More Than Paper Chains:
Permanence, Impermanence, and Ownership in Classical Texts on Sukkot

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

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1 February 2016 | 22 Shevat 5776

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Abstract

The iconic moment of childhood celebrations of Sukkot, I have found, is the careful construction of multi-colored paper chains. Yet beyond these blurry memories, I have experienced Sukkot to be an under-observed holiday in the Reform world. Curious to determine how to make it more palatable to our communities, I chose to engage in a text immersion in some of our classical texts on Sukkot in hopes of finding takeaways applicable to the Reform context. My study focused on chapters 2 and 3 of Talmud Bavli Masekhet Sukkah as well as Mishneh Torah Hilchot Shofar, Sukkah, v'Lulav chapters 6, 7, and 8.

In this paper I share my findings centered on two major themes I discovered in the texts. First, I explore permanence and impermanence as communicated through the sukkah and the *arba'ah minim*. Each invites a paradox, with the sukkah demanding that celebrants attempt to make the permanent impermanent and the *arba'ah minim* demanding that celebrants act as if the impermanent is permanent. The sukkah teaches us about living in the moment, while the *arba'ah minim* draw our attention to the fleetingness of our lives.

Second, I investigate how the texts conceptualize ownership of the sukkah and the *arba'ah minim*. While one ultimately does not need to own a sukkah, two disparate paradigms offered for sukkah ownership prompt us to consider our ideal observance of our Judaism in contrast with our real observance of our Judaism. Conversely, one must own the *arba'ah minim*, raising questions of what we own in our Judaism already and offering lessons in how to deepen those connections.

Acknowledgments

I would like to begin, first and foremost, by thanking God for bringing me to this day. In my study of these Sukkot texts I hypothesized that the sukkah can help us connect to God through a macro lens, with the open roof leading us to think big thoughts and ask big questions. The *arba'ah minim*, on the other hand, help us to find God in the micro as we earnestly peer at tiny details of plants that go virtually unnoticed for most of the year. During my work on this project I have attempted to seek God on both levels.

So many wonderful people have coached me through this project. I would first like to thank my beloved friends and mentors who gamely carved time out of their schedules and joined my cadre of rotating *chavrutot* when I realized I absolutely could not do this alone. Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler, Ben Gurin, Dusty Klass, Jay LeVine, Iah Pillsbury, Moshe Samuels, Michael Shefrin, Rabbi Jeremy Simons, Becca Walker, Paula Kweskin Weiss, and Todd Zinn have all humbled me with the time and energy they chose to put into *lishmah* learning in order to help me progress with my project. I would like to furthermore highlight the personal and pastoral contributions of Rabbi Dr. Rachel Adler, Dr. Leah Hochman, Andi Feldman Fliegel, Dusty Klass, Iah Pillsbury, and Todd Zinn. I could not have completed this project without their listening, astute advice, and timely interventions to hold me accountable.

I can hardly express the extent of my gratitude to my parents, Ima and Abba, Nancy Brudney and Dr. Jeff Brudney. I feel so lucky to have enjoyed their unwavering support throughout this project as well as my entire HUC journey. My parents set a beautiful example of what family can be—and they make it look easy.

Lastly, I would like to thank my adviser, Dr. Candice Levy, who poured countless hours into this project. When Dr. Levy explains gemara, she both answers the question at hand and simultaneously clarifies the logic of a much larger swath of the text, answering many other questions I did not even realize I had. After meeting with Dr. Levy, I would understand texts I thought I had grasped on an entirely different level. I appreciate all her work, time and energy; this project is stronger and sharper because of her help.

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Sukkot, I believe, is undervalued in the Reform world. Growing up, I remember noticing a packed synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—followed in short order by a poorly attended midweek evening service after which we would take turns shaking the synagogue's lulav and etrog in the synagogue's dimly-lit sukkah. At Sunday School we would decorate the sukkah with multi-colored paper chains and then have another chance to shake the lulav and etrog. It never even occurred to me that the lulav and etrog could belong to an individual person, not just a synagogue. The same two families built their own sukkot every year, and I recall wondering why my family did not have one but never asking. As a first-year HUC student I attended a Sukkot evening service at a Conservative synagogue in Rehovot, Israel, excited to participate in the ritual of shaking the lulav and etrog that I remembered from my childhood. After the extremely brief service concluded, I asked the other worshippers when we were going to shake the lulav and etrog—my face growing hot with shame as they responded with some puzzlement that the lulav and etrog would be shaken the next day, not that night.

Many of my friends from liberal Jewish backgrounds share similar stories—and academic research supports my anecdotal observation as well. Dr. Nora L. Rubel, who specializes in American Judaism and religious foodways, notes the phenomenon of declining participation in Sukkot, which "only 28 percent of American Jews claim to observe…in some way"[1]. In her article *The Feast at the End of the Fast,* Rubel notes that Sukkot traditionally played the role of the triumphant

[1] Nora L. Rubel, "The Feast at the End of the Fast: The Evolution of an American Jewish Ritual," in *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America*, ed. Benjamin E. Zeller, Marie W. Dallam, Reid L. Neilson, and Nora L. Rubel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 242.

feast to follow the fast of Yom Kippur, following the cross-cultural pattern of fasting concluding with feasting[2]. However, she posits that flagging participation in Sukkot has given rise to the phenomenon of the formalized post-Yom Kippur Break Fast that has appeared only "in the latter decades of the twentieth century"[3]. Liberal Jews sideline Sukkot to such an extent that the pseudo-holiday of Break Fast has spontaneously evolved to supplant it.

In this paper I will explore the themes and ideas reflected in the rabbinic discussions relating to the mitzvot of the sukkah and the *arba'ah minim*[4] found in the Babylonian Talmud and Maimonides' Mishneh Torah. In my study of these texts, the most salient themes that I discovered deal with permanence and impermanence and ownership. The sukkah and the *arba'ah minim* provide opposing messages about permanence and impermanence, with the sukkah asking us to make the permanent impermanent and the *arba'ah minim* asking us to make the impermanent permanent. Applying these messages to the Reform context, the sukkah requires us to rethink our attachments to physical things and live in the moment, while the *arba'ah minim* demand that we confront our own mortality. Regarding ownership, one is not required to own her own sukkah—but the discussion involving two paradigms of sukkah ownership exemplifies the contemporary pull between one's ideal and realistic practice of her Judaism. Owning

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[2] Rubel, "The Feast at the End of the Fast," 235.
[3] Rubel, "The Feast at the End of the Fast," 235.
[4] *Arba'ah minim* translates to "four species" and refers to all four of the plant specimens taken on Sukkot as detailed in Leviticus 23:40: the palm branch, the myrtle branches, the willow branches, and the etrog. The word *lulav* can refer either to the palm branch alone or to the bound set of the palm, myrtle, and willow. To avoid confusion, I use the term "*arba'ah minim*" to refer to all four of the species; "*lulav* bundle" to refer to the bound set, and "*lulav*" to refer to the palm branch alone.

one's *arba'ah minim*, in contrast, is imperative, and can lead us to contemplate what we truly "own" in our Judaism and how to deepen our relationship with our preferred rituals and practices.

The festival of Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths, is one of the three traditional pilgrimage festivals. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld explains how Sukkot "continues the story of the Israelites, which began with the Exodus from Egypt (Passover) and the giving of the Torah at Sinai (Shavuot) and now ends with the wandering in the desert," when they resided in temporary shelters that some compare to sukkot[5]. Sukkot is also an agricultural holiday: "It marks the time of the harvest, of the final ingathering of produce before the oncoming winter[6]." The observance of the holiday centers upon the rituals of the sukkah and the *arba'ah minim*. The sages understand these rituals to be biblically commanded, and they interpret the biblical verses to define how one ought to observe them. Regarding the sukkah, Leviticus 23:42 states: "You shall dwell in booths [*sukkot*] for seven days; every citizen in Israel shall dwell in booths." The minimal requirements of a valid sukkah are discussed and established in the first chapter of Sukkah in the Babylonian Talmud. The sages determine that a sukkah must be temporary in nature, have a minimum of two and a half walls and a roof composed of plant matter that has been detached from the ground, known as "*schach*." The rabbis interpret the "dwelling" referenced in Leviticus 23:42 to mean "*teishvu k'ein taduru*,"[7] that one shall dwell in the sukkah in the same manner in which she resides in her home the remainder of the year. The

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[5] Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), 125.
[6] Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays*, 125.
[7] BT Sukkah 26a, 27a, 28b

two main activities that must take place in the sukkah are eating[8] (with some exceptions) and sleeping[9] (with no exceptions).

The commandment for taking the *arba'ah minim* can be found in Leviticus 23:40: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a beautiful tree, branches of a date palm, and boughs of a dense-leaved tree, and willows of the brook[10]." The rabbinic sages determine that the four species are the citron fruit (*etrog*), palm branch (*lulav*), myrtle branch (*hadas*), and willow branch (*aravah*). Over extensive discussion the rabbis of the gemara determine that the palm, myrtle, and willow should be bound together[11] while the etrog remains separate. The bundle is comprised of one palm branch, two willow branches, and at least three myrtle branches[12]. The *arba'ah minim* should be taken (or, as we tend to say in English, shaken) every day of the holiday—ideally during the recitation of hallel prayers in the morning prayer service though any time during daylight is acceptable[13].

The inherent paradox of the sukkah calls on us to reconsider some of our assumptions about the value of permanence. The sukkah asks us to make the permanent impermanent: even though, then as now, humans know quite well how to make a (relatively) permanent building, a sukkah must by design be a minimal structure that leaves us exposed to the elements. In one case we see this schema almost comically enacted when the great sage Shammai removes the plaster from the home in which his daughter-in-law and newborn grandson reside in order to place

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[8] Mishnah Sukkah 2:4, 5, 6; BT Sukkah 26a, 26b-27a
[9] BT Sukkah 26a
[10] Koren translation (143)
[11] BT Sukkah 36b-37a
[12] MT Hilchot Lulav 7:7
[13] MT Hilchot Lulav 7:10

schach over the beams and create a sukkah for the child[14]. Shammai literally dismantles the roof of the (permanent) house in order to fashion an (impermanent) sukkah. While most people would go to great lengths to avoid destroying the most protective part of their home, Shammai clearly considers the damage and potential discomfort a small price to pay for the chance to fulfill the commandment of dwelling in the sukkah. This extreme example (which the other rabbis dismiss as an unnecessary stricture[15]) demonstrates Shammai's rejection of the integrity of the permanent home in favor of the impermanence of the sukkah.

Another story concerning the rejection of permanence has further-reaching implications for the contemporary reader. Rabbi Akiva and Rabban Gamliel are traveling on a ship during Sukkot and Rabbi Akiva builds a sukkah on top of it[16]. The next morning they find that it has blown away in the harsh sea wind, upsetting Rabban Gamliel. The text goes on to discuss whether or not a sukkah that blows away at sea (where weather is more extreme than on land) is acceptable from the outset. Rabban Gamliel believes that a sukkah built at sea must have the strength to weather any sea storm in order to be permissible. Rabbi Akiva, however, believes that since a sukkah is meant to be a temporary structure, building it to withstand the weaker weather on land is perfectly sufficient. Rabbi Akiva is willing to embrace the impermanence of the sukkah in practice, leaving it to God alone whether his land-approved sukkah survives on the high seas. Although his response to his sukkah's demise is unrecorded, I imagine Rabbi Akiva split between dismay at no longer being

[14] Mishnah Sukkah 2:8
[15] BT Sukkah 29a
[16] BT Sukkah 23a

able to dwell in the sukkah and delight at having the opportunity to enact the impermanence of the sukkah.

What a perspective Rabbi Akiva offers on surrendering attachment to physical objects! Yet the lesson is far more measured than simple disassociation. Rabbi Akiva's belief in the power of impermanence is limited in scope: Only under certain circumstances may the sukkah's survival be left to chance. And yet his and Shammai's examples can influence us all in considering what really needs to be permanent in our lives and how permanent we actually need it to be. In building a sukkah we have the chance to consciously and unregretfully enact impermanence, trying it on for size in a way that allows us to experience it without risk or commitment.

The impermanence of the sukkah provides us with a strong reminder to live in the moment. In this smartphone age so many of us are tempted to document, rather than experience, life moments both big and small. Maybe the sukkah—and Rabbi Akiva's principled stance that permits the destruction of his own sukkah—invites us both to acknowledge the value of a passed moment and also to let it go rather than grasp frantically after it. As an avid airplane-spotter, I find myself frequently battling this instinct to let my camera, rather than my brain, serve as my locus of memory. When a particularly beautiful plane passes, even when I have repeatedly told myself that I do not need to take any pictures, inevitably I spend the valuable seconds fumbling for my phone, swiping haphazardly to open the camera, and pointing and shooting indiscriminately. The recollection of coming nearly face to face with one of these incredible machines is closely intertwined with my anxious attempts to save

the memory. Perhaps the sukkah can inspire me, at least some days, to actually leave the phone out of reach out of respect for the fleetingness of the experience.

The sukkah also can teach us a lesson about the longevity of valued organizations in our lives—including our synagogues. One of the key questions that I hear facing many Jewish institutions is sustainability. The sukkah is proudly and purposely unsustainable! I remember my shock the first time I heard a rabbi cheerfully opine that not all synagogues should necessarily aspire to last forever. Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum believes that the innovative Jewish community she has personally founded may or may not exist in twenty years[17]. She explains that it would be sad to close, and she certainly has no plans to close, but if the community fulfills its mission for a time and then cannot any longer, it is better to let it go than continue out of deference to an outdated past.

This perspective, which dovetails so neatly with the sukkah's impermanence, entirely shifted my own paradigm regarding institutional life. I had never heard anything less than despair at the prospect of a synagogue closing[18], and it seems that merging institutions to increase the chances of survival activates the same passionate (and, often, defensive) response. I personally worked for a Jewish non-profit at the time that it was unexpectedly absorbed into another non-profit, leaving most of us to find new jobs. Over and above the practical concern of making a living, my colleagues and I were quite emotionally distraught by the transition as we had never even conceived that the organization would, someday, close. How freeing, instead, to

[17] Session at the fall 2013 Rabbis Without Borders retreat
[18] Except regarding synagogues whose days have been numbered for years as members age and few new members appear; under these circumstances, the response seems to be calm acceptance.

openly imagine our institutions having not just beginnings to their life cycles, but endings as well.

We as rabbis can set the tone for our congregations in how we speak of institutional aging, evolution, change, and even death. Some already do: Rabbi Jeff Marks addressed an HUC group and mentioned that he openly discusses how his synagogue may indeed close in the next decade or so—*and that is OK*[19]. It is worth noting, though, that whenever he made these pronouncements, the lay leader in attendance would promptly mitigate the strength of the statement, showing his skepticism. In the same session, one classmate expressed that he believes that a synagogue has an obligation to its children to remain open into their adulthood. It seems that considering the impermanence of the synagogue made the lay leader and the student uncomfortable. I wonder if invoking the sukkah, a thing of considerable Jewish value and also a thing of impermanence, might help provide a concrete symbol to help people cope with institutional transitions.

While the sukkah asks us to re-envision the permanent as impermanent, the *arba'ah minim* demand that we view the impermanent as permanent. Our *arba'ah minim* consist of plant clippings that are destined to wither and die—and yet we make every effort to preserve them and act as if they are still vibrantly alive. The *arba'ah minim* and the many rules governing selection of the component plant specimens thus turns our attention to our own mortality and how to live in the face of it.

Rabbinic discussions surrounding the four species stress the importance of the quality and appearance of the specimens as well as their origins and manner of

[19] HUC Engagement Retreat, December 2015

procurement. The mishnah on each species begins with the sages disqualifying specimens that are stolen, dry, or grown in an idolatrous grove or apostate city[20]. I depart here from the rabbis[21], but it seems to me that of all of these characteristics, only dryness refers to the aesthetic appearance of the specimen itself. All of the other characteristics, instead, refer to impermissible "moral" defects to the plant (thievery, idolatry) that disqualify it regardless of appearance. The mishnah on each species continues on to consider *other* qualities assessing the appearance of the plant specimen, for instance what its leaves may or may not look like and which blemishes are acceptable and unacceptable. Yet no other criteria of appearance, apparently, is as important as a specimen that is not dry. By placing dryness among the list of moral defects, rather than with other issues of appearance, the rabbis indeed seem to be lifting dryness from an aesthetic issue to the level of moral defect itself[22]. Underscoring my reading on the importance of the impermissibility of dryness, the Rambam in fact maintains the same four opening criteria as the mishnayot but shifts the order to put dryness as the *first* undesirable category of the four moral defects[23]. Across all four species, I believe that the rabbis consider a dry specimen to be categorically reprehensible in a way that other aesthetically flawed samples are not[24].

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[20] Mishnah Sukkah 3:1, 2, 3, 5; the gemara overrules the Mishnah in several cases (BT Sukkah 29b-31a, 31b)

[21] The rabbis consider the specimen from an idolatrous grove or apostate city as if it were lacking in measure (BT Sukkah 31b)

[22] On BT Sukkah 29b the rabbis quickly explain their stance against dryness by noting that a dry specimen is not "*hadar*" (beautiful), applying the word used in the Bible to refer to the etrog. This brief reference is not sufficient to me to explain their overwhelming distaste for dryness; additionally, elsewhere in the text there are dissenting voices about the meaning of *hadar* (BT Sukkah 31a-31b, 35a).

[23] MT Hilchot Lulav 8:1

[24] This ruling is not as absolute to all the *minim* as I suggest here (see BT Sukkah 33b; MT Hilchot Lulav 8:1), though the force of the polemic against dryness stands

The great irony of the rabbinic dread of dry *minim* is that *all* of these *minim* begin their inevitable journey to dryness the very instant they are severed from the tree—yet avoiding dryness is held up as the highest ideal. Nothing, then, could be worse than a plant trimming that is merely going the way of all plant trimmings, becoming dryer by the day. The rabbis' insistence on specimens with at least some moisture[25] thus calls on us to ignore botanical reality and treat the impermanent state of moisture as if it were permanent. It seems that the rabbis want to act as if the detached, moribund trimmings of the *minim* are in fact still very much alive.

The Rambam's precise instructions for handling and shaking the *arba'ah minim* further extend the imagined reality of their permanence. He explains that one must shake the *arba'ah minim* "in the way that they grow, that is, with the roots downward to the ground and their heads upward to the air[26]"—reinforcing this pretending that the *minim* are exactly as they were when they were still growing. As if that were not clear enough, the Rambam returns to the topic slightly later, reiterating the proper orientation and specifically noting that if the *minim* are held facing a different direction, the mitzvah has not been fulfilled[27]. Not just the moisture but also the way one holds the *minim* in his hands attempts to freeze in time and make permanent the state of a living plant, which is ever diminishing in the specimens.

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as described. Some aspects are additionally relevant only on the first day of the holiday, since that is the only day biblically ordained for the shaking of the lulav whereas the other days were added by the rabbis. In the Reform context, which is not governed by strict observance of mitzvot, I consider the laws for the first day the richest and will limit my focus to them.

[25] Mishnah Sukkah 3:3 specifically allows a partially dry willow specimen

[26] MT Hilchot Lulav 7:6; my translation

[27] MT Hilchot Lulav 7:9

In sum, it seems that we are asked to invest tremendous effort in acquiring *minim* that meet a list of requirements for looking lively—in spite of the fact that they are entirely moribund. The application to human mortality is overwhelming! Just as we care for our *arba'ah minim* as they wane before our eyes, so must we contemplate the fleeting nature of our own lives. I think that in order to function, most of us spend most of our time operating as if our lives were permanent; however, noticing how the permanence of the *arba'ah minim* is actually terribly illusory abruptly punctures that conception. Just days after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when our liturgy forces us to consider who shall live and who shall die, the *arba'ah minim* remind us that ultimately all of us shall die.

I thus believe that the call of the *arba'ah minim* is for us as rabbis to talk about death—from the bimah, at Sunday School, in adult learning—and to encourage our congregants to do the same. We can set the tone for age-appropriate transparency and bring practical end-of life concerns into the conversation, publicizing the importance of advanced directives, cemetery plots, wills, and other special instructions. We can hold workshops or organize support groups on topics ranging from talking to children about death to serving as a caregiver for a terminally ill relative. We can preemptively discuss Jewish mourning rituals, whose graduated, year-long schema for returning the mourner from abject grief to normal communal life offers so much wisdom, even in a non-halachic context. We have the power to start conversations about the impermanence of lives that we so frequently imagine to be permanent.

In addition to opening the topic of death, the laws governing the *arba'ah minim* also provide direction for living one's life even in the face of impermanence.

The rabbis spend pages of Talmud engaging in lengthy discussion and setting strict rules about every aspect of the *minim.* The thrust of these laws in relation to mortality is clear: nearly *everything* about the *minim* matters, regardless of how long they will actually survive in their most fitting form. Abdicating responsibility is definitively unacceptable regardless of the ultimate fate of the *minim*. For us, too, the fear of impermanence must not cow us into overwhelmed inaction or feelings of impotence. I would assume that most people experience such feelings of inadequacy from time to time—but if I noticed a friend or congregant presenting as stuck there for an extended period of time, I would suggest visiting a mental health professional for support. The *minim* show us that we must take steps to actively live life no matter how long it might endure.

Another key lesson of the *arba'ah minim* is morality. As described above, the rabbis begin the discussion of each of the four species with the list of four moral defects that disqualify the specimen regardless of physical appearance. If any sample is besmirched by thievery or idolatry, one cannot fulfill the mitzvah even if the *minim* are otherwise aesthetically perfect[28]. Applying this idea to our own lives, certain types of immoral behavior "invalidate" even actions that have no connection to the immorality. In my work at Beit T'Shuvah, we consider lying to be one of these invalidating behaviors. Recently one of my clients wrote a beautiful and heartfelt essay about how much he had changed in recovery—and just days later, he lied repeatedly about drinking alcohol before he was ultimately caught. In a subsequent meeting I asked the client how he could reconcile his inspiring words with the deceit

[28] Although the Rambam supports this reading from the outset, he makes an allowance that if one finds out after the fact that one of the four specimens has been touched by idolatry, the mitzvah still stands (MT Hilchot Lulav 8:1)

of his relapse and he claimed that the essay was still entirely true in spite of it all. The client could not understand my insistence that his duplicity in fact rendered the essay decidedly false. This is precisely the message of the *arba'ah minim*: if we are not living according to a moral code, even behaviors that we consider unrelated can be nonetheless nullified.

The impermissible physical defects of the *minim* are teeming with metaphorical meaning as well. As plant trimmings, the *minim* can be rather delicate and require considerable care as workers and merchants cut them from the tree, ship them to their destinations, and sell them in the marketplace. One particularly challenging rule, then, is the mishnah's disqualification of any of the *minim* of the lulav bundle whose "*rosh*," or head, is severed[29]. Similarly, the mishnah on the etrog deals not with whether the tip of the branch is severed but rather if the *pitom*, the woody protuberance on the non-stem side of the fruit, is still attached[30]. Clearly the topmost portion of the plant holds special importance to the rabbis.

Perhaps the rabbis' orientation here is practical: the plant's extremities will naturally be its most vulnerable parts. The tip of the specimen could then serve as a proxy for determining if appropriate care and respect for the mitzvah has been taken in its acquisition and transport. The concern for the "head" of the *minim* is in fact a question of whether one made the effort to protect the *whole* of *minim*.

Applying the metaphor, the *arba'ah minim* demand that we consider how we can protect the vulnerable in ourselves, in others, and in our society. First, we must identify our own vulnerabilities and consider when we have the protection to reveal

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[29] Mishnah Sukkah 3:1, 2, 3. The gemara and the halacha do not always follow the Mishnah in this case: see BT Sukkah 33a, 34b; MT Hilchot Lulav 8:5
[30] Mishnah Sukkah 3:6

them and when we must guard them from being seen. Looking externally, we can honor this message by being mindful of other people's vulnerabilities and taking care not to inflict damage on a tender spot when it is exposed for fear of "invalidating" the whole person. Taken more globally, the *minim* could provide a call for social action, asking that we in fact protect *society's* most vulnerable or we are missing the point entirely. Regardless of how long the impermanent *minim* are to last, making the considerable effort to protect their vulnerable "heads" matters not in spite of its difficulty, but because of it. The *arba'ah minim* teach us that even in the face of our own impermanence, we are responsible for taking action to protect ourselves and others against harsh conditions.

In addition to these philosophical questions of permanence and impermanence, our classical texts raise the practical issue of whether one must own one's own sukkah and *arba'ah minim*. Although one does not need to own his own sukkah, two differing viewpoints on sukkah ownership reflect the tension many contemporary Jews feel between the ideal and realistic practice of their Judaism. In contrast, owning the *arba'ah minim* is mandatory. The *arba'ah minim* prompt us to contemplate what we truly "own" in our Judaism and how to deepen our relationship with our preferred rituals and practices.

The central biblical texts for determining whether or not one must own his sukkah are as follows: the previously-cited "You shall dwell in booths [*sukkot*] for seven days; every citizen in Israel shall dwell in booths[31]" and "You shall prepare for yourself the festival of Sukkot for seven days[32]". Two different interpretations of

[31] Leviticus 23:42; my own translation
[32] Deuteronomy 16:13, Koren Talmud translation

these verses appear in the gemara, defining two distinct conceptions of the experience of dwelling in the sukkah[33]. The majority of the rabbis interpret the first verse using a quirk[34] of the Hebrew spelling of the word "sukkot" to prove that one does not necessarily need to build and dwell in her own sukkah[35]—but rather, theoretically, that *all* Jewish people could share one single sukkah. The rabbis' vision of one gargantuan sukkah is clearly hyperbolic, and yet it still telegraphs a powerful image of family, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers packed in tightly to celebrate the holiday together. Rabbi Eliezer, conversely, offers an opinion based on the second verse that the seemingly superfluous phrase "for yourself" means that the sukkah must be one's own property, introducing a stricter reading on personal accountability and suggesting a rather solitary foil to the rabbis' interpretation. Further distinguishing Rabbi Eliezer's viewpoint from the rabbis', he also states that if one leaves his sukkah for someone else's sukkah, he has negated the mitzvah that he performed in the first sukkah[36]. In Rabbi Eliezer's opinion, in addition to needing one's own sukkah, one may not even *visit* another person's sukkah either. Rabbi Eliezer's conception of the sukkah describes a far more isolated Sukkot experience than the rabbis' boisterous image.

Although the rabbis' viewpoint prevails, Rabbi Eliezer's vision of the sukkah as one's own private dwelling could nonetheless add a different texture to the holiday. A Sukkot characterized by retreat and isolation would certainly underscore

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[33] BT Sukkah 27b
[34] In the biblical verse, the second vav of "sukkot" is omitted, making the plural form nonetheless appear similar to the singular form (Note in Koren translation, page 129)
[35] BT Sukkah 31a also notes that a borrowed sukkah, a stolen sukkah, and a sukkah made of stolen materials are permissible for use
[36] Ibid

and extend the introspection of the high holy days. Moreover, the sukkah itself could serve as a sort of cocoon as one contemplates and begins to enact the changes that she wished to make in the new year. Rather than flitting casually from sukkah to sukkah, one would remain safely at home, ensconced in the temporary vessel that would house her transition from who she had been to who she wished to be. Of course other family members would be present too, but pressure to don one's public-facing persona would be eliminated. The dismantling of the sukkah after the holiday would provide a cathartic moment of discarding the old and opening oneself to the new.

Perhaps, inspired by Rabbi Eliezer, contemporary Jews could re-conceptualize Sukkot as a critical period for planning and practicing how to make changes inspired by the high holy day experience. In contrast to the public nature of the synagogue worship of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot would then offer both time and space to be alone with one's thoughts. As a rabbi, I would love to teach introspective Sukkot as a compelling re-interpretation of the holiday, particularly since explaining that Sukkot is a harvest festival has painfully little resonance to most of our congregants. Anecdotally, I believe that most synagogue sukkot sit empty for the vast majority of the holiday—but perhaps suggesting to congregants that the sukkah is open to them as a space for quiet pondering might encourage a different clientele than the attendees of Sushi in the Sukkah or Pizza in the Hut.

Returning to the argument between the rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer, a fuller picture emerges of their disparate philosophies regarding the sukkah and its requirements. At issue is when the sukkah must be completed and how long it must last. Continuing to derive law from the two biblical verses cited above, the sages

interpret that while building a sukkah before the holiday is preferable, one can (and should) nonetheless construct a sukkah at any point until the very last minute of the holiday[37]. They establish no minimum amount of time that the sukkah must exist in order to be valid. Rabbi Eliezer, in contrast, believes that the sukkah must be completed before the holiday begins and is only valid if it may be used on all seven days[38]. As before, regarding ownership of the sukkah, Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation seems comparatively stricter than the rabbis': he demands more preparation and establishes firmer boundaries. For Rabbi Eliezer, there are clear rules defining exactly how to observe the mitzvah of sukkah with no articulated leeway. It seems that to the rabbis, the experience of the sukkah is more fungible, with considerable flexibility permitted in exactly how it is observed (for instance in a friend's sukkah, or in a sukkah built on the fourth day of the holiday).

Both parties, I believe, reach their conclusions based on reason and the fervent belief that they are accurately interpreting God's will. And yet in this text, I observe two different paradigms that characterize a struggle I have personally experienced and also noticed among other contemporary liberal Jews. For us, Judaism is frequently one of many competing priorities in our busy lives. I know that I often find myself deeply internally split between how I believe I *should* be observing a holiday, and how I find that I am realistically *able* to observe that holiday. The two opinions in the text articulate these alternate positions beautifully. Rabbi Eliezer presents the idealized vision for how a holiday or ritual "must" be observed—and if the conditions are not met, one misses his chance to participate.

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[37] Ibid
[38] Ibid

The rabbis, in contrast, espouse a vision far more accepting and supportive of the person who is exerting *some* effort to observe the holiday, even if they delayed or ultimately were forced to rely on a friend. I do not mean to suggest that the rabbis believe that they are compromising on matters of Jewish law, as this is definitely not the case. However, I nonetheless identify with the empirical result, if not the rationale, of the divergent readings of the biblical sources.

Even for Reform Jews who do not feel bound by the halachic imperative, the strict, Rabbi Eliezer-like voice within can be a strong force indeed. I readily identify with congregants in turmoil over feeling unable to enact a ritual in the way they believe to their core is correct. As an illustration, in one HUC class a visiting rabbi told us that a woman had approached her and told her that the rabbi had changed her life ten years prior when her children were young. What had the rabbi done? She had suggested that busy young families make their lives easier by serving takeout pizza at family Shabbat dinners. The woman had been so consumed—and overwhelmed—by her belief about what Shabbat dinner had to look like (homemade chicken soup served against the backdrop of a sparkling clean home) that she needed permission from the rabbi to even *consider* another way of doing it. The rabbi, in the method of the rabbis of the gemara, offered an alternative practice to the ideal that the woman had internalized. The woman embraced the rabbi's suggestion, freeing her to actually enjoy her Shabbat dinner rather than fretting about what it was not. As a Reform rabbi I have the opportunity to open these doors and suggest "imperfect" or creative ways to practice Judaism, and I am fairly comfortable doing so—it is when I will have to emulate Rabbi Eliezer and draw the line of what is *not* acceptable in my community that provides the greater challenge.

I believe that all of the details of sukkah building explored in the conflict between the rabbis and Rabbi Eliezer point to the broader issue of ownership of the sukkah. The person who carefully considers how to construct the sukkah, purchases the materials, and sets aside the time to build it before the holiday begins will necessarily have a different relationship with her sukkah than the one who hurries to get supplies the afternoon of the holiday and finds herself building into the night and the next day as well. Both, I would hope, would benefit from the experience of engaging with the intricacies of the holiday. The first person, though, knew she was going to make a sukkah and prioritized her life in order to make it happen: she fully owned that sukkah at every point in the process. The second person might or might not have known that she was going to make a sukkah and then perhaps found that time had gotten away from her: for at least a brief period, it seems that the sukkah owns *her* during the frenzied building process.

This is the result when we do not take ownership and plan for things that are important to us: instead of us controlling them, they control us. This is not to say that we cannot regain control: indeed, this is what the rabbis advocate. For the harried mother, buying pizza was the solution that gave her back ownership of the Shabbat experience that she so valued but felt she could not implement correctly. As a rabbi, I hope to walk with my congregants in identifying our most beloved Jewish experiences, holidays, and traditions and working backward to make sure we take the time to enact them in a way that feels fitting. Considering beforehand our ideal celebration of a holiday—and then how to either enact that vision *or* modify our expectations—would do so much to eliminate the guilt many people seem to associate with their own (lack of) Jewish observance. Bringing our actions into

alignment with our beliefs about what matters delivers ownership of our Judaism back into our own hands. The gemara's preservation of both opinions illustrates the importance of both standpoints, regardless of who "wins." Rabbi Eliezer teaches us to invest in creating an ideal vision for living our Judaism. The rabbis teach us not to abandon the mission entirely simply because we cannot meet the vision. Although the text presents these paradigms as opposing choices, we as contemporary Jews live in constant negotiation between these two poles of observance.

In contrast to the question and debate regarding ownership of the sukkah, the gemara is quite firm that one must own her own *arba'ah minim*. Whereas the rabbis conceive of the sukkah as readily shareable, it seems that they intend shaking the *minim* to be an act of private devotion. The key biblical verse regarding the *minim* states "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a beautiful tree, branches of a date palm, and boughs of a dense-leaved tree, and willows of the brook[39]". Following the same principle that Rabbi Eliezer invokes when trying to argue for ownership of the sukkah, the gemara seizes upon the seemingly superfluous phrase "for yourselves" to prove that the *arba'ah minim* must be one's own property[40]. The gemara then explicitly prohibits using a borrowed (or stolen[41]) *arba'ah minim* for fulfilling the mitzvah[42].

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[39] Leviticus 23:40; Koren translation
[40] The emphasis on proper ownership applies only on the first day of the holiday (BT Sukkah 30a; MT Hilchot Lulav 8:1), since that is the only day biblically ordained for the shaking of the lulav whereas the other days were added by the rabbis. In the Reform context, which is not governed by strict observance of mitzvot, I consider the laws for the first day the richest and will limit my focus to them.
[41] BT Sukkah 29b
[42] BT Sukkah 30a

Yet pages and pages after this hard line is drawn, the rabbis offer a fascinating mitigating proposal[43]: the legal fiction of the gift, by which someone may actually fulfill the mitzvah without otherwise owning one's own *arba'ah minim* after all. Anyone who has the *arba'ah minim* may thus gift it to someone who does not on the condition that she return it afterward[44]. Despite initially articulating a very firm boundary on this issue, the gemara suddenly changes course and offers a compromise. The proposition sounds a bit dubious in that all parties involved are well aware that the *arba'ah minim* are not a *real* gift and will be promptly returned—but still the rabbis find sufficient meaning in enacting ownership for that brief moment to consider the act permissible in a way that simple borrowing is not.

What is the magic of the rabbis' system that makes the gift option valid but borrowing unacceptable? With a gift, I think, one is ultimately accountable only to oneself as sole proprietor rather than to someone else. In a borrowing situation, a new dimension is added to an existing relationship as two people become simultaneously invested in the same object. If the object becomes damaged, it might be clear who owes what to whom—or a delicate dance of responsibility, blame, and guilt might ensue. Moreover, though, I think most people have had the awkward experience of loaning something to a friend and then witnessing them using it in their presence. The lender's eyes tend to train themselves involuntarily to the object, while the borrower's eyes tend to train themselves involuntarily to the lender. Even if the dynamic is not inherently uncomfortable, it certainly constitutes a complicating distraction—which the rabbis skirt entirely by insisting on the formal gift.

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[43] BT Sukkah 41b
[44] Or, retroactively the mitzvah is not in fact fulfilled (BT Sukkah 41b)

Since the gift is a theoretical construct, its actual power to subvert the dynamics of a borrowing relationship are admittedly limited. Nonetheless, it seems that the rabbis are still making every effort to provide the recipient with a personal experience with the *arba'ah minim* that is unencumbered by a watchful lender stationed just a few feet away. Furthermore, if the *arba'ah minim* become damaged, it seems that the gift recipient bears full responsibility. The gift giver, alternatively, has renounced any claim to the gifted item. In my estimation, the rabbis want the person taking the *arba'ah minim* to feel uniquely and solely responsible to and for it—without the baggage of the interpersonal relationship interfering.

Care for the object itself is another layer to consider, particularly since it requires effort to properly preserve one's *arba'ah minim.* Any contemporary *arba'ah minim* owner can speak to his personal regimen for keeping the finicky willow even slightly fresh over the course of the holiday! Even though someone might treat a borrowed object better than something they own, I would argue that this is just as likely to result from the feeling of obligation to the *owner* than the feeling of obligation to the object. I can think of times when I have made an immense effort to fix or replace a borrowed object that was damaged under my care; however, I can also recall (with embarrassment) times when I have simply returned the damaged object in hopes that the person would not notice the problem. With a gift, however, only the owner can possibly be considered responsible for damage; there simply is no one else to hold responsible. I am reminded of the joys of babysitting as opposed to the challenges of parenthood: even the most devoted and competent babysitter leaves at the end of the session or calls the parents to come home and take charge if something out of the ordinary occurs. Only the parent or guardian feels the full

weight of permanent responsibility for the child. Similarly, though on a smaller scale, perhaps the rabbis want the person shaking the *arba'ah minim* to connect to them not just in that moment but also to feel responsible for their care before and after the service for all seven (or eight) days.

The rabbis' strong case for ownership of the *arba'ah minim* can serve as a helpful prompt for us to consider what we own in our Judaism, both literally and figuratively. What rituals, texts, songs, objects, do we comfortably inhabit—and actually use? What are the things that we have dropped from our proverbial rotation, left forlornly on the shelf and quite possibly destined for a giveaway pile in the not so distant future? What, conversely, have we wanted to learn, to try, to buy—and what are the fears or other barriers that have stopped us in the past? Continuing in the vein of high holy day introspection and self-assessment, perhaps Sukkot can offer a time to take an inventory of our Jewish practice as we begin the new year.

There are, of course, valid reasons for borrowing rather than owning. When someone first takes an interest in a practice, it makes perfect sense to approach a friend who already "owns" it and ask him about it and even to accept it on loan. I can very specifically remember trying on a friend's tefillin for the first time—of course I used someone else's before I even vaguely considered buying my own pair. There is no obligation to ultimately take on any given "borrowed" practice on as one's own, either. If, however, one continues to borrow after weeks, months, or years of exploration, perhaps the reluctance to "buy" demands some examination of fears or biases. If a person is interested enough to observe a practice but not willing to invest, Sukkot might be a fitting impetus to contemplate why.

In my experience, some of our borrowed rituals are taken on out of obligation to loved ones. Carrying out a tradition in Grandma's memory can be meaningful and lovely—or does it feel fundamentally borrowed, even when one is making the effort of performing it? Does sitting through Shabbat services to make Dad happy feel genuine enough to be tolerable? Perhaps the *arba'ah minim* can inspire us to consider creative ways to add ownership to practices we think we must do whether we like it or not. I cannot help but think of a cousin of mine whose grandfather died while he was in the process of studying for his bar mitzvah—and the bar mitzvah was summarily cancelled, revealing that the grandfather was apparently the sole driving force behind it. For that family, it seems, the ritual that they were dutifully enacting was nonetheless entirely borrowed. The *arba'ah minim* encourage us to find some stake of ownership in any practice we take on—and will inform my interactions with congregants eager to either add or discard Jewish practices from their lives.

The classical texts on Sukkot offer two schema of note for fostering a sense of ownership of the *arba'ah minim* through physical engagement—and these schema can be applied to other practices or objects as well. First, we learn that that adding ornamentation to beautify one's *arba'ah minim*[45] (and sukkah[46]) is permissible. This is a wonderful precedent to empower congregants to consider what would add beauty to the rituals in their lives. Encouraging them to apply their own definitions of beauty (whether found in the aesthetic, the intellectual, the communal, etc.) additionally might help congregants integrate their general interests into their Jewish practice. Building these connections between congregants' passions and their

[45] BT Sukkah 37b; MT Hilchot Lulav 7:11.
[46] BT Sukkah 10b

Judaism helps sidestep the pitfall of placing one's Jewish life in a silo so it is only relevant at the synagogue or on specific days of the year. The texts on beautification moreover seem to me to encourage manipulation of the *arba'ah minim* that necessarily brings one closer to them[47]. Continuing to use the *arba'ah minim* as a metaphor for any given practice, I love this image of a delightfully tangible Judaism that we *should* touch and adorn—and will, in the process, draw nearer to it.

The second example of physical engagement entails taking a maximalist view of the role of the *arba'ah minim* on Sukkot, over and above the brief mitzvah of shaking them every day. The gemara vividly recalls how the people of Jerusalem would leave their homes in the morning with their *arba'ah minim* in their hands; go to the synagogue and pray with their *arba'ah minim* in their hands; visit the sick and comfort the mourners with their *arba'ah minim* in their hands—and only when they entered the *beit midrash*, the place of Jewish study, would they send their *arba'ah minim* home[48]. Not only would they spend hours of the day with the *arba'ah minim nearby*, but the text repeatedly emphasizes the physical engagement of specifically holding them in one's hands. How would it change our behavior or stimulate our thinking about a Jewish practice to give a ritual object (or proxy object to remind us of the practice) additional or unexpected real estate in our homes or our lives? Might, for instance, we react differently to daily household annoyances if we placed our Shabbat candlesticks in a prominent place in the home? Might we subsequently

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[47] MT Hilchot Lulav 7:11 allows putting decorative rings or a decorative cloth on the *arba'ah minim* but prohibits placing them in a planter or pot; I believe that the permitted activities encourage physical handling and closeness with the *minim* while the prohibited modifications would place a strong barrier between the *minim* and their owner.

[48] BT Sukkah 41b

view those same candlesticks with a new degree of familiarity and ownership when employing them to light Shabbat candles? I am reminded of a story found in the book *Building a Successful Volunteer Culture*[49]. The author, a rabbi, tells his congregation that there is a problem with the synagogue building so the Torah scroll cannot remain there; his solution is to suggest that they all take turns bringing the Torah home each night. Dubious morality of this experiment aside, the rabbi raves about the impact that the Torah's presence in their homes had on his congregants. Bringing a Jewish item into one's physical space, even and explicitly outside its ordained use, can foster feelings of ownership as well.

Sukkot, particularly its observance by dwelling in the sukkah and shaking the *arba'ah minim*, engages issues of permanence and impermanence as well as ownership. The sukkah challenges us to make the permanent impermanent while the *arba'ah minim* challenge us to make the impermanent permanent. The sukkah asks us to consider our attachments to material and immaterial things, encouraging us to live in the moment and embrace the change that impermanence fosters. The *arba'ah minim*, in contrast, force us to confront our own mortality and pay attention to death. Even while acknowledging that all things are impermanent, the *minim* nonetheless offer two important lessons for how to live in the meantime: be moral and protect the vulnerable. The question of ownership of the sukkah and the *arba'ah minim* has tremendous possible implications for our year-round practice of Judaism. The sukkah can inspire us to think ahead and contemplate our ideal and realistic

[49] Rabbi Charles Simon, *Building a Successful Volunteer Culture: Finding Meaning in Service in the Jewish Community* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 42-45.

ritual participation—and to plan in advance so that we own our Judaism and it does not own us. The *arba'ah minim* can lead us to consider what we already own and what is borrowed, and how we can enact ownership through beautification of our rituals and simple physical presence. Sukkot's powerful physical symbols and temporal setting following the high holy days provide ample opportunity for guiding our congregants in deepening their Jewish practice in the new year and evermore.

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