



SERMON EREV CHOL HA-MO'ED SUKKOT: FESTIVAL FATIGUE

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Friday 18 October 2019
Dublin Jewish Progressive Congregation

- 1 I'm getting married in 16 days. (To an Irish citizen, indeed.) Wedding planning is one of those things where you actually have very little idea about its intricacies, until really getting into it. Before starting on this whole process, I had never heard of poser tables, or pre-marriage interviews with the local council. I had no clue that some kosher caterers charge an extra fee for "waitress make-up". I hadn't anticipated all the politics around which relatives made it into the *Jewish Chronicle* engagement announcement by name. Lots of things came as a complete surprise.
- 2 One industry that I genuinely had never even considered before was wedding insurance. I actually had a good laugh at some of the smallprint involved. We're forbidden from inviting "terrorists and narcotics traffickers" to our big day. We're not insured against war damage or "radioactive contamination" – or even against "Acts of God" – although, as a rabbi, I might be inclined to say that every marriage is an act of God.
- 3 My biggest chuckle, though, was at the insurance company's phrase "wedding cover". Because a wedding cover is an icon of every Jewish wedding. Four poles, an attractive velvet or linen canopy... the chuppah is the ultimate symbol of marriage.
- 4 I'd always assumed, in the back of my mind, that there was some link between the sukkah and the chuppah. Both are small, semi-open structures.



Both are the venue in which mitzvot are carried out. Surely the one must be derived from the other?

- 5 As Sukkot was approaching this year, I decided to do some research. And it turns out: no. No link. But while I had the books open, I did find something else interesting: grooms are exempt from Sukkot.¹ So long as the wedding took place in the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, they don't have to sit in the Sukkah, or eat in it, or sleep in it. They get to take a year off.
- 6 The Talmud explains this special dispensation as follows: "It is because they wish to rejoice. Why can they not rejoice in the sukkah? Due to the suffering of the groom. For that place is cramped and exposed and has only three sides, so he will be too bashful to smile with his wife."²
- 7 In other words: far too many people around, and after an exciting wedding – which would have been very publicly celebrated by the entire community – the last thing the happy couple needs is to spend a further week camping out in a cold, uncomfortable sukkah, constantly surrounded by the world and his wife and unable to snatch even a moment of privacy.
- 8 This seems very relatable, but at the same time, it's a bit surprising that the sages showed such sensitivity. Spending time in the sukkah is a mitzvah and, not only that, it is specifically meant to be enjoyable. Three separate times the Torah commands us to be joyous at Sukkot.³ The third time it even says we are to be "completely joyous". So why the special exception for newlyweds? Are they in fact being antisocial killjoys, determined to spend time only with each other, even at the cost of celebrating a the most festive of festivals with their friends and family?
- 9 Not quite. In fact, the exception is all about balance. In 14th century Spain, Rabbi Nissim Gerondi, a Talmud commentator more commonly known by his



acronym 'the Ran', observed: "It is not the manner of those who bring joy to the bride and groom to do so in the wedding quarters alone; rather, they do so inside, outside⁴ and in the sukkah."⁵ So what we're dealing with here is an exemption, not a ban. The bride and groom are excused from spending a full seven days in the sukkah, but they are not prevented from spending any time there at all. On the contrary, it is anticipated that they will spend hang out there a bit, with their friends, who bring them cheer; they will also spend some time alone, which will bring them a different but equally important sort of cheer.

- 10 This special exemption, then, is a remarkably sympathetic rabbinic recognition that the Jewish calendar might not always fit in perfectly with individual Jews' lives. A newly-married couple who have only just had their wedding – an act of God, as my insurers so astutely said, and a joyous one at that – are simply not, necessarily, in the frame of mind to engage in the joyous, but forced, merriment of Sukkot straight afterwards.
- 11 Dwelling in a hut for seven days will not be a spiritually rewarding experience if it is done with a grudging spirit when the hut-dweller would rather, for quite justifiable reasons (entirely holy reasons, indeed), be elsewhere.
- 12 I didn't get married in the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot – that would be taking the idea of clashing personal calendars and Jewish calendars to a ridiculous level! – but I sympathise with these newlyweds who aren't in the right frame of mind for another bout of festivities straight away. Because the High Holy Days are hard, right? In an email before I came, Jenni warned me rather apologetically that tonight's congregation might be small due to "shul fatigue", but that's nothing to apologise for. It's inevitable. Rosh Hashanah, Shabbat Shuvah, Yom Kippur, Shabbat Ha'azinu, Sukkot and now



Shabbat Chol ha-Mo'ed Sukkot come one after another in an exhausting and seemingly endless succession, and Simchat Torah is just around the corner. Enough already.

- 13 There's no shame in lacking the energy to be "completely joyous" for seven days straight right now. I suspect that the Ran – himself a rabbi for whom the High Holy Days were the busiest time of year – felt a little bit of this weariness when he said that the dispensation for brides and grooms was to recognise that they needed a more varied experience, "inside, outside and in the sukkah".
- 14 We've all suffered from festival fatigue over the last few weeks. But for the rest of the year, may we seek out the most fulfilling and varied Jewish experiences open to us. May we all encounter the world as the rabbis wished for newlyweds: in varied activities, all bringing us different sorts of joy, inside, outside and – for a day or so more at least – in the sukkah. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 18.10.19

¹ Hilchot Shofar, Sukkah, v'Lulav 6:3

² bSukkah 25b and Rashi ad loc, sv "Tza'ar chatan"

³ Leviticus 23:40; Deuteronomy 16:14 and 15

⁴ Literally "in upstairs chambers" but I'm keeping this sermon suitable for family viewing

⁵ The Ran on the Rif at Sukkah 11a, sv "U-mi-hu"