

## The Strength of Vulnerability

It must have been about midnight. I awoke to feel a creature moving next to me. I had forgotten that Matan and I, who were sleeping outside in our *Sukkah* last Monday on the first night of *Sukkot*, had let our puppy, Bamba, join us.



And suddenly this sweet moment of a father, a son, and their dog on an inflatable mattress under the stars and the full moon came crashing to an end.

Bamba must have smelled or heard some turkeys in the woods behind our home and he went *meshugeh* – crazy. He started barking loudly and as quickly as I could, I got out of my sleeping bag, trying to stop

Bamba from waking the entire neighborhood. I could see the headline:  
“Rabbi’s Dog in *Sukkah* Warrants Police Visit!”

I am not sure what we were thinking when we let him join us, but it was sweet while it lasted.

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Not only do dogs bark when they are scared, but many people do as well, although people often yell instead of bark when they are afraid. Dogs are no different; they are genetically programmed to behave that way when they are scared.

Like humans, when they experience fear or vulnerability, they are wired to project strength and power.

This dichotomy – vulnerability and strength – lies at the core of the cycle of the holidays in which we find ourselves. We have come from the fragility of *Yom Kippur*, rehearsing our own deaths as we dress in clothes that mimic burial shrouds, fasting and fearing, and then we enjoy the harvest on *Sukkot*, days which celebrate the plenty we often experience during this time of year.

But there is a twist on our harvest festival. While it is filled with joy – in fact, the Torah commands us to be happy (*v’samahta b’hageikha*), and it contains the best parties including the *Simhat Beit Hashoeivah* – the water drawing



celebration that was considered the Dick Clark New Year's Rockin' Eve of the ancient world, *Sukkot* is also tinged with uncertainty.

For ancient Israelite farmers, there was obvious uncertainty: it had not rained for six months; would it rain again? Would they have enough water to survive? Our *tefillot*, our prayers, mimic this as we cry out to be saved; we cry out for help over and over again as we will in a few minutes during the additional *Hoshanot* prayers added on this day.

Fear, anxiety and worry are woven into many corners of this festival. We wave around an *etrog*, a citron fruit with its fragile *pitam* that can break off. We read this morning from the book of *Kohelet* – Ecclesiastes – easily the most pessimistic book of the Hebrew Bible. A book that asks what is the value in anything we do? You can feel the author's depressive side.

But, this feeling is most powerfully experienced in the *sukkah*. A place where we are covered and protected by God, but one that is so fragile.

We saw that this week as our *sukkot* were ripped apart, collapsed and bent by the tremendous wind storm on Thursday – these are not strong structures and I am grateful to Mo Diamant for untying the walls of our own Garber *Sukkah*. In case you're wondering, that is why it is still standing, while many others including Gann Academy's is not! We will enjoy *kiddush* in it after *shul* today!







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The Talmud relates two opinions about the *sukkah* from two of the great sages of the second century of the common era: Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva. When the Torah states that God brought the Israelites out of Egypt in *sukkot*, in huts, “*Ki vaSukkot hoshavti*” (Lev 23:32), they explore what this might mean. Since we see from other places in the Torah that the Israelites actually lived in tents and not *sukkot*, perhaps this does not mean they literally dwelled in *sukkot* for their forty years of wandering in the wilderness, but that *sukkot* are a metaphor.

And so, R. Eliezer states it was NOT actually *sukkot*, but it was “*ananei khavod* – the Israelites dwelled under God’s clouds of glory. Rashi

quotes his opinion and I remember reading it as a child and being confused: how would the Israelites be protected in a cloud?!?

But, what R. Eliezer was actually stating was that they did not sleep in clouds, but in tents, which were wrapped in these mystical clouds of God's Presence. And in those celestial clouds, they were totally sheltered – the clouds of glory created a spiritual force field of love and security that took care of them.



R. Akiva disagreed, declaring, no, “*Sukkot mamash* – these were actual *Sukkot* – just like our fragile huts that have been blown around this week.

While we can argue about the historical accuracy of this statement, I see our two great sages framing an experience for us. Being in the clouds of glory is to be totally sheltered and sleeping in a *sukkah* is not. It is an experience of vulnerability.

The Talmud brings both of these sages' perspective to frame how important both of these approaches to life are. Feeling vulnerable can actually help us.

While we may have evolved to bark when we as humans feel vulnerable, it's probably not that helpful. Most of the threats in our

day-to-day lives are really our own anxieties and fears run amuck. While it may be harder to hold on to that place of vulnerability, it's necessary in order to be responded to in a way that elicits compassion and love.

Real strength, real power, and real leadership means allowing ourselves to go into those raw places, places of emotional vulnerability. When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and share that with others, it allows us to sink down into a more honest, real and helpful place. It allows us to go deeper with ourselves and others. It helps us foster more intense relationships where we actually share with others the reality of our lives, not merely the sanitized versions we sometimes like to produce for others on social media.

That is not to say that our world is not filled with challenges, it has a great number of them. But how we respond to them is what is important. We can project strength that covers up the concern or we can delve into the emotionally charged space of actually being open and honest.

Rashbam, a 12th-century commentator and grandson of Rashi, understood this approach. He explains that at the time of the year when we feel strong and powerful, when we have the abundance of the harvest, go and dwell in a *sukkah*, remembering what a fragile existence is all about.

*Sukkot* helps us cultivate empathy. It is not easy, nor is it always comfortable. But our tradition had great wisdom in asking us to go and dwell in a



fragile space, reminding us that we should inhabit that space in our emotional lives as well.

When we explore those depths, the depths of our vulnerability, we find an authenticity that is our true strength.