

the Harlem Sukkot
Companion



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Illustrated by: Ally Pockrass

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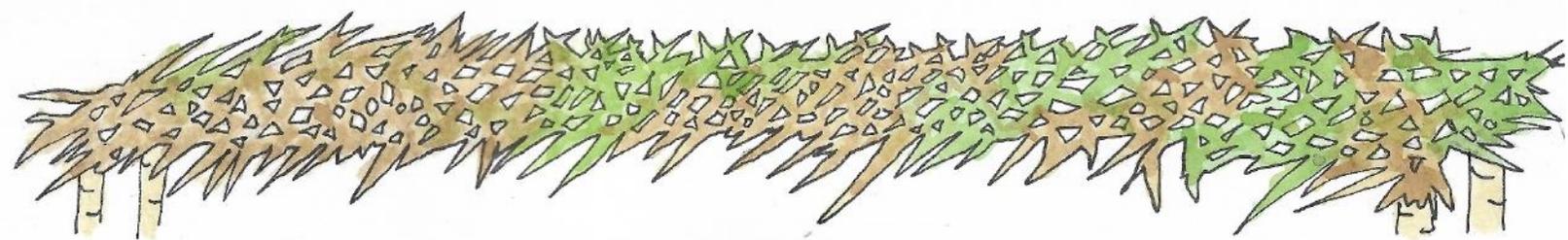
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Message from JCC Harlem

By Adina Schwartz, Director of Engagement

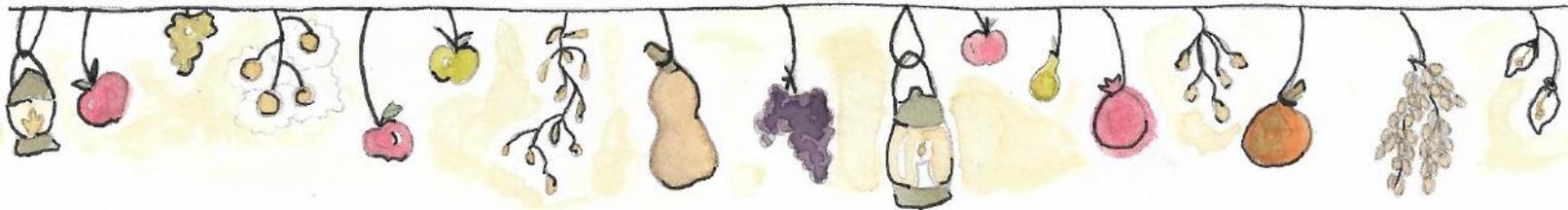


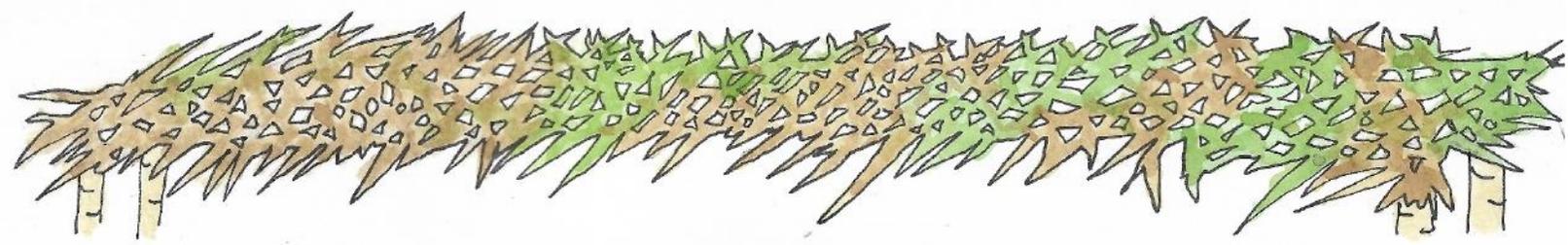
There's one tradition on the holiday of Sukkot that I have always found interesting. On the Shabbat that falls during the holiday, many communities recite the Book of *Kohelet*, or *Ecclesiastes*, aloud in synagogue. *Kohelet* is one of the five scrolls found in the final section of the Torah that is traditionally attributed to King Solomon. The book opens with the words 'Utter futility! Utter futility! All is futile!', setting the tone for a work that centralizes the wearisome nature of human mortality. It's a heavy and beautiful work filled with challenging questions about the meaning of life. The thing I (and many) find so fascinating is the fact that we read this book aloud during one of the most festive holidays in the Jewish Calendar. In fact, Sukkot is the only Jewish holiday where we are literally commanded to rejoice. It is called *Z'man Simchateinu* - the Season of Our Rejoicing - in the Bible!

Many have tackled the question of why we read *Kohelet* on this holiday of rejoicing and have provided thought-provoking answers, including that we must work through *Kohelet's* hard existential questions about the meaning of life in order to find authentic inner peace and joy. This year, though, there is another glaring duality in the recitation of *Kohelet*. The Hebrew root of the word *Kohelet* is *Kahal*, which means...wait for it...to collect, gather, or assemble — presumably because King Solomon's words were spoken in public assembly. Is this not wild?! This year we won't just be grappling with a work that bemoans life's futility during the most joyous festival in the Jewish calendar, but we are going to be reading this book that is literally named for a gathering at a time when we distinctly cannot gather.

These questions and remarkable coincidences are among the many reasons we are so thrilled to team up with Kyle Savitch and Ally Pockrass in the creation of this Harlem Sukkot Companion. We hope that this work will serve as our 'Kohelet.' It is our means of gathering the voices, thoughts, and reflections of our beautiful Harlem community in a moment when we can't be together physically, but when spiritually we've never needed each other more.

We cannot wait to welcome you back into our home on W 118th Street. Until then, let's continue to lean into the newness of this challenging time together. Let this companion (and all of our virtual and socially distant offerings) act as our Sukkah, a temporary place where we can hold all the dualities we are faced with right now. Let's find new ways of rejoicing, apart yet still very much together. And let's draw strength from King Solomon's proclamation in what is arguably *Kohelet's* most famous verse (and which I can't help but sing to the tune immortalized by Pete Seeger and the Byrds) –



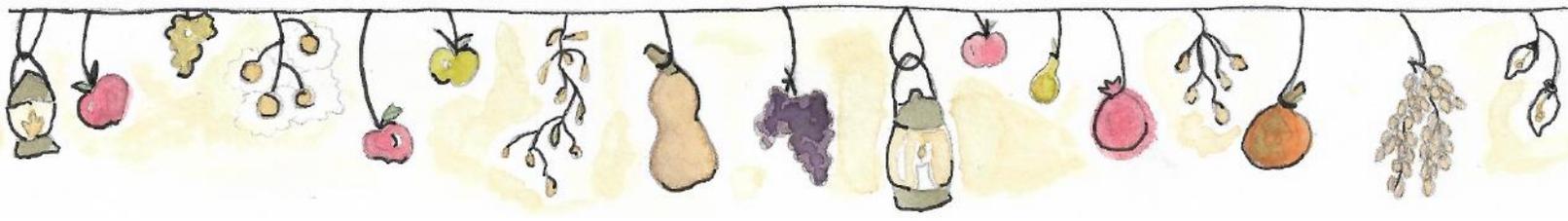


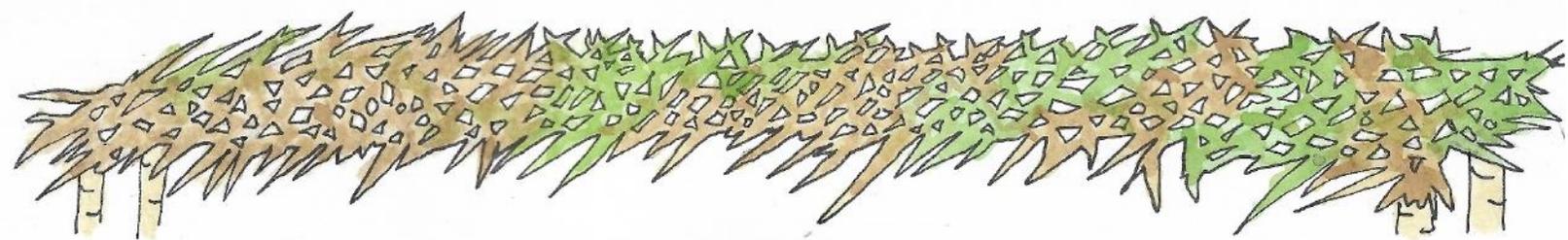
“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. A time to be born, a time to die. A time to plant, a time to uproot. A time to embrace, and a time to refrain...A time to scatter stones, a time to gather them together.”

Until we can gather again, dear friends...



An initiative of the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan
in collaboration with UJA-Federation of New York





Message from PJ Library in New York

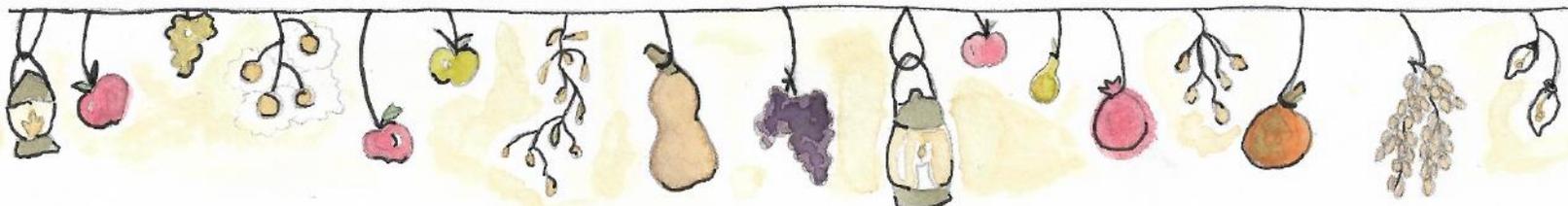
By Alison Goldberg, Engagement Officer

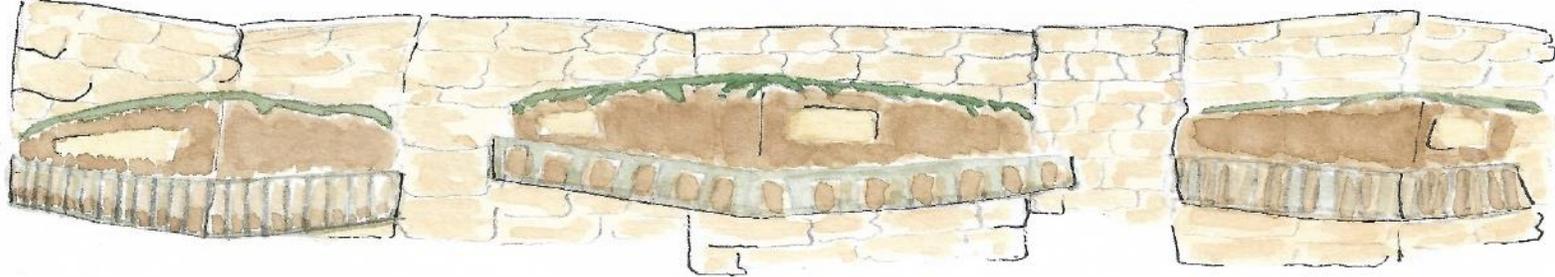


PJ Library is proud to partner with projects like the Harlem Sukkot Companion that think beyond the limits of lockdown and creatively connect individuals and families with the joyful traditions of Sukkot. Families and friends in Harlem - we're thinking of you, and please let us know how we can support you and your young children this year. Have a meaningful and safe holiday!

Quality family time can be a great comfort when the world gets challenging. The same challenges make it harder than ever for families to create fun, educational experiences at home, especially during Jewish holidays. PJ Library is here to help. We send free storybooks to kids, from newborns to twelve-year-olds, making it easier to share Jewish traditions and values with your family. Sign up today at ny.pjlibrary.org and you will also receive regular e-newsletters about local in-person and online family events and brand new resources with story, activity, and recipe suggestions by age. Free Jewish middle-grade books for 9-12-year-olds are available through PJ Our Way at pjourway.org and grandparents can also receive the gift of PJ Library at pjlibrary.org/grandparent-enrollment.

PJ Library is a program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation made possible through partnerships with philanthropists and local organizations.





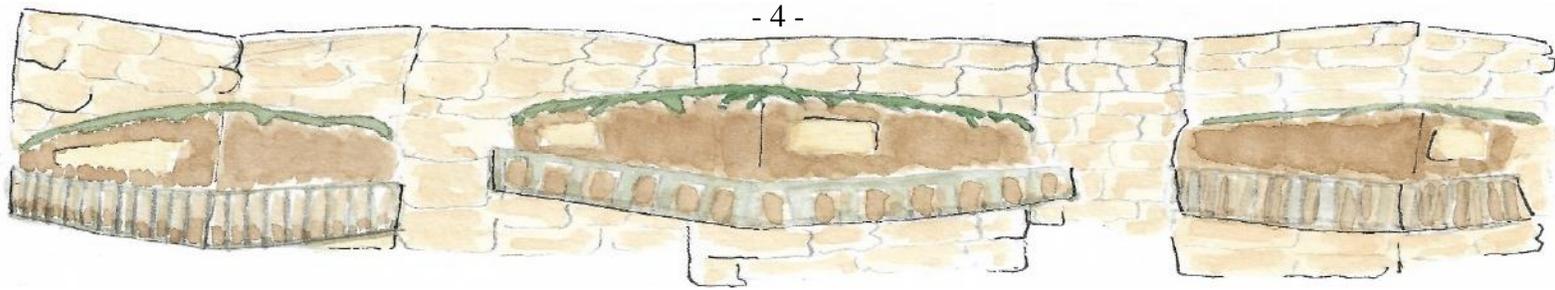
Editor's Forward

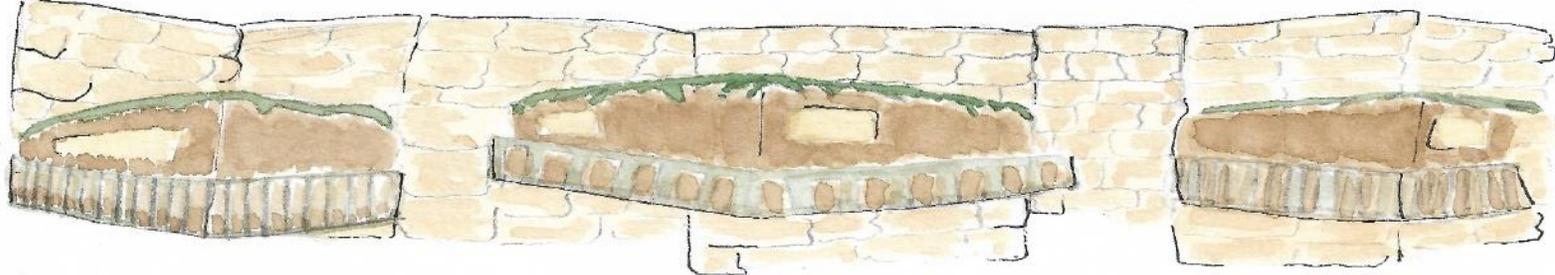
By Kyle Savitch

Traditionally, Sukkot is called Zman Simchateinu, the time of our rejoicing. In the writings of the prophet Isaiah, this rejoicing seems to be linked to the Simchat Beit HaShoeva (the Water Drawing Ceremony) which took place at the Temple each year at this time.

In a primarily agricultural society, water is the foundation of annual blessing and, in Israel, the rains are tied to the relationship between G-d and the people of the land. With Sukkot coinciding with the harvest, the holiday is a perfect time to celebrate gratitude for past rains and to share the foundational hope for the coming rains. The mishna in masechet Rosh Hashana says that on Sukkot the Jewish people are judged regarding the year's rainfall, so there is also a lot at stake. This judgment will determine if there is an abundance of rain leading to a plentiful harvest or a draught which could result in a famine. The gemara in masechet Rosh Hashana goes on to say that the reason we pour out water on the altar as part of Simchat Beit HaShoeva is so that the coming year's rains will be blessed. According to the mishna in masechet Sukkah, the festivities surrounding the Simchat Beit HaShoeva were lively and full of joy. There was dancing and fire (and I like to imagine fire juggling) accompanied by singing and instruments. The rabbis went as far as to say that one who has not experienced the Simchat Beit HaShoeva has never seen rejoicing in their life. In our days, though, when there is no Temple, how can we still consider Sukkot to be Zman Simchateinu?

In Jewish tradition, bringing water to a guest is a significant display of hospitality. Rivka, for example, drew water for Avraham's servant Eliezer and his camels when they were travelling. Also, Avraham, who embodies the spirit of hospitality in our Torah, brings water for the guests he welcomes into his tent. In fact, we learn from Avraham's planting of an אשל (a type of tree), that the mitzvah of hospitality to guests is accomplished by offering אכילה (food), שתיה (drink), and לוויה (escort). With inviting 'ushpizzin' (guests) being a core aspect of Sukkot, I believe that in modern times this is the true root of our joy. In the Mishne Torah, Rambam supports this when he suggests that one who eats and drinks with locked gates and does not invite the poor and embittered to join in their celebration of the festival is not enjoying the joy of mitzvah, but instead the joy of their gut. Charlotte Brontë, the English novelist and poet who wrote Jane Eyre, wrote in a letter that "happiness quite unshared can scarcely be called happiness; it has no taste." Especially in our time of socially distancing, it is easy to identify with this sentiment. Although we are still not able to fully gather together this Sukkot, I hope that, by sharing this companion and bringing it into our homes, we can welcome each other into our homes in some small way. Chag Sameach and I hope you find the essence of Zman Simchateinu in this small offering.



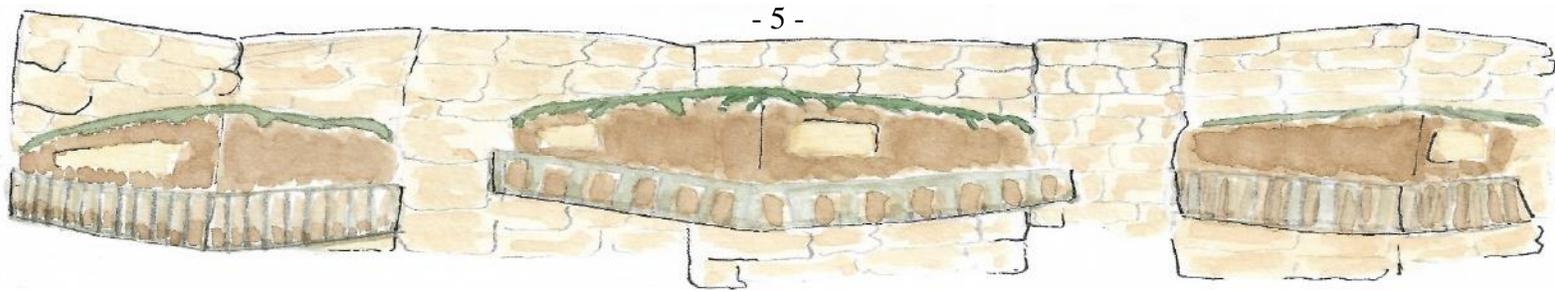


Illustrator's Foreword

By Ally Pockrass

Sukkot in Harlem is filled with community, food, and gathering. It is really a hallmark holiday for the community, drawing in regulars, new and old friends, and special guests. Sukkot in Harlem is filled with song and propelled by personal histories and the joys of being together. It is also a time where the various sub-communities come together to celebrate, share a meal, exchange words of Torah, and get to know each other.

Unfortunately, Sukkot will be affected by the pandemic like so many of our holidays have been this year. But I hope that we take this time to deepen our relationships with Judaism and the holidays. To feel community in a new and meaningful way. Although we may not be able to gather in great numbers in the Sukkah, we can enjoy a meal with our bubbles in one of the many sukkot around the neighborhood. Sukkah hopping can commence. We can still shake the lulav and etrog. And, most of all, we can reflect on how far we've come as a Jewish nation, as a community, and as individuals. I hope that this companion, and the art within it, can serve as a conduit for that reflection this year.





Universal Basic Happiness: The Mi Casa Es Sukkah-sa Mindset

By Dvir Cahana, Resident of Harlem Moishe House



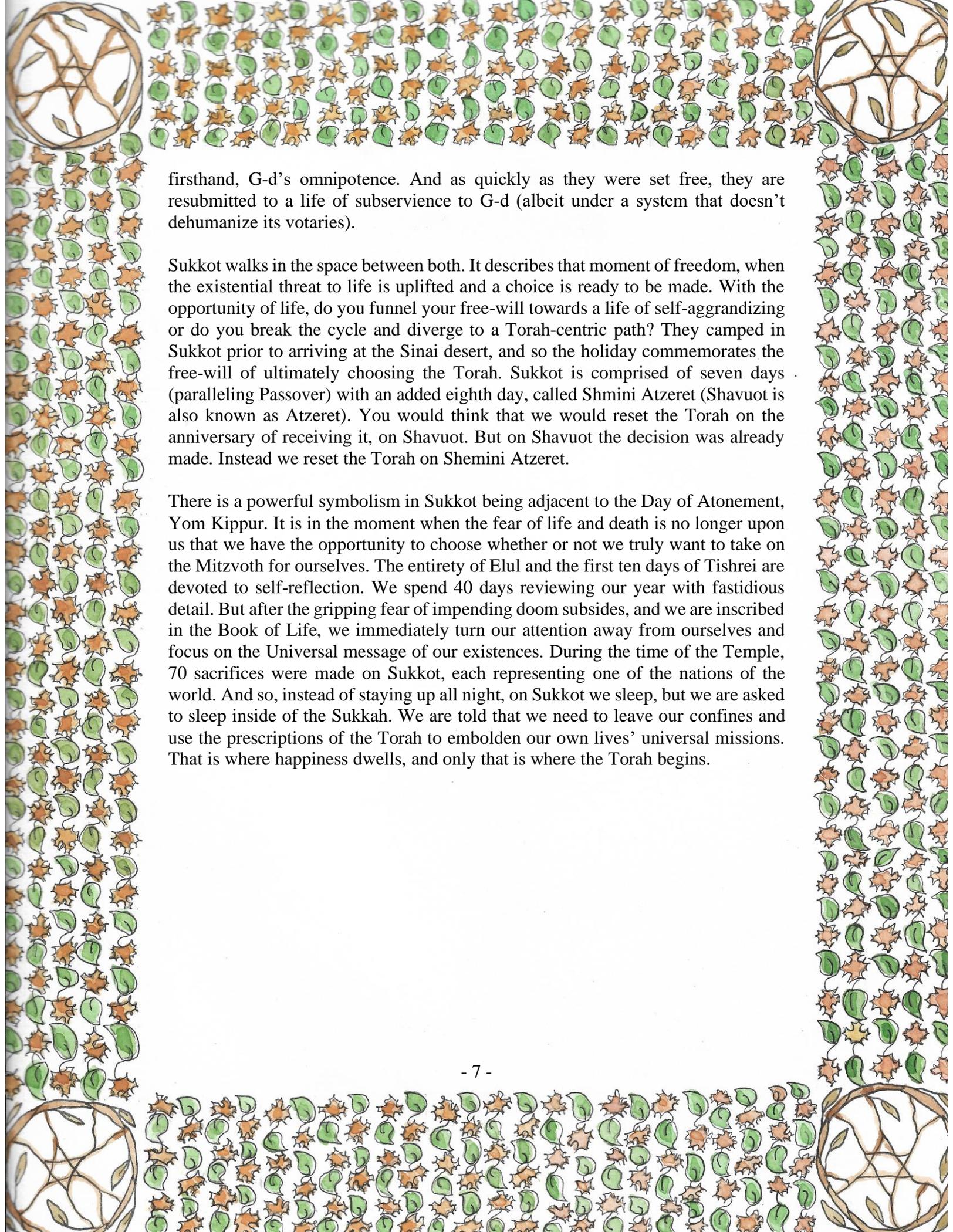
Sukkot is a paradoxical holiday. We are commanded to be happy, and yet we attempt to experience that happiness by leaving the comforts of our homes and exposing ourselves to the elements. What is it about Sukkot that we can turn to and say, indeed this holiday is truly one that gets into my kishkes and musters up ebullience? Was it such a pleasant experience wandering through the desert? Why not command us to be joyful on Purim? Furthermore, why do we read King Solomon's, existential crisis of a text, Ecclesiastes? If we really want to make ourselves

happy, shouldn't the book of Psalms or the Song of Songs be the central text of this holiday?

I think the answer is that happiness comes from a place when you are able to look beyond yourself. When the entirety of your being is focused on self-preservation, then the rest of the world will forever remain a threat to your own tranquility. Aristotle describes Eudaimonia, or fulfilled happiness, as only being achievable when we have the ability to give gifts to others. The first question in the second sentence of Ecclesiastes is, "What profit does a human receive from all of their toil". If you perceive the world through this self-centered lens then you will quickly arrive at the conclusion that it is all meaningless. In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon changes his name to Kohelet. We can read the entirety of the book as an allegory between the community (Kehillah) and the individual.

Unlike the other pilgrimage holidays, on Sukkot we are not asked to stay up all night. On Passover we do this to reenact the night of the tenth plague, when the Angel of Death lurked outside, and the fear of Pharaoh's wrath pervaded. Holding their breaths, the people anticipated the prospect of emancipation. As slaves, quotidian life remained preoccupied with survival. Being at the lintel of a previously-selfish existence, and the heightened intensity of the moment kept the people wide awake.

On Shavuot, we stay up in atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf. This time, we weren't fearful of a mortal's jurisprudence, rather we trembled as we awaited the verdict of the Ultimate Judge's ruling. Shavuot also harkens us back to that moment of sublime awe, in which the entire people quaked in fear as they witnessed,



firsthand, G-d's omnipotence. And as quickly as they were set free, they are resubmitted to a life of subservience to G-d (albeit under a system that doesn't dehumanize its votaries).

Sukkot walks in the space between both. It describes that moment of freedom, when the existential threat to life is uplifted and a choice is ready to be made. With the opportunity of life, do you funnel your free-will towards a life of self-aggrandizing or do you break the cycle and diverge to a Torah-centric path? They camped in Sukkot prior to arriving at the Sinai desert, and so the holiday commemorates the free-will of ultimately choosing the Torah. Sukkot is comprised of seven days (paralleling Passover) with an added eighth day, called Shmini Atzeret (Shavuot is also known as Atzeret). You would think that we would reset the Torah on the anniversary of receiving it, on Shavuot. But on Shavuot the decision was already made. Instead we reset the Torah on Shemini Atzeret.

There is a powerful symbolism in Sukkot being adjacent to the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. It is in the moment when the fear of life and death is no longer upon us that we have the opportunity to choose whether or not we truly want to take on the Mitzvoth for ourselves. The entirety of Elul and the first ten days of Tishrei are devoted to self-reflection. We spend 40 days reviewing our year with fastidious detail. But after the gripping fear of impending doom subsides, and we are inscribed in the Book of Life, we immediately turn our attention away from ourselves and focus on the Universal message of our existences. During the time of the Temple, 70 sacrifices were made on Sukkot, each representing one of the nations of the world. And so, instead of staying up all night, on Sukkot we sleep, but we are asked to sleep inside of the Sukkah. We are told that we need to leave our confines and use the prescriptions of the Torah to embolden our own lives' universal missions. That is where happiness dwells, and only that is where the Torah begins.



Bringing Community Together: Lessons from Sukkot

By Michele Schulman, Greater New York Community Manager at Moishe House
and Harlem Resident



Sukkot is a holiday I've always enjoyed, but also always felt disconnected from. After all, what does a California city kid know about seasons and harvesting? Growing up, Sukkot was about my father building the sukkah at the synagogue, arts and crafts with paper chains, pizza parties in the hut, and some far off notion that it was time for the fall harvest. Still, Sukkot fell in the series of holidays that came every fall and so I would look forward to the ritual of building, decorating, and celebrating the transition of seasons.

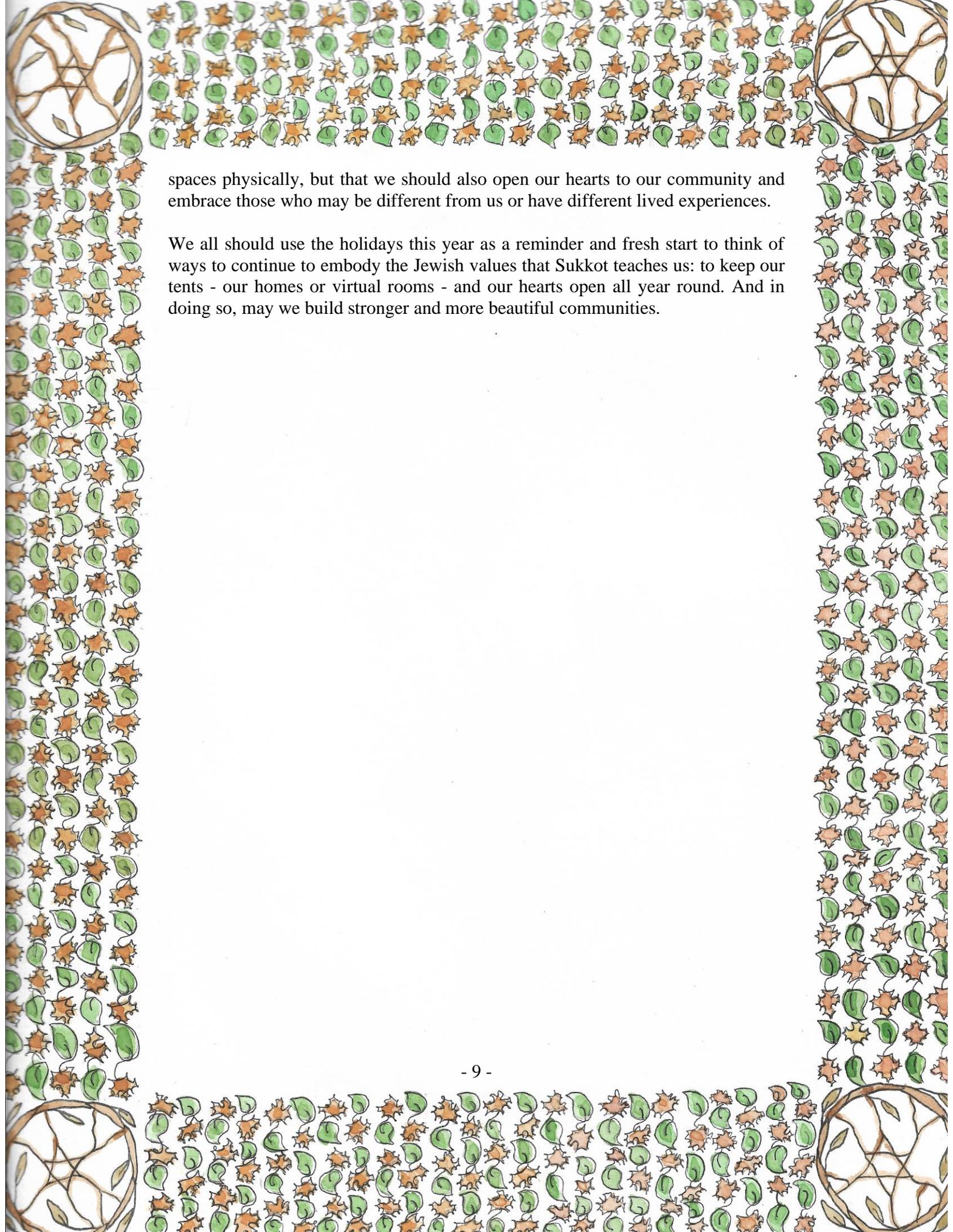
As an adult I found myself in professional roles where I was responsible for creating meaningful Jewish experiences for others, first as a student and later a professional with Hillel and now with Moishe House. I have had to learn more about Sukkot and, in doing so, I have come to realize that Sukkot is an important and special holiday for different reasons than what I was raised understanding.

We're told in the book of Leviticus that we are to build and live in a booth for seven days every fall during the harvest. Later in the book of Deuteronomy, we read:

"You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow in your communities." (Deut 16:14)

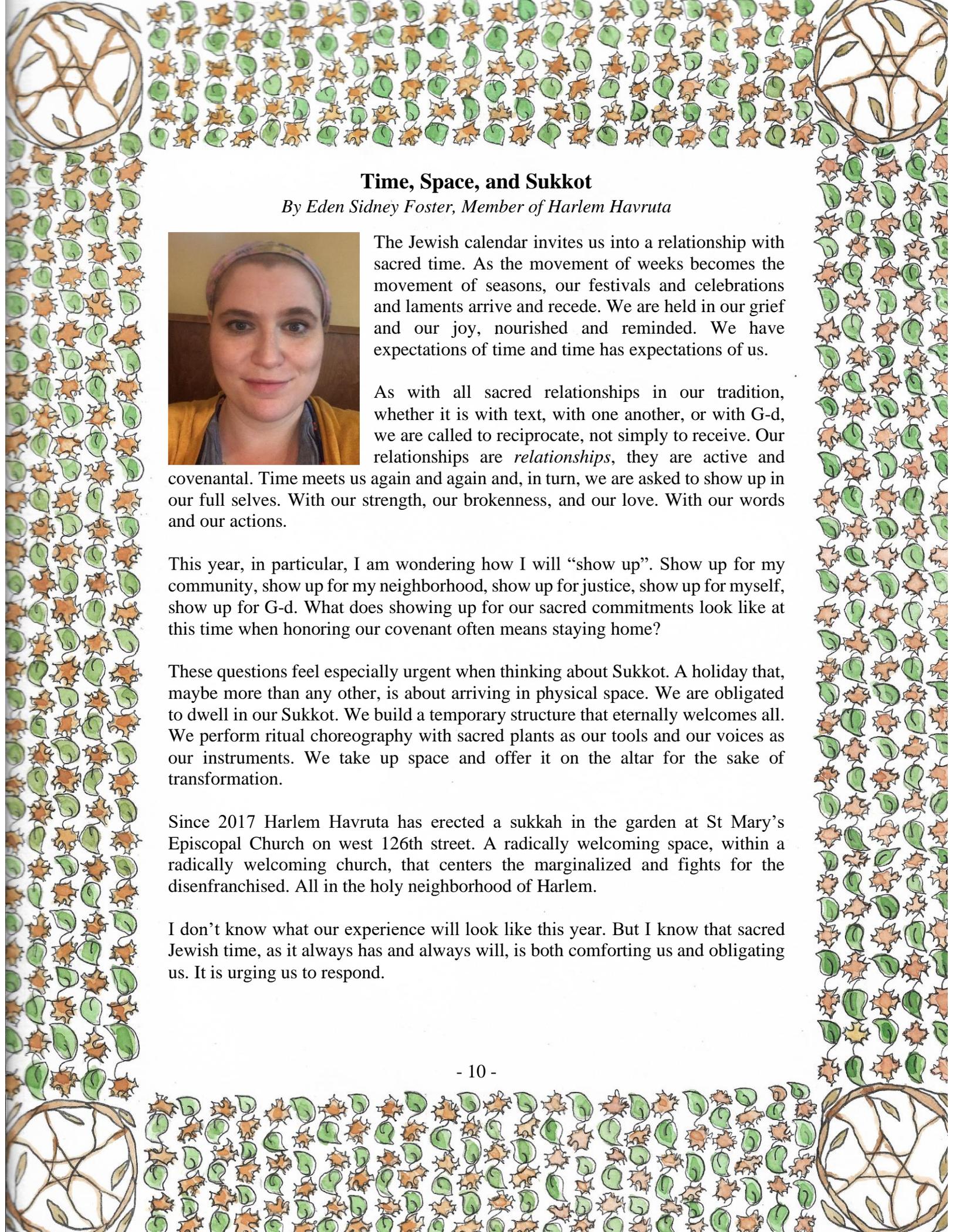
In this verse, we are explicitly commanded to **celebrate** the occasion. And, even further, we should be doing so with our community - be it our family, those who work for us, those in positions of power over us, people we've never met, or people who need our support. Everyone is welcome to enjoy the Feast of Booths together in the sukkah because all are considered equal.

As a Jewish professional, I take this lesson from Sukkot to heart in all of the work that I do throughout the year. In my work at Moishe House, I am always striving to enable our community builders to create Jewish community where every person is treated and welcomed equally - regardless of if they keep Shabbat, went to religious school, or have only one Jewish parent and were raised with multiple faith experiences. I love that not only does Sukkot remind us that we should open up our



spaces physically, but that we should also open our hearts to our community and embrace those who may be different from us or have different lived experiences.

We all should use the holidays this year as a reminder and fresh start to think of ways to continue to embody the Jewish values that Sukkot teaches us: to keep our tents - our homes or virtual rooms - and our hearts open all year round. And in doing so, may we build stronger and more beautiful communities.



Time, Space, and Sukkot

By Eden Sidney Foster, Member of Harlem Havruta



The Jewish calendar invites us into a relationship with sacred time. As the movement of weeks becomes the movement of seasons, our festivals and celebrations and laments arrive and recede. We are held in our grief and our joy, nourished and reminded. We have expectations of time and time has expectations of us.

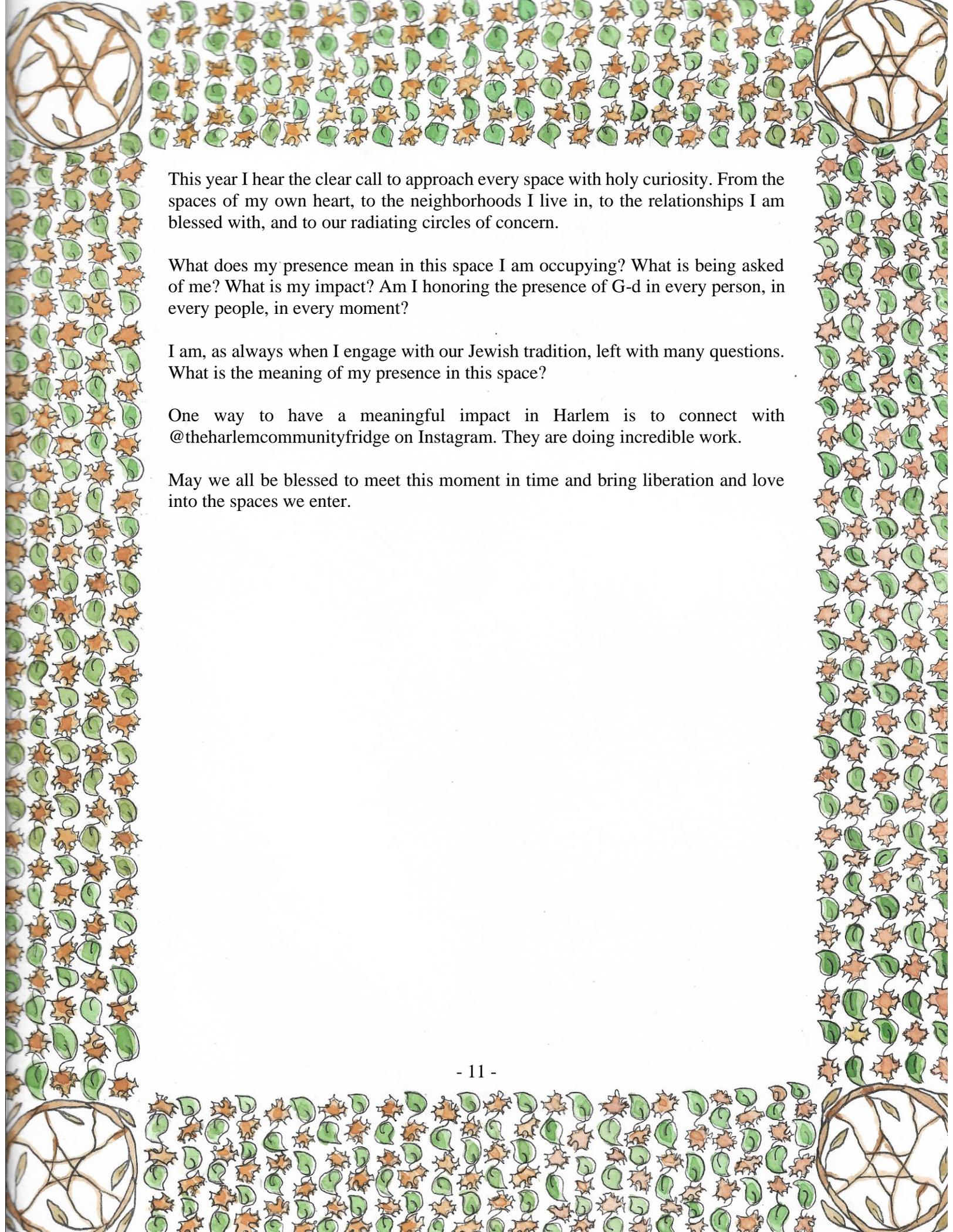
As with all sacred relationships in our tradition, whether it is with text, with one another, or with G-d, we are called to reciprocate, not simply to receive. Our relationships are *relationships*, they are active and covenantal. Time meets us again and again and, in turn, we are asked to show up in our full selves. With our strength, our brokenness, and our love. With our words and our actions.

This year, in particular, I am wondering how I will “show up”. Show up for my community, show up for my neighborhood, show up for justice, show up for myself, show up for G-d. What does showing up for our sacred commitments look like at this time when honoring our covenant often means staying home?

These questions feel especially urgent when thinking about Sukkot. A holiday that, maybe more than any other, is about arriving in physical space. We are obligated to dwell in our Sukkot. We build a temporary structure that eternally welcomes all. We perform ritual choreography with sacred plants as our tools and our voices as our instruments. We take up space and offer it on the altar for the sake of transformation.

Since 2017 Harlem Havruta has erected a sukkah in the garden at St Mary’s Episcopal Church on west 126th street. A radically welcoming space, within a radically welcoming church, that centers the marginalized and fights for the disenfranchised. All in the holy neighborhood of Harlem.

I don’t know what our experience will look like this year. But I know that sacred Jewish time, as it always has and always will, is both comforting us and obligating us. It is urging us to respond.



This year I hear the clear call to approach every space with holy curiosity. From the spaces of my own heart, to the neighborhoods I live in, to the relationships I am blessed with, and to our radiating circles of concern.

What does my presence mean in this space I am occupying? What is being asked of me? What is my impact? Am I honoring the presence of G-d in every person, in every people, in every moment?

I am, as always when I engage with our Jewish tradition, left with many questions. What is the meaning of my presence in this space?

One way to have a meaningful impact in Harlem is to connect with @theharlemcommunityfridge on Instagram. They are doing incredible work.

May we all be blessed to meet this moment in time and bring liberation and love into the spaces we enter.



Shake it Out

By Jordan Sved, Harlem Resident and Community Member



“On the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days.” - Leviticus 23:40

This verse in Leviticus is the biblical source for the four species as we know them today. The Talmud later clarifies that to “rejoice” with a Lulav, Etrog, Hadassim, and Aravot is to wave them during the traditional festival prayer, which has evolved into the rituals we see today.

The High Holidays are often a time of high precision and specificity for the Jewish people. Now not even a week later, we’ve moved on from fasting and praying all day to grabbing some leafy greens and shaking it out during prayer. Why the change of pace?

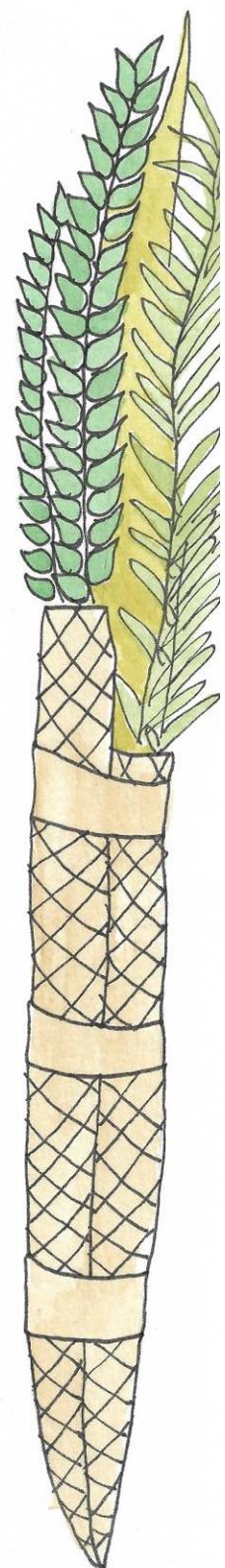
I like to think this serves the Jewish people twofold. First, the whole holiday of Sukkot, beyond just the four species, is an opportunity to celebrate the work that we put in during the days of repentance and atonement. Second, while our fate is written and sealed during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we continue to include prayers of contemplation and repentance until the end of Sukkot knowing that “the book” is not yet put away for the year. Tashlich is a reflection of this too. Although many perform this custom during the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah, the deadline to symbolically throw your sins into the river is not until the last day of Sukkot.

The Four Species are a reminder that there is still time.

There is still time if the format for prayer during the earlier holidays did not work for you. There is still time if the way you connect to the divine is through nature and dance instead of books and liturgy. There is still time.

The Four Species are a model of expression and prayer that may appeal more to you, you can have a dance party with your Lulav and Etrog and bring your focus on rejoicing as we are mandated from the verse in Leviticus. You can do this and find an avenue to God that is suitable for you.

There is space & there is time for you.





Musings on the Minim

By Saadia McIntosh, Harlem City Coordinator for Serve the Moment at Repair the World



Growing up as an Observant Jew, I feel like it is easy to be cynical about many of our religion's more unique rituals. Why, one may wonder, would a New York-based Jew ever choose to sit outside in the chilly mid fall days of September or October, with several of their closest friends or family members, jammed into a glorified booth in an *alleged expression of joy and celebration*? Wouldn't you be warmer and happier sitting inside free of the fear of rain or wind? And what's up with the four species or *arba minim* as they're referred to in Hebrew? What's the deal with the lemon, the leaves, the other leaves and the palm thing?

Sefer Vayikra commands us to “take the fruit of a citrus tree (*Etrog*), palm branches (*Lulav*), boughs of thick trees (*Hadas*) and brook willows (*Arava*)” on the first day of *Sukkot*, in order to “rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.” Later Rabbinical authorities expounded upon this commandment, mandating Jews to take these four species, physically bring them together, then wave them in a number of directions. Again - *kinda weird*. The outside observer of this ritual may find themselves perturbed by the almost song and dance of this all, but this, like most every Jewish ritual, is rife with deeper meaning and a lesson that is eternally relevant.

Vayikra Rabba maintains that the binding of the *arba minim* is symbolic of our desire to unite the four different “types” of Jews. This *midrash* ascribes each of the species' properties of smell and taste, or lack thereof, as characteristics that correspond to the performance or non-performance of Torah and Mitzvot. The *etrog* smells and tastes great, symbolizing those who possess knowledge of Torah and who perform Mitzvot. The *hadas* smells great but is practically inedible, symbolic of those who may perform mitzvot, but are lacking in Torah knowledge. The *lulav* has taste, but no smell: symbolic of those who study Torah but are lacking in Mitzvot. Finally, *aravot* are devoid of taste and smell, symbolic of those who lack both Torah and Mitzvot. Another explanation links each of the species to vital body parts: the *lulav* to the spine, the *hadas* to the eye, the *arava* to the mouth and the *etrog* to the heart.

Much like these symbolic interpretations of the *arba minim* suggest, the Jewish people are not a monolith. Per the *midrash*'s first explanation, we may not all



function at the same level of ritual observance or possess the same Torah knowledge, but *every single one of us matters*. The midrash's second explanation highlights how vital every single Jew is to the wellbeing of our community as a whole. This explanation has always resonated the most with me as it calls attention to the indispensable role each and every one of us holds in endeavors to keep our nation alive and well. Our lives and identities may look different from one another, but we are all integral.

Jews do not all look the same. We come in all shapes and sizes, and we certainly come in a multitude of hues as well. A Black Jew myself, I have always remained hyper aware that I look different from the lions' share of my colleagues with whom I have worshiped, learned or played at school, shul or summer camp. Throughout the years, my blackness has functioned as the butt of jokes, the aspect of my identity that has caused others to feel intimidated or scared and the thing that reminds me that I, in fact, am different from so many other Jews. For years, I've been made to feel like I am different from my brethren. It's been said to me that the struggles I've faced as a Black man of color in America are not inherently *Jewish issues*.

The racial justice uprisings that we've seen as of late serve as stark reminders that our society is imperfect, inequitable and, at times, immensely tragic. Countless Black and Brown lives have been lost due to systemic issues within the very institutions that are meant to protect all of us. As backwards as that notion is, it's one with which we, as a society, must grapple.

As Jews existing within a larger multicultural, multifaceted and ultimately beautiful society, we cannot and should not take ourselves out of this larger conversation. More than that, however, as a Jewish community that is home to Black people among so many others, this *is our issue*. This *is* our business, and we should seek to be as much a part of this movement for black lives as we can be. In the spirit of the *Sukkot* season and the symbolism of the *arba minim*, Jews must recognize and appreciate that we may not all be the same, but we can only be complete if all of us are properly cared for, attended to and loved.

It's taken me years to gain the confidence I have in who I am. As someone who holds a unique identity, and who is admittedly a bit of weirdo, I can confidently say that I have a lot to offer to not only the Jewish community, but to any communities of which I am a part. I may not be the perfect *etrog*, but I know that I hold an important role in this world. Black people, and certainly those who are Jews, must be seen, heard and regarded highly if we're to engender a world which merits a safe, healthy and sweet new year.



Head in the Clouds, Feet on the Ground

By Dimitry Ekshtut, Co-Founder of Based in Harlem and Kehillat Harlem

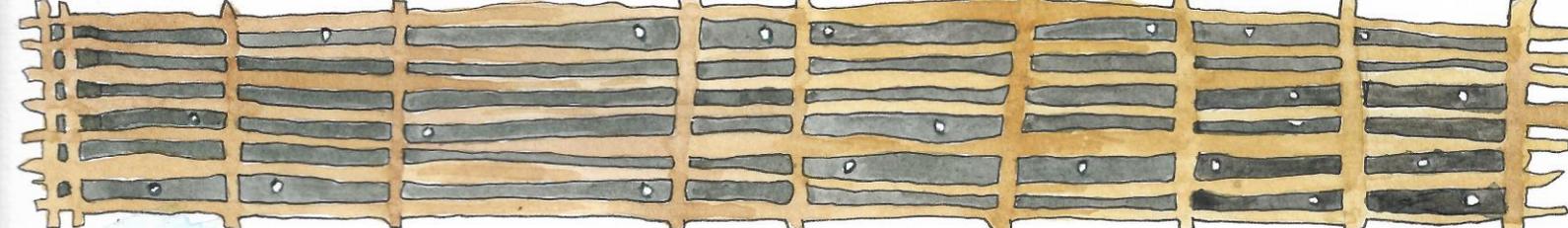


Of all the elements of Sukkot, perhaps the most ubiquitous is the construction of the *sukkah* itself - a temporary, intentionally impermanent dwelling. Before entering the Promised Land, G-d commands the nascent Jewish people to “live in booths for seven days” as an eternal reminder of the Divine shelter they received during the Exodus from Egypt and throughout their journeying in the wilderness (Vayikra 23:42-43). The Sages of our tradition expound at great length on the particularities of sukkah construction - what materials qualify for use in a kosher sukkah, how high it can be, how many walls it needs to have, and the like. But aside from the technical aspects of sukkah, the Sages were also deeply invested in the question of symbolic purpose. What exactly does the sukkah represent? Are we simply, as an exercise of historical reenactment, constructing physical booths akin to those built by the Israelites as a form of shelter from the sweltering heat of the desert sun? Or could there be something more?

The Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer offers an alternate explanation, noting that the word *sukkot* in the above verse does not simply mean “booths”, but rather is an oblique reference to the *ananei kavod* - the “clouds of glory” that surrounded and sheltered the Jewish people throughout their sojourning in the wilderness (Masechet Sukkah 11b). In this formulation, the sukkah owes its fleeting, delicate presence and porous thatch roof (through which one must be able to still see the stars in the night sky) to its approximation of a cloud.

Our tradition teaches that the seven mentions of the word *anan* (“cloud”) imply that there were seven distinct clouds following the Jewish encampment in the desert - one on each of their four sides, one above them, one beneath their feet, and one in front of them to level the oncoming terrain and ease their journey. Six clouds to delineate the boundaries of the physical world (in front, behind, to the left, to the right, above, and below) and one, the seventh, to supersede the physical with an infusion of Divine providence. This miraculous gift of protection and guidance was given in the sole merit of one righteous individual - Moses’ brother, Aaron.

Throughout their wanderings in the wilderness, the Jewish people complain time and again about the lack of meat and water, build a golden calf, and constantly threaten Moses with rebellion. They are, as G-d describes them, truly a “stiff-

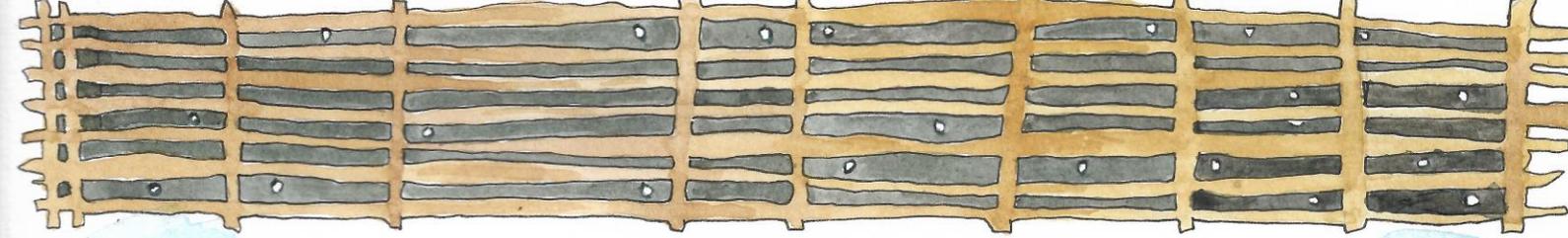


necked people". Only through the merit of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam do they manage to survive at all. Moses beseeches G-d to show mercy after the grievous sin of the golden calf. Through Miriam's merit, the Israelites have a miraculous well and perpetual source of water. And in Aaron's merit, the Israelites have the clouds of glory to guide and protect them in a harsh, unforgiving environment.

All three siblings were prophets in their own right, but what made Aaron distinct and truly beloved by his people was his essential attribute of being an *ohev shalom*, a lover of peace, and a *rodef shalom*, a pursuer of peace. When arguments ensued in the camp, Aaron would seek out each disputant separately, telling them that the other felt remorse and desired reconciliation, thereby smoothing over hurt feelings and paving the way for a reestablishing of peace in their midst. He went out actively seeking peace and, for this reason, he merited Divine protection - not only for himself, but for his entire community. Indeed, upon Aaron's death the clouds of glory disappeared from the encampment, taking with them the protection and assistance that they previously offered. Almost instantaneously, the Jewish people experienced a violent confrontation with a rival nation that had heard of Aaron's passing, the clouds' departure, and the ensuing vulnerability that these events seemed to imply. Perhaps, then, when we pursue peace as sincerely, authentically, and consistently as did Aaron, we too merit such Heavenly protection and assistance.

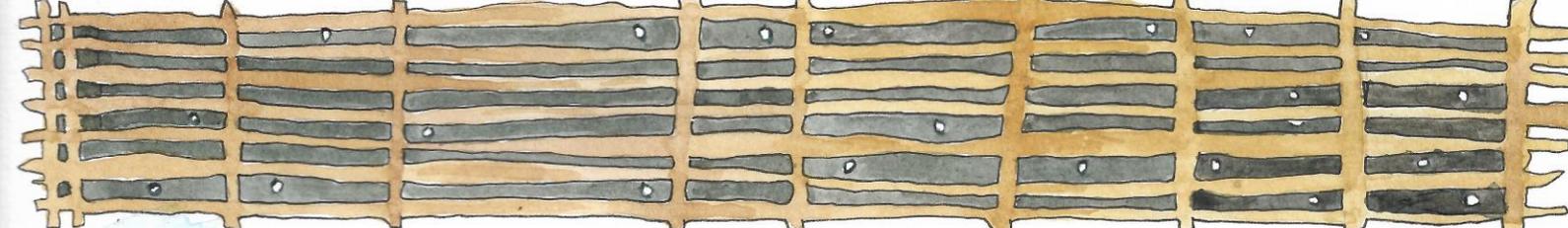
This Fall, here in Harlem and throughout the world, tent-like sukkah structures will rapidly blossom and bloom and, as hastily as they were erected, dissipate just one short week later. Much as the Sages of the Talmud asked themselves nearly two millennia ago, we must ask ourselves today as well - for what purpose is my sukkah constructed? Is it to be merely a booth, or a taste of the clouds of glory? Do I dwell comfortably in my personal bubble, oblivious to the cries of others? Or do I instead channel my inner Aaron, chafing with righteous indignation at the injustices that surround me, recognizing that any Divine protection I or my community may merit is a direct function of my willingness to go out and be a *rodef shalom*, chasing after peace, pursuing reconciliation and harmony?

We live in a world on fire. The West Coast is engulfed in flames, searing the sky with a bright, red-orange haze. There are five concurrently active tropical cyclones churning their way through the Atlantic, only the second such instance in recorded history. Coronavirus has cut short the lives of hundreds of thousands and sapped the emotional resilience of millions more. The gaping wounds of racial inequality in this country continue to fester as the list of those brutalized seems to grow longer each week. The normalization of corruption, glamorization of incompetence, and threats to the integrity of our country's very democracy have not only entered



common currency but are actively abetted from the highest echelons of power. Strongmen proliferate throughout the globe. Right here in our own backyard, we spurn the neediest among us just as we prepare to enter the Days of Awe and while building our own *sukkot*, our own shelters, for ourselves and our friends. Where are the clouds of glory? Where is the *rodef shalom*? Who will be the Aaron of our generation and, most importantly, will we listen to them?

This Sukkot will be different for many reasons. In the tradition of our forefather Aaron, may we rekindle the flame of spiritual and moral grandeur, replenish our wellspring of empathy, and seek to find love for our fellows, our neighbors, in our own hearts. If we do this, perhaps we too, in this moment of wandering, will merit the Divine protection and guidance we seek.



Our Chance to Remember the Future

By Hannah Simpson, Harlem Resident and Activist



Why should I worry about huts when I'm supposed to just stay home? Judaism really needs an indoor holiday, one where we look out toward the world from safely behind our own windows, tell stories of how we used to take refuge in caves, and reaffirm that we can ride out anything with perseverance and faith. We actually do have one, but it's... not Sukkot.

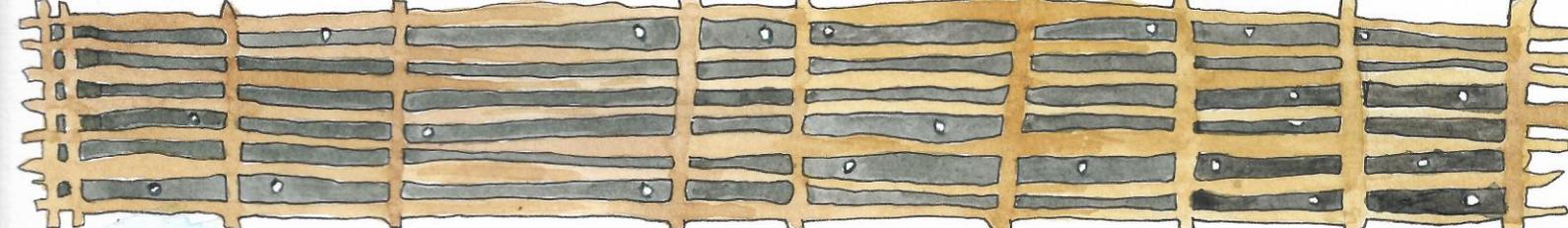
I laughed through April as Passover approached: "I have mentally skipped everything until Chanukah!" Chanukah is the perfect quarantine holiday. Lighting candles up against panes of glass, safe inside where the contaminants can't reach us. Frying up artisanal latkes with sourdough and kale using those cooking skills we perfected when the restaurants closed. And presents. Everybody likes presents with contactless delivery.

The joke was on me. The tenacity of this virus, the uninterested leaders who downplayed it, and everyone who resisted its management, have condemned all of us to precisely that Chanukah I bittersweetly dreamed of.

If perhaps only to avoid thinking more about quarantine Chanukah, Sukkot turned out to be worth the mental revisit. Judaism has a lot of holidays that celebrate the here and now and the way back when, but Sukkot takes on--and teaches--a different level of planning entirely if you hope to properly execute it. A sukkah isn't going to assemble itself, especially not one that is properly sized, let alone reasonably safe.

Erecting a sukkah from the earth, roof, or terrace commences as we rebound from the peak of our spiritual and, by way of fasting, physical exhaustion. Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, a minor fast, and an extra shabbat in the middle make you say to yourself, "Wasn't I just at Temple?" And to achieve a sukkah on time, you had to buy or unpack the materials from storage amid all of this, if not even sooner.

Juxtaposed with foresight comes a sense of ephemerality. If a sukkah were kept up year-round, it would cease to be a sukkah. This differs from other faiths where the counterpart holiday seasons creep longer and longer into the secular calendar.



October is when other festive displays start to appear, yet the yards where lights start twinkling first are the ones that never actually took them down last year.

In Israel, our perfectly imperfect homeland, the municipal feat of pruning a prior years' worth of shedding palm fronds, for aesthetics and safety alike, is linked with Sukkot. A free supply of roofing material for the community's huts piles on every curb at just the right moment. There's a beauty that comes with finding holiness and a use for this refuse and compost before its disposal.

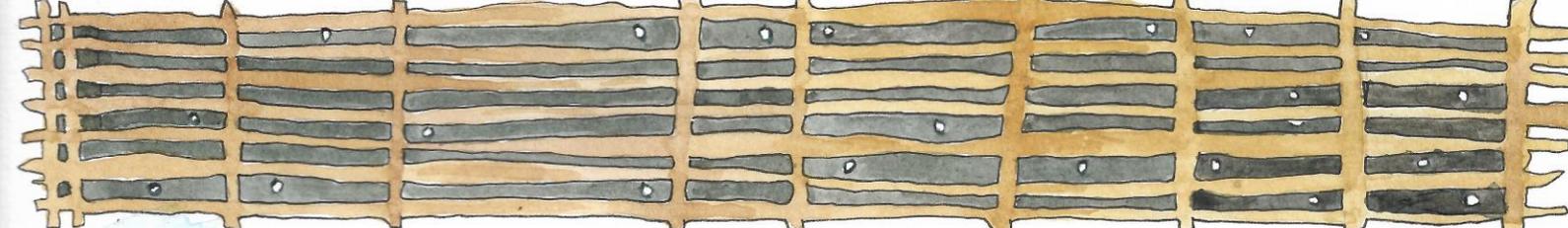
I made none of these plans myself, but I can appreciate that others in my community have. Harlem has no shortage of community sukkot; some are even safe spaces to be openly transgender. I can choose those that fly the flag of Israel without fear or shame and celebrate our connection to our siblings halfway around the world as they bear lockdowns even more stringent than here.

Sukkot is a holiday to remember the future, to build beyond the immediate. The act of harvesting is the fruit--most literally--of prior labor. We go on to beseech the heavens for rain over a season, not for instantaneous floods. We finish our sacred stories only to start back at the beginning. On other holidays we remember the past, but here we remember the future exists too. It transcends the bleakness that surrounds us. Even the darkest hours cannot be permanent.

This pandemic has upended and claimed countless lives. It will continue to. It will change, if not cancel, our communal observance and celebration. But it will not destroy us.

The original Sukkot were built in the desert as we meandered our way out of corruption and confinement toward a promised land. While we can't visit Israel right now, or for the foreseeable future, the indomitable Jewish spirit we each raise will ensure it is still there waiting for all of us as the world repairs.

Where we are headed as persons or a people might never be clear, but these humble sukkot compel us to set our sights ahead. Wherever we are--good or bad--isn't where we will be forever.



Where is Home

By Erica Frankel, Co-Founder of Based in Harlem and Kehillat Harlem



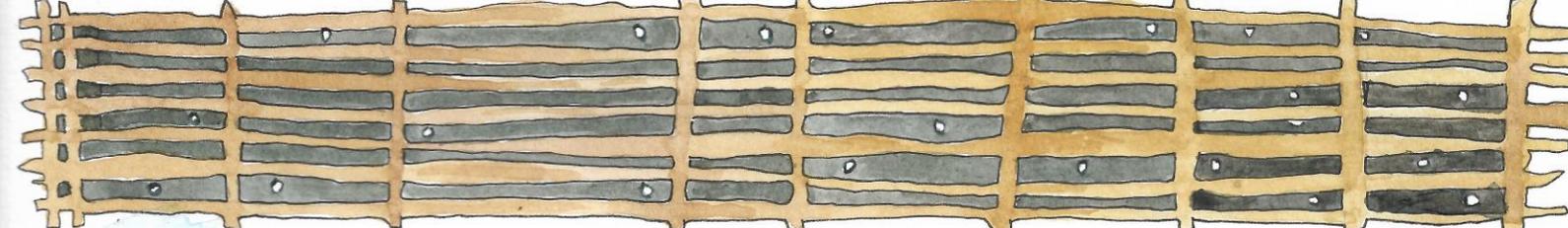
Where is home? This is the essential question at the heart of Sukkot. Is home where you keep your stuff? Where the most important people in your life live? Is it — as the saying goes — where the heart is? Is it a fixed place we return to over and over again, or do we carry it with us wherever we go?

Once a year, Jewish communities all over the world head outdoors to build temporary booths: structures which are not quite a house, but rather the *implication* of a house — the faintest outline of a shelter. Unlike most construction projects, the rabbinic blueprint for a sukkah does not yield a structure impermeable to wind, rain, and chill. In fact, the architectural rules of sukkah-building emphatically do the opposite, requiring our exposure to nature and legislating our vulnerability to the elements.

This is exemplified in the laws related to the sukkah's roof, which is made of *s'chach* — composed of natural materials such as leaves, branches, and twigs. Our tradition teaches that we should be able to perceive the starlight through this *s'chach*, and it should be porous to the weather. So important is it that we be aware of our exposure that the Talmudic sage Rabbah stipulates a maximum height for the sukkah: "Up until 20 *amot* (40 feet) a person is aware that he is dwelling in a sukkah. Higher than 20 *amot*, a person is not aware he is in a sukkah, because his eyes do not notice the *s'chach*."

It seems we must not only construct a temporary home during Sukkot, but that we must remind ourselves with each gesture, at each moment, that this home is frail, permeable, and vulnerable. Moreover, we are encouraged to spend all of our time in this state over the seven days of the holiday. The Mishnah instructs us that, during Sukkot, "All seven days, one must make one's sukkah permanent and one's home impermanent." The Talmud picks up on this idea and describes those who would bring their nice dishes and glassware into the sukkah, and even those who would sleep inside it.

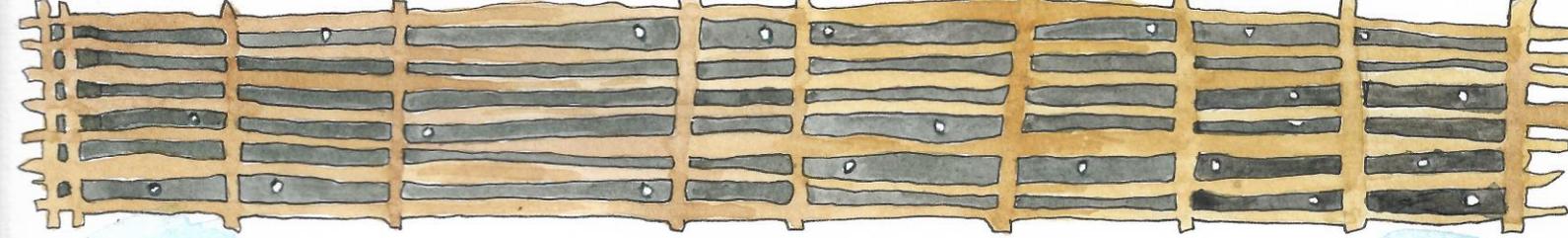
For many of us, our experience of vulnerability, uncertainty, and impermanence is more alive than ever this year. We may feel all too aware of the fragility inherent in our lives and in the human experience. We may see with greater clarity those for



whom vulnerability is not a temporary structure, but rather a permanent state of being. We are reminded that we have neighbors with no homes at all.

We can never really count on the permanence of home, Sukkot seems to teach us. But we can try to make that which is temporary, impermanent, and fleeting in our lives feel a little bit more permanent. We can look into the face of uncertainty and decide to step bravely inside, carrying our fine dishware and our furniture. We can try to make our sukkah feel like home, making it our refuge for as long as we dwell in it.

This Sukkot—amidst a global pandemic, wildfires along the West Coast, and the persistent victimization of bodies in the public square—we may need fewer reminders of life’s frailty. But we can move forward boldly in the face of this frailty, committing ourselves to erect structures in spite of their inevitable ruin. We can take it upon ourselves to face uncertainty by eagerly looking up to find the stars. And we can take action to make home wherever we are, for ourselves and for our communities.



Eruvin and Sukkot: Learning Daf Yomi During a Pandemic

By Jessica Jobanek, Harlem Resident and Middle School Judaic Studies Teacher at Beit Rabban Day School in Manhattan

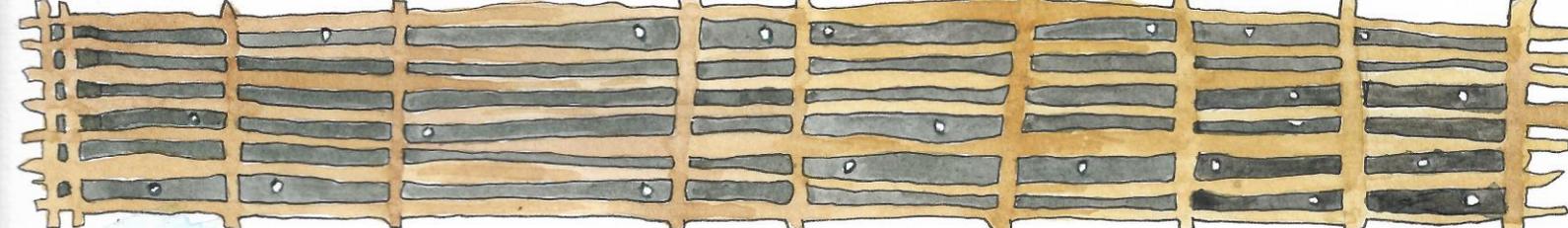


On January 5, 2020, the 14th Daf Yomi cycle began, and I joined thousands of Jews around the world who have committed to studying one daf, or front-and-back page, of the Babylonian Talmud each day, a seven-and-a-half year undertaking.

The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported to the CDC on January 22, just about two weeks after we began learning Masekhet Berakhot, the tractate of the Talmud that deals with the laws of blessings and prayers. By the time we finished Berakhot, in early March, the severity of the pandemic was becoming clear. When we began learning Masekhet Shabbat, synagogues had ceased in-person operations, my school had transitioned to distance learning, and it was quickly becoming clear that things would not soon return to normal.

Over the following weeks, life came to mirror the discussions I read in Daf Yomi. As we faced the prospect of a stay-at-home order, the rabbis of the Talmud debated how far outside one's dwelling one may travel on Shabbat; as I prepared for a solitary Pesach in April, we read the story of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and his son who were secluded in a cave for twelve years. As the days of isolation turned into weeks, we read the story of the person lost in the desert who loses track of the days of the week and needs to know when to observe Shabbat. Congregation Ramath Orah's weekly Daf Yomi zoom group provided an anchor that helped me, quite literally, keep track of the days.

On August 10, we finished Masekhet Shabbat and began learning Masekhet Eruvin. Since it is forbidden to carry things outside of one's own home on Shabbat, the rabbis decreed that one can create an eruv, a symbolic boundary around a semi-public space that transforms it into a private domain for the purposes of carrying. Masekhet Eruvin begins with a discussion of an alleyway that is enclosed on three sides and open to the public domain on one side. If one places a crossbeam horizontally across the entrance to the alley, marking the alley off as a separate space, then one can carry within the alley.

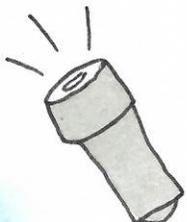
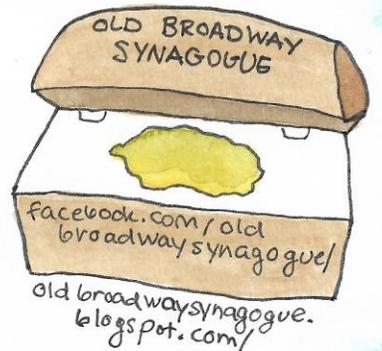
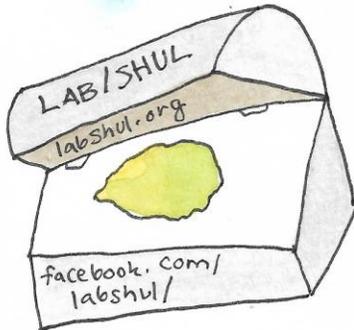
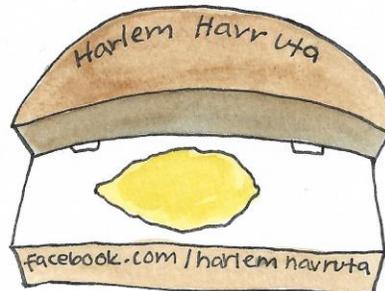
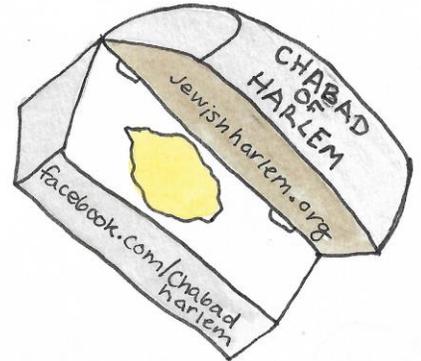
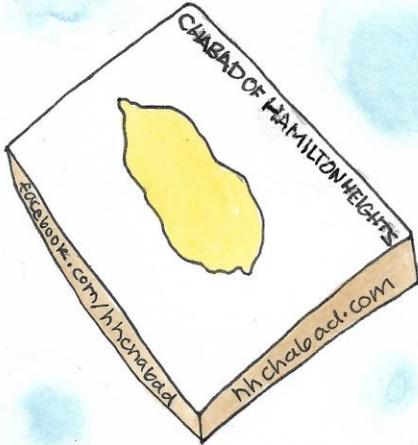
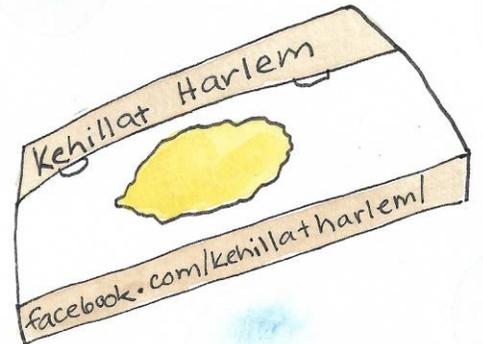
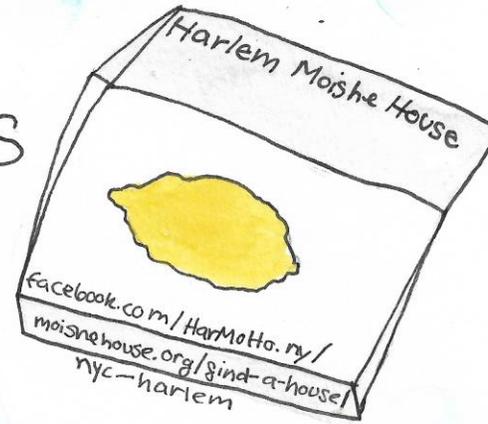
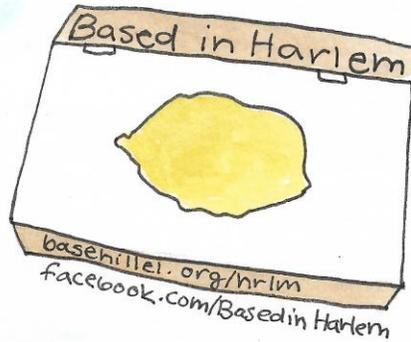


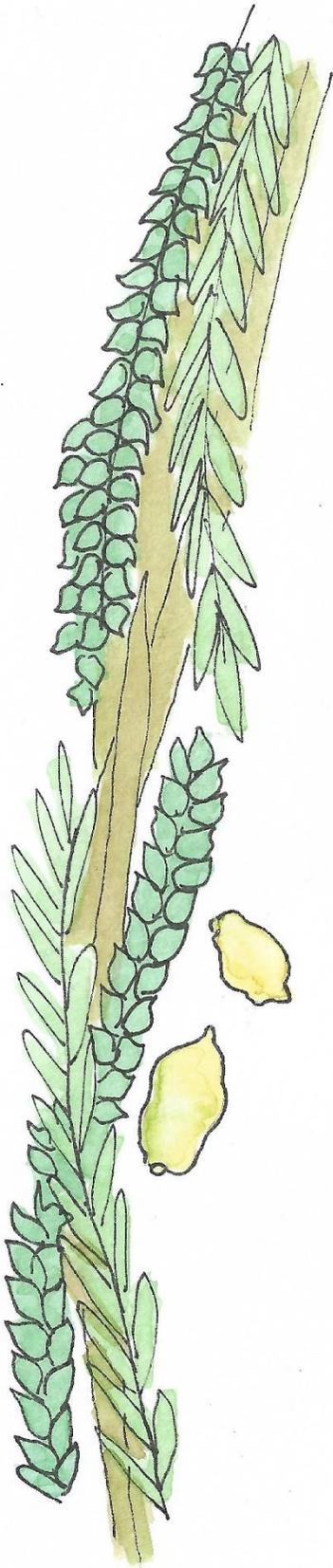
Almost immediately, the rabbis compare the alleyway to a sukkah. Like a sukkah, which must be shorter than twenty cubits, the crossbeam must be less than twenty cubits above the ground. Like a sukkah, stable materials are needed that will not become damaged. Sukkot and the beam placed across the alleyway are not identical, though. Whereas the beam placed across the alleyway benefits a group of people, the sages assume that a sukkah is constructed primarily for an individual (Eruvin 3a).

I often think of Sukkot as the paradigmatic communal holiday. After all, we invite guests into our sukkahs--both flesh-and-blood guests, and ancestral ushpizin/ushpizot. Each year, all across Harlem, different synagogues, families, and communal organizations erect sukkahs and host large communal meals where all are welcome. Sukkot is *z'man simchateinu*, the time of our rejoicing. Given my experiences of Sukkot, it was fascinating--and troubling--to see the rabbis' assumption that a sukkah is primarily constructed for the individual. In contrast, the crossbeam erected in the alleyway allows people to leave their homes on Shabbat and find community with one another. An eruv chatzerot, or "mingling of courtyards," quite literally requires the participation of everyone in a given space. As Debbie Kerzhner put it in our Daf Yomi group, erubin are the original quarantine pod--a group of people who have agreed to shared communal norms in order to be together.

This Sukkot will be different than all others. Unlike past Sukkot, in which it was possible to sukkah-hop across Harlem, most of us will be celebrating individually, or in socially-distanced small groups. Yet, as we celebrate sukkot physically distanced from one another, we can remember that we are still within the Manhattan eruv--the symbolic boundary that transforms our private dwellings into a community. We can't sit around the same table in one sukkah but, this Sukkot, we will still be in the eruv together. And maybe, for this year, that's enough.

Harlem Organizations





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