

## October 2017 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

As I think I've made clear to anyone who will listen, Israel is a place near and dear to my heart. There are, of course, many reasons why, but at this time of year, I always tend to come back to one in particular.

It was during my junior year of college, when I was an exchange student at the [Hebrew University of Jerusalem](#). While it is true that Israel tends to function on the Gregorian calendar (as opposed to the Jewish calendar), all the same, it is hard not to feel the rhythm of Jewish time when you live there. Grocery stores change their inventory for Passover, public buses sit parked on Shabbat, and the entire country stands still for a brief moment of national solidarity on Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) and, a week later, on Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day for those who have fallen in war on the battlefield and by terrorism). But as I see it, there is perhaps no moment in the Israeli year more universally in sync with Jewish time than the period between Rosh Hashanah and Simchat Torah.

Universities, in fact, close their gates for the entire four-week period. So for me as a 20-year-old student from America, that meant that I had to find something to do for a whole month.

Eager for new experiences, I chose to volunteer on a kibbutz. However, rather than opting for a secular kibbutz, which describes the overwhelming majority of kibbutzim, I decided to live on an Orthodox Religious Kibbutz.

Over the course of the month, I worked in a number of low-skill labor positions. I prepared feed for the livestock, peeled potatoes for the cafeteria, cleaned out the chicken coops, and shoveled my fair share of cow manure. None of these jobs was particularly interesting, nor all that much fun, but each and every one of them was necessary for the practical functioning of the kibbutz. Without all of us doing this kind of work, whether or not the work itself was at all interesting, it would have been much harder for the kibbutz to meet its bottom line obligations. And this is one of the great lessons I learned from my four weeks there: When a community is truly collective in spirit, the members are willing to do jobs they don't necessarily enjoy, because only when everyone contributes can the community truly support itself.

All the same, I did have one job that month that cannot be described this way. In fact, not only did it have nothing to do with the bottom line, it actually took hundreds of labor hours to accomplish and tied up a number of valuable pieces of farm equipment which otherwise could have been serving to boost the kibbutz's financial situation. Instead, about ten of us spent the better part of a week rising high in the air on kibbutz cherry pickers to cut down date palm branches, load them onto trucks, and deliver them not only to the central lawn outside the communal dining hall but also to each

individual family home on the kibbutz. They were, of course, to serve as the *schach* (the vegetation that creates the roof of a *sukkah*).

I won't lie. It was tough work. The branches became heavier and heavier as the week went on, the trucks were loud and uncomfortable, and the sun was relentless. But it was also, without the shadow of a doubt, not only the most personally fulfilling job I had during my four weeks there, even more importantly, it was clearly the one that the kibbutz members most appreciated.

What I learned from this experience is that some of the most important jobs we can take on in life have nothing to do with squeezing out a few more percentage points of profit. The palm branches, in fact, accomplished exactly the opposite. Not only did my work not contribute to the year-end financial stability of the kibbutz, it actually cost them significant financial opportunity. Yet to imagine this community using their resources for any goal at this time of year other than preparing to undertake the ritual observance of *Sukkot* would have been unthinkable. Ritual mattered to the members of my kibbutz, and ritual matters to us at the JCNWJ.

Whether it be for *Sukkot* or any other Jewish observance, we glory in the opportunity to gather together as a community and share ritual life together because ritual has a power like nothing else. Ritual has the power to put tangible shape onto the intangible spirit. When we sit in the *sukkah*, we are at once connected with the ritual matters, and the kibbutz was prepared to put their money where their spiritual core was.

Among the many lessons I learned and continue to carry with me from the experience of being intimately connected with the ritual preparation and fulfillment of *Sukkot* that month on kibbutz in 1986 are that we benefit from the opportunity to express gratitude to God for our many blessings.

Specifically, we build a *sukkah* in order to:

- Acknowledge that we are blessed with permanent shelter over our heads, and therefore answer the call to action to help those who do not;
- Thank God and those who work the land for the bountiful harvest we eat, and, therefore, once again, feel the call to action to help those who are without;
- Benefit from the spiritual value of community by sharing what we have with guests who come eat with us;
- Remind ourselves that while we are no longer slaves in Egypt, our own national freedom comes with the responsibility to keep moving forward through the desert of despair so that all people everywhere can enjoy freedom as well.
- Remind us that even though we relied on fragile huts for shelter while making our way through the desert after Egypt, we were able to survive the ordeal precisely because God kept shielding us at all times. So when we participate in the ritual of building and sitting in the *sukkah* today, what we are really doing

is creating a tangible reality to remind us once again that God's protective eye remains with us today.

And finally, one concluding yet vitally important word of thanks: Even though it sometimes may seem that our community *sukkah* magically appears each year at the blink of an eye. But, surprise surprise, it doesn't actually work that way! It takes hard work and dedication (and some skill, too). Over the course of many many years, there has been one person more responsible than anyone else for making sure our community can enjoy our beautiful *sukkah*, and that person is Karl Gross who year in and year out makes it his business to build the structure and also to procure the corn stalks that we use as *schach* for the roof. This year, he was joined by Sandy Kahan and Andy Shelofsky. On behalf of the entire JCNWJ community, I offer our thanks to all of you gentlemen.

There are, of course, so many other tangible benefits that we derive from the ritual of *Sukkot*, but this is a pretty good place to start.

*Chag Sukkot Sameach,*  
Rabbi Dubin

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