, I try to have a campfire on one of the Sukkot nights, so I can wait for whoever may be drawn to our sukkah by the dancing light and the beat of my drum.

B'ahavah,

Rabbi Randy