Sanctuary Sukkah Toolkit: 2019 Edition

Sukkot, with its emphasis both on welcoming guests and on embracing the fragility of our lives, offers the perfect time to focus on immigrants’ rights and sanctuary work. This toolkit contains the following resources to support your community in doing so:

- Text study on Sanctuary Sukkah
- Text Companion, fleshing out the thinking behind the texts
- Suggestions for public programming
- Suggestions for home activities
Sanctuary Sukkah Text Study

1. Vayikra 23:42-43

You shall dwell in sukkot for seven days—every native-born in Israel shall dwell in sukkot. So that your descendants will know that I gave the Israelites sukkot to dwell in when I took them out of the land of Egypt—I the ETERNAL your God.

For discussion: This text connects the meaning of the sukkah to a very specific time, the Exodus, and to the obligation of memory. Why do we use the sukkah to trigger memory? What role does historical memory (real or revisionist) play in today’s conversations about immigration? What (if any) bearing does historical memory have on our actions today?

2. Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 2a

/Mishnah/ A sukkah that is taller than 20 cubits is invalid. Rabbi Yehudah allows it.

/Gemara/ Where do you get that?...Rava says: From “you shall dwell in sukkot for seven days.” The Torah is saying: For these seven days, leave your permanent/regular residence and dwell in a temporary/improvised residence.

For discussion: How is Rava’s conception of sukkah different from that in Vayikra? What might it say about contemporary immigration? How are Rava’s implications different from those suggested by the Vayikra text?

3. Shnei Luchot HaBrit (ShLaH), Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565?-1630, Prague/Germany/Israel), Masechet Sukkah, Derech Chayim Tochachat Mussar

In the Menorat HaMeor (Candle 3, part 4, chapter 1; Spain, 14th century, Rabbi Isaac Aboab) is found a piece of ethical teaching regarding sukkah, as follows:

When the Talmud says (Sukkah 2a), “Go out from your permanent/regular residence and dwell in a temporary/improvised residence,” their intention was that the mitzvah of sukkah teaches us not to place our confidence in the height of our houses, their strength, or their good upkeep—even if they are full of all good things. Likewise we should not trust in the aid of any person, even if he should be the lord of all the land and its ruler. Rather, we should place

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1 Thank you to Rabbi Victor Reinstein for teaching us this text.
our confidence in the One Who Spoke and the world came into being, for only [God] has power and faith; what God promises, God does not renege on, as it says in Numbers (23:19), “God is not human, to be capricious...”, and [the power to] shelter belongs solely to God...

In order to awaken a person to this, the mitzvah of sukkah comes at the end of harvest-time in Israel...when the store-rooms are full of good things, and people have [left their fields and] gone into the cities to fix their roofs and check their walls so they will be protected from rain, wind, and other harms. Therefore [the Torah] commands us to leave our strong homes and dwell in the sukkah, so that we awaken and place our trust in the Holy Blessed One, and know within our hearts that all the good that we have comes to us by the will of God. This is why it is hinted that the sukkah should be built from the refuse of the field and vineyard, to remind us that we have harvested the food we eat...

...And I will tell you that my heart always burns when I see the people of Israel building houses like the castles of princes, making for themselves a permanent dwelling in this world upon the tainted earth...as if this were the inheritance they should give to their children, and their children’s children, for all eternity...Therefore, if God gives you great wealth, build houses according to your needs and not more. Do not build towers and walls in pride and grandeur, only a dignified dwelling-place with a room in it to be alone for the purpose of Torah study and repentance...

For discussion: The ShLaH builds on Rava’s reasoning and explicitly extends the sukkah’s lesson to our behavior year-round. What does his teaching say to you about the way in which we live in the world? About immigration and sanctuary in particular?

4. Devarim 24:16

Parents shall not be put to death for their children, and children shall not be put to death for their parents; each person shall be put to death [only] for their own sin.

For discussion: Deportation is not execution (although some young immigrants are sent “back” to places of violence where they may have no networks or coping skills) and being undocumented is not a sin (nor even a crime; “improper entry” is a criminal offense but, having entered legally, overstaying a visa is a civil violation). Even with these caveats, how does the core message of this text resonate for you today?
Text Companion

Here we outline some of the thinking behind our choice of texts below. We of course welcome you to build on our ideas, disagree with our interpretations, and add your own texts to the mix.

Text 1, from Vayikra, roots our observance of Sukkot in the Israelites’ desert wandering. This conjures up, for us, images of rebelling against Pharaoh, a role reversal between the powerless and the powerful, and the divine shelter in the desert. It speaks specifically to a Jewish memory, which may conjure up more recent history of Jews being immigrants and refugees. Does that make us more sympathetic to the plight of today’s immigrants? Does it, in fact, place a moral obligation on us to stand as allies with them?

Text two, from the Talmud, generalizes the meaning of sukkah by framing it in terms of permanent vs temporary, categories than everyone can relate to, rather than locating it specifically in a Jewish narrative. This leads us to ask ourselves what is permanent and what is temporary in our lives today. What is permanent or enduring about America, and what is not? Who gets to define that? It is also worth exploring the Hebrew, especially keva (permanent/regular), with its associations of “Make your Torah study keva” and its tension with kavannah in the arena of prayer. Is there a way in which we need to get out of our rote thinking and behavior when it comes to immigration and tap into something more inspiring, or is the opposite true, that we must turn our occasional moments of sympathy for immigrants into a keva of allyhood?

The long text from the ShLaH raises many interesting points of connection to today’s immigration policies. Our intention is not to tell immigrants in danger of deportation simply to trust in God, but rather to make all of us consider how we try to create security for ourselves, which of these attempts at security actually make us secure, and what it means for America to be or to become a great nation. Alternatively, what does it mean to trust in God if we think of ourselves as God’s agents of change in the world? More broadly speaking, what are America’s needs, and how do we meet them without excess?

Text four is meant almost as a coda, in light of the cancellation of DACA, family separation, and child detention. What are other ways that our society punishes children for the crimes of their parents, and what can you imagine would happen if we made a collective decision to stop doing so? For more background on the distinction between illegal entry and being undocumented, this article from the Marshall Project offers a helpful Q&A: https://www.themarshallproject.org/2019/06/27/decoding-the-border-law-democrats-are-debating

Finally, how does this series of texts and the discussion that arises out of them shape one’s experience of sitting in the sukkah? (And vice versa: how does sitting in the sukkah affect the way one reads these texts?) Do they create any shift either in your experience of Sukkot or your level of engagement in immigration issues and sanctuary work?
Suggestions for public programming

You might do one or more of the following in combination:

- Invite an immigrant-led church or mosque to share a meal in your sukkah.
- Study interfaith texts together about hospitality, accompaniment, or immigration. See samples in T’ruah’s Mikdash Handbook (www.truah.org/mikdash)
- Host a children’s program in the sukkah that focuses on songs, arts and crafts, and other simple ways to connect. Kids arrive with a grown-up and also provide easy common ground to begin building relationships among those grown-ups.
- Invite congregants to share their family immigration stories. This can be done orally (perhaps even in a setting inspired by The Moth Radio Hour) or through writing and pictures that congregants create and hang in the sukkah.
- Invite supportive elected officials from local or state government to address the assemblage. Think about a representative from the mayor or governor’s office, city councilmembers, or state legislators. Supportive officials want to be able to tell stories of how their constituents care about immigrants’ rights.
- Invite press. Make whatever event you do into a story that can inspire other people.

Suggestions for home activities

- Hang T’ruah’s Sanctuary Mezuzah and/or Prayer for Welcoming Ushpizin (spiritual guests) in your sukkah as a decoration.
- Share your family’s immigration stories, between generations or across sides of the family.
- Invite a neighbor, colleague, or community member who is involved in immigrant justice work to share a meal in your sukkah.
- When you shake the lulav, think about the symbolism of welcoming people from the four corners of the earth.