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### **Undercover: The Halachos of Schach**

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When our *Torah* speaks about the Festival of *Sukkos* it states "*Chag HaSukkos Taaseh Lecha B'Aspecha Migornecha U'Miyikvecha.*"<sup>1</sup> The *Sukkos* holiday should be observed at the time that you harvest your grain and your wine, during the fall. Our *Chachamim*, our sages, have taught us that this verse has another esoteric meaning. The *sukkos*, the huts in which we dwell during this festival, should be made from the unused parts of the harvesting grain and wine, namely the stalks of grain and twigs of the vine. These are the items that should be used for the *schach*, which is placed on top of the *sukkah* instead of a permanent roof.

Our Rabbis have further taught that this *schach* directive includes other items that are similar to stalks and twigs, *pesoles goren v'yekev*, that are no longer attached to the ground and cannot become ritually impure, *tamei*. Unfinished wood slats, corn stalks, and palm branches are popular varieties that satisfy the criteria for *schach*.

Many natural materials are not qualified to be used for *schach*. Leather is a natural product that does not grow from the ground; neither do cement or natural materials such as metal. None of these may be used for *schach*. All types of foods are not kosher material for *schach*. Included in this *halachic* directive are grain husks that have some grains remaining in the husks. Wood products that are cut and shaped into vessels, utensils, or equipment that have a hollow, would not qualify for *schach* because these products can become *tamei*. Furthermore, even if the wood vessels were to be broken and unfit for their original use and can no longer become *tamei*, they remain disqualified.

Although hollow bent wooden pipes would not be kosher for *schach*, hollow bamboo poles would be kosher because they grow hollow naturally, and were not fashioned by anyone with the intention of putting things into their hollow. Similarly, straight wooden pipes without indentations would be kosher, as well as wooden beams, even those with imperfections in the wood. However, the custom is not to use them.

Stems that are used for *schach* must be in their original state and cannot be subject to further processing. For example, wood is kosher, paper is not. Flax stems are kosher, flax rope is not. Cotton wool which has been combed out and no longer resembles the natural cotton plant, would no longer qualify for *schach*.

Flax rope is problematic for another reason. According to *Rashi*, if the linen fibers were twisted into threads and braided into rope they are *posul min HaTorah*. The *Torah* disqualifies them as it does any other woven material.

Branches of a tree cannot be used for *schach* if the branches are still connected to their original source. If the branch was still connected to the tree while covering the *sukkah* and was then cut down, the branch would still be disqualified unless a person lifted the branch and then replaced it on the *sukkah* with the intention of using the branch for *schach*. Our Rabbis have taught us that *schach* which has an unpleasant odor should preferably not be used. Use of *schach* that has a pervasive foul smell is forbidden. Kosher *schach* has to

tamai: unclean,  
defiled, impure

remain fresh throughout the entire *chag*. Branches with leaves that will dry out during *Sukkos* or vines that will shrivel are disqualified, and are not kosher even while the leaves are still fresh.

Kosher *schach* material must be placed on top of the *sukkah* with the intention of being used for *schach*. One cannot place kosher *schach* material on top of the *sukkah* with the intention to drying the material and then change his mind in the course of the drying process and use it for *schach*. To this end, the *halacha* forbids the use of bundled *schach* if they are generally subject to drying. Moreover, our Rabbis forbade the use of this bundled kosher *schach*, even if it was intended for *schach*. This restriction applies to bundles of 25 sticks or more that are tied in the middle or at both ends.

How wide can the boards be to qualify as kosher *schach*? One may use boards that are less than 4 *tefachim* (14") wide. Even if wider boards would be set on their sides, these boards would not be kosher. It is the custom not to use narrower finished wood planks generally used in construction, as well.

As was stated previously, the criteria for *schach* is three fold: Items that grow from the ground, items which are no longer attached to the ground, and items that cannot become *tamei*. Reeds, straw, or wooden slats that are woven into mats would not qualify for *schach* if they were woven for the purpose of sitting or sleeping on or any other specific function. However, if they were made expressly for *schach*, these mats would be kosher.

Are bamboo mats that are held together with other materials such as string or yarn kosher? HaRav Moshe Feinstein zt"l ruled on venetian blinds that were made out of wooden slats and were held together with cloth tape, which is *mekabel tumah*, that these blinds are not kosher. Even if the tape were removed, the slats remain non-kosher and are disqualified for *schach*. Based on Rav Moshe's reasoning, even if a mat was manufactured for no specific reason, since the slats were held together by cloth tape, the mats would be considered an item that is *mekabel tumah* and could not, *halachically*, be used for *schach*. Mats held together with braided nylon filament thread would be disqualified for the same reason, since they are considered woven, according to *Rashi*. However, monofilament line would not be disqualified for this reason, because a monofilament line merely holds the slats together and is not woven. Therefore, if the wooden mats were made for *schach* using monofilament line, the mats would be kosher.<sup>2</sup>

A kosher monofilament mat must be placed on the *sukkah* in the proper manner. The following guidelines must be followed. The bamboo slats should be placed perpendicular to the beams and walls upon which they rest. In other words, if the monofilament line (which does not qualify as *schach*) is supporting the slats, the mat has been placed down improperly. One may not suspend *schach* with non-*schach* material. Furthermore, *schach* mats must not be anchored with string so that the mat won't blow away in a normal wind (a *ruach metzuya*), for the same reason string, which is an improper *schach* material, cannot be used for anchoring. Instead, a kosher wooden beam can be placed across the mat to hold it down.

Can kosher mats contain more than 25 slats, or would the mat be considered a bundle (*chavila*)? Since the mat does not need to be dried, it can contain more than 25 slats.

There is a Rabbinical question whether one can support the *schach* with something that is not kosher for *schach*. Therefore, one should not support the *schach* with anything that can become *tamei*, i.e. metal rods or pipes. Also, one cannot use metal to weigh down the *schach* so that it will not blow off with an ordinary wind. One may, however, hold down the support with something that is not kosher for *schach*. If the *schach* is supported by wooden beams, which are there to strengthen the *schach* so that it shouldn't blow away in an unusual wind, then nails or string can be used as a support to the beams.

How much *schach* should be used to cover the *sukkah*? The amount required is determined by the amount necessary to shade the *sukkah*. The *schach* must be dense enough so that there should not be more sunlight than shade. However, it cannot be so dense that the rain would not be able to fall into the *sukkah*.

We have just mentioned some of the *dinim* of *schach*. There are many more *halachos* however, this article does not allow for a more elaborate discussion. In case of questions a *halachic* authority should be consulted.

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* help us fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* properly, and may we merit to see with our own eyes that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* spread His tabernacle of peace over us, the entire Jewish nation, and *Yerushalayim*.

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1. Devarim 16:13

2. In Hilchos Sukkah (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 629:1) it is written that schach cannot consist of something that is "mekabel tumah." It is for this reason that bamboo carpet mats cannot be used for schach. In addition, l'chatchila, kosher schach may not be supported by anything which is mekabel tumah (see Rama, O.C. 629:7). According to the opinion of Rashi (as brought in Shaar Hatziyun 629:20), spun or woven threads (e.g. string, yarn) are mekabel tumah. Rav Moshe Feinstein states (Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:177) based on a Mishna, if something which is mekabel tumah is used to hold wooden slats together, the slats themselves are also mekabel tumah and are no longer kosher for schach use. Therefore, Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that wooden venetian blinds held together with something woven are not kosher for schach. It follows that according to Rashi, bamboo slats held together by multi-filament cord (i.e. it is braided or twisted) are also not kosher schach (even if they are not made to sit or walk on).

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