



A Tale of Two Structures

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Parashat Emor features two types of ritual buildings: the first, the *mishkan* (tabernacle), later transformed into the *beit ha-mikdash* (Temple); and the second, a *sukkah*.

We encounter the *mikdash*¹ this week, mostly in the form of limits on who may serve in it and how they must conduct themselves. Those who may serve there are not allowed to engage with the world as other Jews are: *kohanim* (priests) are not permitted any contact with the dead, except for their closest relatives. The Kohen Gadol may not even become impure through contact with the dead for his closest relatives—even his mother, even his father.²

These limits are initially strange. What is it about contact with the dead that is so antithetical to a *kohen*'s task?

Perhaps the answer lies in the purpose of the *mikdash*, and the ways it differs from a *sukkah*.

The *mikdash* is God's dwelling place on earth, a place where people can draw close to the Almighty. It is a place reminiscent of paradise, a place where we experience the world as it

¹ Often, texts that are about the *mishkan* are really about the *beit ha-mikdash*. The word "*mikdash*" by itself, however, can refer to either, which is why I use it here where these two buildings slip into each other.

² Vayikra 21:1-6.



might have been, and as we believe it will eventually be. In building the *mikdash*, we recreate in microcosm the world as God intended it to be, and remind ourselves of the world we hope to help build ourselves: a world free of human suffering and death.³

The creation of a mini-Eden within a fallen world requires vigilance around its borders; if the pains and injuries of the world are allowed to enter, then in an instant, all too easily, the feeling of perfection—of the world to come—can fall away. The *mikdash* polices its borders carefully, and, in doing so creates a space where, as long as we stand within its walls, we can dream of a world of permanence. We create a world where, for a short time, we can take solace and encouragement from being reminded that suffering and death were not meant to be an inherent part of this world, and that we believe that one day in the world to come—in the eventual world where God will be utterly manifest—they won't be.

Many of us long for such a space, a space where we can go to be reminded of our belief in a world that could be free of suffering and pain.

But there are also times where such a space might feel hollow. There are times when we are too aware of the imperfect, impermanent nature of the world that is to be absorbed by the vision of the perfect world that might be. There are times when we are too aware of just how vulnerable we are, just how susceptible to this world's constant movement and permeability to be comforted by the image of permanence.

There are moments when the reality of all that is too transient in the world—all that is too imperfect—is too powerful for us to find our home in the *mikdash*. The Torah acknowledges this: those who are *tamei met* (impure because of contact with death) are not allowed to enter the *mikdash*, not only because of the threat to the *mikdash*, but because in those moments

³ On this theme, see R. Shai Held's essay on Parashat Vayikra, "Order Amidst Chaos: Relating to Leviticus," printed in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/order-amidst-chaos-connecting-leviticus>.



when we have only just come face to face with the stark reality of death—of this world where everything is transient—the *mikdash* cannot be the holy dwelling place that we need.

And in those moments, we turn to the second type of building featured in this week's *parashah*: the *sukkah*.

ויקרא כג:מב-מג

⁴²בַּסֻּכּוֹת תִּשְׁבּוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת: ⁴³לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דִּרְתִּיכֶם כִּי בַּסֻּכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Vayikra 23:42-43

⁴²You shall dwell in *sukkot* seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in *sukkot*;

⁴³that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in *sukkot*,
when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am Hashem your God.”

The essence of the *sukkah* is its impermanence. It is a reminder of the temporary structures we lived in in the wilderness, a transitory time. It does not insulate us from the realities of this world—instead, it highlights them. The *sukkah*, meant to be dismantled after a week, reminds us that nothing in this world is permanent. Its permeable roof, open to the rain and the sun, reminds us of our vulnerability. The timing of the holiday—right before summer turns to winter—reminds us that change is inevitable, that long sunny days of plenty turn into wintry days and long nights.

The *sukkah* has none of the magic of the *mikdash*. It cannot transport us to another world, the world that once was and that we pray will come again. It cannot shield us from the reality of injury, of sickness, of death. It cannot be a place of perfection and permanence—and if we attempted to make it one, we would lose the essence of what makes it a *sukkah*.



But when are too mired in the reality of the world to fully trust in the *mikdash*'s message, in the moments when the reality of this world is too real for us to anticipate the world to come, the *sukkah* can welcome us in a way that the *mikdash* cannot. When we feel like we cannot access even the dream of security and permanence, the *sukkah* reminds us that God can be present in vulnerability and transition.

When we feel alienated from a model of religion that defies the reality of suffering, of pain, of death, the *sukkah* reminds us that God is with us in all those things and that the wilderness, the place of not knowing, of the in between, is holy as well.⁴

It is a different model of religious experience, and a challenging one. It is a model that insists on accepting, at this moment at least, the reality of the world as it is. It is a model that insists that in seeking God in that transience, that impermanence, that vulnerability, we can find joy.

While it may be tempting to choose one model or the other (a Judaism that centers either the *mikdash* or the *sukkah*), Parashat Emor insists that we need both. We need models of holiness that encourage us to dream and anticipate the world to come, and to do all that we can to make it a reality. But we also need models that will meet us where we are, that allow us to embrace this world, with all its transience, its impermanence, and its pain, and to find holiness and joy here as well.

The *mikdash* stands every day of the year while the *sukkah* stands only for seven. That's appropriate—we hope for more moments of joy in wholeness than in precariousness and vulnerability.

⁴ On the theme of God's presence in the *sukkah*, see R. Aviva Richman, "The Worldly and Other-Wordly Dimensions of the *Sukkah*," published in Hadar's High Holiday Reader 5782, *Zokhreinu l'Hayyim / Memory and Purpose*, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/worldly-and-other-worldly-dimensions-sukkah>.



But on the days when the realities of this world—sickness and death, impermanence and change—are too much to dream past, the *sukkah* assures us that God can be found in the wilderness of this world as well.