

Sukkot 5772 - Universal Sukkah

Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom. *Hag Sukkot Sameah.*

How many of you have been to Grace Chapel?

Located right in the middle of town, Grace Chapel is one of the largest Evangelical churches in all of New England.

Since I had the pleasure of taking Bryan Wilkerson, Grace Chapel's senior pastor, (and they have seventeen ministers!) to Israel in the summer of 2010, I got to know him and wanted to visit his church on a Sunday when they have thousands of worshippers.

It was a little weird to get up on a Sunday to go to church instead of shul, but that's what I did!

After davening at home, I drove over. The welcome was unbelievable. There was parking available at Lexington High School if you were simply a regular church goer, but I was new, so I received the VIP treatment for first-timers, which meant I drove right up to the church and got to park right in front.

The fun didn't end there. There were greeters all along the way, volunteers on the street, volunteers in the parking lot, and volunteers as you walked into the building. One of these volunteers came right up to me and greeted me as I exited my car. He told me with a big smile, "Welcome, we're so glad you are here for the first time." Then he handed me a welcome packet with information, a brochure, and inside was a \$5 coupon for use at the church's coffee shop.

Woah.

Having toured the church with my clergy association, I had already seen the impressive focus on welcoming and greeting, which is so central to building community and to helping people feel comfortable in any space.

One of the things that I was most impressed with was their children's center. You can drop off your child, and they give you a beeper so that you can feel entirely comfortable leaving the child since, if something goes wrong, they page you. It's also an unbelievable facility with games and activities for every age including mini-rooms that young children can explore.

But I had never actually seen this church in action. There were hundreds and hundreds of people there; you could feel the vibrancy and dynamism of the community. This was a church that went to great lengths to make everyone under their roof feel at home.

Visiting other places of worship is a valuable experience, both to learn and to deepen our understanding of others. By exploring the differences between other faiths and our own, we can shed light on our own tradition.

Since Christianity and Judaism share much in common, there is a lot to learn. Over the years, I have visited different churches – usually for meetings.

Just last week I was in a new church for the first time, the St. Paul Evangelical Church. I had never been to this church, and they were hosting our monthly clergy luncheon for the first time.

These are wonderful get-togethers where we eat lunch together, share with each other what's going on in our lives, what's going on with us professionally and in our communities, and then learn more about our area through speakers. These gatherings offer much support and collegiality for pastors and clergy from disparate backgrounds.

Sometimes we bring in a guest to present or we enjoy a learning session where we study text and our traditions. Over the last eight years, we have also held two two-day retreats where our clergy members have really intensified their connections to each other.

I had driven by St. Paul Evangelical Church dozens of times, right on Lowell Street. On your way up to Burlington, there is a new building, built ten years ago, just a couple of years before our beautiful space was built. Inside we enjoyed a lovely lunch that several of the church members had

prepared (don't worry, they made me a beautiful tuna sandwich and salad – there was plenty of Kosher food to eat!)

Most of our meeting was focused on how to help those in need in our community, such our Lexington Clergy Association's voucher program, which provides emergency funds to people in need for food or gasoline, as well as learning about some of the other programs in our area to help seniors and others who are hungry.

But I always enjoy the experience of sitting in someone else's place of worship, especially a group that is different from me.

Sometimes I think about the difference between our world today and our world just a couple of generations ago. There was no way my grandparents ever went into a church. My father's parents, living in the Bronx, had no reason to go to a church, and previous generations would have followed a more restrictive understanding of Judaism – one which prohibits even entering a church.

Thankfully, today we are more lenient, and I can sit in a church and have lunch, and they even care enough to make me a special tuna sandwich so that I can eat something that's Kosher. It's an unbelievable world; can one imagine having evangelical churches preparing kosher lunches for rabbis? These values of universalism, which I spoke about at Kol Nidre last week are truly part of our world.

Sukkot is the first universal holiday. The Talmud teaches (Sukkah 55b) and Rabbi Eliezer said, "Why are 70 offerings brought on Sukkot? (For the) 70 nations of the world."

Vegetarians, I apologize, but these 70 sacrifices must have been quite a sight.

On the first day, there are thirteen bulls, two rams and fourteen yearling lambs, in addition to grain offerings, another goat, the regular burnt offering, its grain offering and libation.

Each day most of those same sacrifices occurred again, except one fewer bulls, so that it went 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8 and on the last day, the seventh day, there were seven bulls.

This is quite different from any other festival, and the numbers are staggering: 98 lambs, 70 bulls. Compare this with Pesah, which has only 16 bulls, and no other holiday requires more than two.

The Talmud picks up on this thread, connecting it to an understanding that there were approximately 70 nations in the world. Thus, each one of these offerings must be connected to one of the nations.

This universalistic interpretation places Israel as a bridge. Traditionally, animals were brought as a way of apologizing, of saying you're sorry, of making up for something, in addition to displaying gratitude and thanksgiving.

Rashi explains this: "To bring forgiveness for them (the 70 nations which comprised the world) so that rain shall fall all over the world."

Whereas the other festivals – like Pesah and Shavuot – represent particular events in the history of the Jewish people, Sukkot has a different perspective.

Think about it: Pesah is our Exodus, the emergence of the Jewish people; receiving God's revelation, the core of the Torah, is Shavuot's yearly task.

According to Rashi, Sukkot is concerned with how much rain there will be on the entire planet; in essence it is concerned with the welfare of all the people of the world. All these animals are supposed to bring rain, not just for Israel, but for everyone.

The Haftarah for the first day of Sukkot picked up this theme. Writing after the Babylonian exile around the year 500 BCE, Zekhariah sees a day of doom and judgment coming to the world.

Jerusalem is at the center of this vision, and he sees a universal pilgrimage where all peoples will stream to the holy city.

There will be wars, but after them, Adonai will be recognized as the one universal God of the world, and then all people will be ready to celebrate the festival of Sukkot together in Jerusalem.

“And it shall come to pass that everyone that is left of all the nations that came up against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, *Adonai Tz’vaot* (the Lord of Hosts), and to observe the festival of Sukkot.” (Zekhariah 14:16)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a nineteenth-century rabbi, philosopher, and a leader of modern Orthodox Judaism, claimed that the Sukkah binds all of humanity into a single brotherhood.

One may not move into a Sukkah with thoughts only of one’s own destiny, unless one moves into the Sukkah as a person of the world – being bound into the fellowship that encompasses all of humanity, united under the Divine, freed from the worship of any other object.

In addition, the Sukkah is an experience in nature – certainly a universal experience since all humanity inhabits this planet.

In peace and fellowship, we will all be united, and the Eternal One, and God’s eternal values will be respected by all who dwell in the world.

So on this universal holiday, let us look for ways to reach out to those of other faiths and traditions. If you have a Sukkah, perhaps invite over people who aren’t Jewish, so that they can get a sense of this ancient festival. This is time to bring in others, to feel that sense of God’s love and shelter as we dwell in the Sukkah.

The world currently is greatly divided as we see the rise of religious fundamentalism in many places in the world. The attack on the mosque in Northern Israel represents a small but real fringe group of Judaism that has become radicalized, which we all need to speak out against.

Unfortunately, we see fundamentalism throughout the world. This can result in denying evolution, burning down Mosques, and suicide bombings in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, not to mention Israel.

But if we could share a vision with the world of a space where we could all come together, break bread, share stories, and find our common humanity, we might be able to transform the world.

By the way, we are working on an Interfaith Israel trip with Temple Isaiah and four local churches to do just that – to gain new insights into other faiths and traditions.

Let us use this festival of Sukkot to open ourselves up to others. Let us try to be as welcoming as my experience at Grace Chapel so that we can move the world and all peoples just a little closer to the vision of a sukkat shalom – a universal Sukkah of peace.

Shabbat Shalom and *Hag Sukkot Sameah*.