Embracing Imperfection

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At some point during Yom Kippur services, my thoughts always stray to sukkah-building. You may find this strange: for most people, after all, Yom Kippur itself is the primary focus of the high holiday season. Personally, however, I'm already looking forward to celebrating Sukkot next week. There's a part of me that needs the lessons it teaches.

Over the time Sara and I have lived in Maine, our sukkah has become sturdier, larger, and more beautiful. But no matter what we do, the sukkah still leaks. It's supposed to: a sukkah is a temporary shelter built specifically for the holiday of Sukkot, and one should be able to see stars through the branches that form its roof. I'm very glad that the roofers who worked on our house this past winter held themselves to higher standards of weatherproofing! At the same time, I'm also glad to spend some time each year under an imperfect roof, even though I'll probably get wet at some point during the holiday. I need that reminder to embrace imperfection.

Yom Kippur and Sukkot are a kind of yin and yang—each complements and balances the other. Yom Kippur is a day to reach for the stars, to transcend our human limitations as we aspire to emulate angels. Sukkot, in contrast, is a down-to-earth harvest festival. The need to link these very different holidays is so strong, however, that some people make a point of driving the first nail into their sukkah before even sitting down for the post-Yom Kippur break-fast.

We just recited the Ashamnu and Al Ḥet prayers, symbolically beating ourselves up for falling short of our aspirations once again. It's important to acknowledge our shortcomings, to make amends for our errors, to recommit ourselves to the realization of our highest ideals. Yom Kippur is a day to just that. We should not, however, do *only* that. While today is a day set aside

to lament our imperfections, Sukkot provides an opportunity to celebrate notwithstanding our imperfections, those leaks in the roof inherent to human life.

I'm something of a perfectionist by nature. I hold myself to high standards, I work hard to achieve them, and I'm disappointed when I fall short. These are valuable character traits, and I implicitly instill them in my students when I work with them on their papers. I also model these traits for students when sharing and discussing my own writing. I spent last year's sabbatical working on a book about the ways Christians have used ideas about Jews to think about Muslims. I'm now teaching a seminar on anti-Judaism and Islamophobia, which I scheduled for this fall precisely so that I could include draft chapters on the syllabus. Unfortunately, I realized this summer that I simply wasn't satisfied with the chapters I had spent months writing, so I threw them all out and started over. I'm scheduled to teach one of these chapters during Sukkot; I hope I'll finish writing it by then.

Sometimes, you just need to start from a blank slate. In a sense, that's what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about. We don't truly start over, of course. My new chapters begin with a blank document, but I bring to them all of the ideas that I developed through my previous failed efforts. Starting from scratch gives me the opportunity to make different choices, to apply the lessons I've learned without the need to fight my way out of old ruts and poorly designed paragraphs. Throwing out early drafts is painful and scary, but it's also liberating and, often, the best way to move forward. In this respect, writing imitiates life. The high holidays help us summon the courage to turn a new leaf. Each new year provides an opportunity to take a fresh approach to the challenges we face, to renew the relationships that we sustain and that sustain us, even as we draw on and learn from our experiences in years gone by. The message of Rosh

Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that this year, if we work hard enough, we have a chance to finally get it right.

Sukkot offers a different, complementary message: don't try too hard. "Utter futility!" cries Kohelet in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes that many communities read next weekend. "What real value is there for a person in all of the gains one can make beneath the sun?" Kohelet declares that "there is not one good person on earth who always does what is right and never errs." We're only human, and we should embrace our imperfections.

The prayers we recite on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur remind us of our fragility. אדם, יסודו מעפר וסופו לעפר, בנפשו יביא לחמו — "Each person's origin is dust, and each of us will return to the soil having spent life seeking sustenance." Our mahzor aims to inspire an orientation toward God, toward values that transcend our own brief lives, in the hopes that we make the most of the days we have on earth. The high holidays are a time to return to the land of our souls. The harvest festival of Sukkot, in contrast, celebrates the land on which our bodies dwell and the sustenance that comes from its soil. For that reason, the prayers we recite on Sukkot speak to human fragility in a different way. We pray for the rain whose water nourishes our food and ourselves. This year, as we pray that the rain will be לברכה ולא לקללה, a blessing not a curse, we'll mourn the destructive power of too much rain as our thoughts turn to the people of Houston, Florida, and especially Puerto Rico. Whereas Yom Kippur emphasizes individual dimensions of human fragility, Sukkot focuses on human beings as a collective society. Like the sukkah, we are all inherently vulernable.

One could easily become paralyzed by the fact that our very existence depends to a great extent on forces beyond our control, but Kohelet teaches us to keep calm and carry on. "If one watches the wind, one will never sow; and if one observes the clouds, one will never reap. ...

Sow your seed in the morning, and don't hold back your hand in the evening, since you don't know which is going to succeed." Kohelet doesn't advise us to ignore meteorologists or data about climate change; rather, his point is that we should make the best of the imperfect opportunities we have.

The author of Psalm 27 goes even further. This is the psalm associated with the season of teshuvah, which began 40 days ago with the month of Elul and extends all the way through Sukkot. We often sing the line אחת שאלתי מאת ה', "One thing I ask of Adonai—this I seek: to dwell in the House of God all the days of my life." The very next line of this psalm is surprising: "Were God to hide me in God's *sukkah* on the calamitous day, were God to enfold me in the secret recesses of God's tent, I would be raised up in a protecting fort." A protecting *sukkah*, really? In the event of a calamitous hurricane, I'd much prefer to take shelter in a sturdier structure! The psalmist doesn't advise us to ignore building codes or take unnecessary risks; rather, his point is that we should seek comfort and fortitude in God, and in godly communities like this one, even in the face of our inherent vulernability. Our resilience ultimately stems from our reliance on others.

"Who will live and who will die?," we ask nervously on this day. "Who by fire, and who by water?" There's so much about our lives that we can't control. On Sukkot, however, we rejoice nonetheless. We don't celebrate the destructive forces of hurricanes or drought-fueled forest fires, but we do celebrate despite them. The very awareness of our own fragility and mortality can inspire us to appreciate the precious moments of our lives. Yom Kippur is a day to focus on the ways we fall short; Sukkot is a week to be grateful for all that we have.

Last year during Sukkot, I assembled a new bookcase: I needed more room to store all the books I've been consulting as I write. My son Jacob, who loves tools, was eager to help and

just old enough to use a screwdriver properly. Something seemed wrong as I nailed the backing into place, but only after I finished did I realize that we failed to square the frame as we screwed its pieces together. Every time I look at that bookcase, I notice how off-kilter it is. For the perfectionist in me, that's very frustrating. This is, however, a Sukkot bookcase, a reminder that nothing is perfect. Even as it holds my research materials, it also reminds me to rejoice in the time I spend with my family. As Kohelet warns, "The making of many books is without limit, and much study is wearying to the flesh." There is a time for every purpose under heaven.

Tonight is the time to fast, the time to seek forgiveness for our mistakes, the time to aspire to be more like angels. This is a precious opportunity, not least because it's such a brief one. Already in tomorrow's Neilah service we'll call out the words of Kohelet: "Go forth joyfully, and with a full heart, partake of your meal and drink your wine." Originally, the medieval poem inspired by these words referred to the coming festival of Sukkot, the celebration for which Yom Kippur helps us prepare spiritually. Now, we also associate these words with the break-fast meal, which has become a celebratory ritual in its own right over the past few decades. We don't celebrate because we've become flawless over the course of Yom Kippur; instead, we rejoice because we are more than just our flaws. Even as we seek to do better, we embrace ourselves and the fellow members of our community, flaws and all, with a full, grateful, and joyful heart. May the year that we have begun together be a year of ongoing self-improvement and, no less importantly, a year of appreciation for all that we have.