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Congregation Or Chadash, Chicago, Illinois

I Made Them Dwell in Sukkot

My Loyola students are reading *The Jew in the Lotus* by Rodger Kamenetz. The title is probably familiar to you, if not the book itself. Kamenetz tells the story of the group of rabbis and Jewish scholars who travelled to Dharamsala, India in 1990 to meet with the Dalai Lama. It is an engaging story, very well told, and turns out to be a great way to introduce students to aspects of interreligious dialogue, and to offer a presentation of Judaism that reflects the differences across a broad spectrum of interpretations. The Dalai Lama is also a charming and perceptive interlocutor, who learns a lot from his guests, and teaches them much as well.

After the group lands in Delhi, they travel overland. The daring driving style of their Sikh drivers is compared to the drivers of Israeli Egged buses. The rapid accelerations and sudden lane changes, which are the specialty of both Israeli and Indian drivers, succeed in eliciting many recitations of the Shema from their passengers, regularly convinced that this Shema will be their last. (Kamenetz repeats the well-known Israeli joke about the bus driver who gets into Heaven ahead of the famous rabbi, because the bus driver got many more Jews to say the Shema.)

There is a poignant moment early in the trip, which Kamenetz relates as follows:

Near the Red Fort, a stately monument of Moghul rule, we saw a half dozen men lounging in a temporary shelter on what looked like a construction site. I took their picture. But Zalman [Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi] mentioned a Talmudic caution. One must not call attention to the *mishkenot ohni* – dwellings of the poor – lest they be embarrassed. I *was* embarrassed. I didn't know those stacks of lumber and stacks of wood were dwellings. I thought they were the ruins of a lumberyard. These low fantastic camps, known as bustees, stretched for miles. Their residents were the lucky ones – they had shelter.

In the scatter of rubble, scat, and trash I deciphered the scene: with a coal brazier on the ground and a jar of white balls on a wooden table, the men sitting around were not simply idle. This was a restaurant. Those white balls, some kind of pastry. The man patting flour down on what I foolishly took to be a painted boulder was actually cooking on an earthenware stove. Cots were scattered here and there where men squatted, smoking. It was not just a restaurant, but an open-air hotel.

Ignorance swings the doors of perception back hard on their hinges... (p. 18)

What must the horde of just-freed slaves have looked like streaming out of Egypt, making their way to their first encampment, which was called Sukkot?

We are admonished by the Talmud not to call attention to the dwellings of the poor in ways that cause embarrassment. But surely we must pay attention to the vast chasm that separates rich and poor, have and have-not, a chasm growing ever wider. And when we speak of shelter, we mean not only housing, but everything that provides some basic sense of security and human dignity. At this moment, the attention is on health care. I do not propose to analyze the details of this or that bill, but simply to state what seems to me an obvious question: What is the purpose of government if it does not include making sure that everyone has access to decent health care?

Garrison Keillor was eloquent on the subject this week, in his gently angry way of speaking. (I mentioned him also on Yom Kippur – Garrison and I seem to be on the same wavelength in recent weeks.)

The so-called cultural wars over abortion and prayer in the schools and pornography and gays did nothing about anything, except elect dullards to office who brought a certain nihilistic approach to governance that helped bring about the disaster in the banking industry that ate up a lot of 401(k)s...

It's time to dump the dead-end issues that have wasted too much time already. Old men shouldn't be allowed to doze off at the switch and muck up the works for the young who will have to repair the damage. Get over yourselves. Your replacements have arrived, and you should think about them now and then. Enough with the shrieking. Pass health-care reform.¹

Our neighbor, Rabbi Ruth Gelfarb, and I have been studying together the past few months. We just picked up the Shulchan Aruch (no small feat – my edition is large and heavy!) and began looking at the way Rabbi Yosef Karo codifies the laws of Sukkot. He begins the section by quoting the verse from Leviticus 23 that appears in the Torah portion for the first day of the festival:

Basukot teshvu shivat yamim kol ha-ezrach b'yisrael yeishvu basukot. L'ma'an yeid'u doroteichem ki vasukot hoshavti et b'nei yisrael b'hotzi'I otam me'eretz mitzrayim ani Adonai Eloheichem.

You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God. (Lev. 23:42-43)

¹ <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/chi-oped0930keillorsep30,0,1198390.column>

Karo immediately explains the notion of sukkot according to the interpretation that describes them as *an'nei kavod*, clouds of glory, which protected the people from wind and heat. Only then does he plunge into the details of what is required to build an actual sukkah.

This format is not quite the same as we find in Maimonides' Code. The Rambam, at the beginning of a section will tell us that the section relates to mitzvot x, y, and z. Then he starts right in with the rules, and then cites the supporting scriptural verses where relevant.

Karo's organizational approach interests me. He begins with the verse that most generally states the subject. In this case, at least, he then states a midrashic interpretation – the clouds of glory – as if it were part of the scriptural citation. The key word for the midrashic connection is *hoshavti* – I (God) caused them to dwell. It is not because the Israelites themselves built sukkot; our building of sukkot is a reminder to the generations of God's providential care.

Here is the connection that seems most relevant at this moment of national decision-making. Yes, there is such a thing as divine providence, but we may not depend upon it in all circumstances. Divine providence is expressed through human action – expressed here through the actual construction of sukkot. A society that does not make sure that its most vulnerable members have the basics required for life and dignity is not a society that expresses – or believes in – God's care.

The “clouds of glory” that protected us in the wilderness represent the sense of God's close and watchful care that was particularly apparent during those 40 years. But Divine Providence does not mean that we sit back and do nothing. On the contrary: we got up and left, we stepped into the sea, we gathered the manna, and, when necessary, we even went into battle. We are to remember God's care by going out and actually building sukkot. AND by taking real action to protect the environment, by making sure that everyone has adequate food and housing, and – right now – by making sure that there is real and meaningful health care available to all.

“Enough with the shrieking,” as Garrison Keillor put it. Get moving.