

Where We Find Ourselves

Jewish Women around the World Write about Home



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My Iranian Sukkah

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Every year after Yom Kippur, my husband Norman and I try to bring together the pieces of our sukkah, our temporary home for a week, a reminder of our frailty as Jews. Every year we wonder where we had last stored the metal frame, the bamboo roof, and the decorations. Every year we wonder about the weather. Will we have to dodge the raindrops and the wind once again this year for a quick *bracha* before eating inside? Will our sukkah stand up? Will there be a hurricane?

I insisted on building a sukkah the first time we had a yard. My husband protested that it would never last in Portsmouth, Virginia, remembering the sukkahs of his childhood and youth in that town, when his father, Milton, struggled to balance the wobbly structure in the more protected area outside the living room. Every year, my father-in-law had to bring it down in the middle of the holiday, fearing that strong winds from one hurricane or another would topple the sukkah against the building, bringing down bricks, glass, and the roof shingles.

In Iran of my youth, we had no such worries. Every year, a month before the holiday, my father ordered four young trees from the town's wood supplier. He made sure they were cut to the exact height and had the two largest branches trimmed in a V, like two hands ready to catch a ball. Nails and screws being forbidden in

building a sukkah, the V on top of each tree supported the trunks of narrower ones to shape the skeleton of our sukkah.

My father and uncles worked diligently to tie the supporting beams with sturdy ropes, which again and again they wrapped around the connecting branches, making strong knots. They removed four tiles from the paved yard, dug deep, put the poles in and poured cement around them. Had we had hurricane winds, that sukkah would have remained sturdy and protected against the tall wall that separated us from our Muslim neighbors. We didn't worry about our sukkah coming down. It was sturdy even though sukkahs are supposed to be unsteady, moving to the rhythm of the wind.

It seems that every sukkah my husband and I made in Virginia came tumbling down. We tried different designs: wooden poles set in cinder blocks from the *Jewish Catalog*, four by fours set in holes in imitation of my father's; but none withstood the winds that uprooted them. Once my engineer brothers built the strongest sukkah we had ever had. But as we sat there sipping cardamom tea and cracking roasted watermelon seeds between our teeth, the sukkah tilted and went down in one piece. It held together nicely, and the walls and decorations were still intact, but it was uninhabitable.

We kept building different models of sukkahs. Our latest is a fabricated one bought from a sukkah Web site. It is generic, similar to many other sukkahs that go up in the neighborhood and around the country. It doesn't have the flavor of our sukkahs past, but it has proved to be sturdier although it shakes and loses its roof once in a while to strong winds.

In the city of my birth, Shiraz, our sukkah never came down from a natural disaster. Being very far away from any body of water, we didn't have weather disturbances like Virginia hurricanes. In the desert climate, no one had ever seen our dry river overflow to the city even during unusual storms. Strong winds never came in the fall; the weather was pleasant, sometimes a bit chilly at night under the star-studded sky. We huddled together, all of us who lived in our

large communal home: my parents and siblings, my married uncle and his family, my grandmother, a single uncle and another aunt.

Long ago, in another country, another time, my father and uncles competed with the rest of the community, as everyone bragged about their larger sukkahs and their more beautiful walls made of handmade rugs. Every year, a traveling merchant stopped by our house before the holiday with a new supply of kilims, flat woven carpets with geometric designs in the bright colors of the desert mountains streaked with minerals. On the gray bricks that paved our yard, the salesman displayed the carpets like a magical quilt, like Jacob's coat of many colors. And when we examined them closely, lost among the triangles and shooting lines were bits and pieces of flat bread, dates, and long-grained rice from the lunch the village women and their daughters had eaten just a few hours earlier after they had finished tying the last knots on the loom—sitting cross-legged with wool and silk underneath their fingernails. We gladly gave the merchant our old carpets in exchange, happy to purge ourselves of the old, not realizing their value.

My mother complained that her beautiful silk shawls and scarves were being ruined as my father confiscated them to decorate the upper edges of the hanging kilims under the palm leaves of the roof as if the sukkah was a *bejleb*, a bridal canopy. My father couldn't stop smiling as he finished hanging the silk scarves woven with designs of paisleys, cypress trees gracefully bending into the wind, the symbol of our city. Such beauty!

In Virginia, for the walls of our sukkah, my husband experimented with blue tarp that dried quickly after a rain shower but kept the heat in mixed with the smell of plastic. We draped our temporary home with colorful sheets that were weighted down with rain and pinned *shanab-tovab* cards from family and friends in imitation of Norman's past sukkahs, a custom his mother, Florence, remembered and suggested. My parents' cards from their exile in Israel were always the most beautiful, with Hebrew and Persian inscriptions,

with roses and singing nightingales shining underneath white and pink glitter, laced with memories of a lost past that I once tried to forget, but now yearn to revive.

In Iran, Sukkoth was fun for us children. We made conical containers with construction paper and cheap glue, and filled them with a mixture of ground roasted chickpea flour and sugar—lots of sugar. After the holiday, as we watched the men dismantle the sukkah, we tore the tips of the cones to enjoy their grainy sweetness with a cup of jasmine tea. We competed with other cousins in making the nicest decorations: lanterns made with sticks and colorful strings, clusters of pomegranates still clinging to their branches and leaves, small round watermelons, boiled eggs painstakingly crisscrossed with hand-painted strings, quince that would end up in a stew with tomatoes and yellow plums, and unripe persimmons that slowly softened as the holiday progressed—their flesh gooey, bright orange, and mouthwatering—a sukkah demolition treat.

In Virginia, after the holiday ended, there were no treats from the sukkah for my daughters when they were young. The plastic grapes and apples went in a basket for another year. The chain made of construction paper, of hours of laughter and fun, sat limp and colorless on top of the pile of pine tree branches that we had used for *sekbag*, a roof covering that oozed and dropped brown and green needles on our plates of eggplant stew over basmati rice.

Over the years, I tried to emulate my Iranian sukkahs past. I taught my daughters how to string fruit that rotted halfway through the holiday and dropped on white shirts, well-groomed hair, and flowery silk skirts as we entertained friends with sweet round challahs and honey. Apples, red, green, and yellow, adorning our sukkah like precious stones, attracted bugs and bees that stung a little girl with green eyes and honey-color hair—a little girl my daughter Yaeli had invited along with her Hebrew Academy class to stop by on their sukkah-hopping journey to munch on candy and chips.

For the school visit, my daughters had made sure I wouldn't serve something so terrible as fruit and a plate of roasted chickpeas

and raisins. It was bad enough that in their lunch boxes they found plain yogurt mixed with grated cucumbers and crushed dried mint instead of the sweet fruit yogurts their friends devoured. Their classmates stared as my daughters unwrapped pita stuffed with meat and potato patties, scallion and cilantro, and dates instead of cookies and candy. The girls loved the food but their friends noticed their differences, their hybrid blood that set them apart. Therefore, for the second-grade visitors, I removed from the sukkah the roasted watermelon and squash seeds, the rice cookies sprinkled with rose water. Instead, I served them caffeine-free sodas and store-bought chocolate chip cookies that I covered with autumn-color napkins. But the bees arrived in their yellow armor, usurping the place, oblivious to the children who, screaming and crying, surrendered the sukkah.

We soon learned to replace the pomegranates, persimmons, and quinces with little fall gourds and Indian corn, produce I had never known in my Iranian life, but which didn't entice the bugs. In Iran, we had saved the pomegranates from our sukkah to mix with the *kboroset* for Passover, carrying our Jewish life from one holiday to the other. In America, although I buy them in the fall before Sukkoth, they appear as guests only in the sukkah, to be saved in the refrigerator for the spring holiday of Passover.

For years, I struggled to transport my childhood memories of the holiday to my adopted homeland, to share them with my children who dream of visiting Iran as they have become young women. When I told my daughters of the colorful sukkahs that went up all around Shiraz in the secluded ghetto, behind the privacy walls of Jewish homes, and in my own backyard in a Muslim neighborhood, they made plans to travel to Iran. They made plans to visit the ancient cemetery in Shiraz to pay respect to the tombs of their paternal great grandparents, whose eyes follow them from the picture frames by the Shabbat candles at home. They made plans to visit the tombs of Esther and Mordechai in Hamedan, my mother's hometown. Building their dream travels, they turned to me, "Why

didn't you teach us Farsi?" they asked. I regretted that by distancing myself from my heritage, by wanting to discard my Iranian past for many years, I had denied both my children and my parents the pleasures of verbal communication.

I am amazed that my daughters have created such unrealistic dreams to connect with my country of birth, the country I had so desperately tried to escape, to forget. I tell them not now. I fear that my childhood home will be inhospitable to them because they are women, because they are Jewish, because they are American, because they are my children. Children of writers cannot go to a country where words are criminal. Instead I feed them Persian rice, stews with lamb shanks, dill, and cilantro. I add a touch of nostalgia, a pinch of history. I feed them my memories of a lost home.

With our children grown and gone these days, I decorate the sukkah by myself. The walls are pretty, factory-built with Hebrew lettering, recalling our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not our foremothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah. So I conjure their names. Let the women not be forgotten.

Sukkoth meant hard work for the women in my Iranian family. Although they didn't get along, they had to cook together, carry the food outside, and the dirty dishes back inside. My memories of the holiday are as much about the aroma of my mother and grandmother's food as they are about the construction of the sukkah. And I regret that I have no stories of sukkahs in the shtetels of Kiev and Ponovitz, the birthplace of Norman's grandparents, to tell my children. I cannot re-create his paternal grandmother, Fanny's, homemade gefilte fish made from the carp in the bathtub. I don't know what Norman's maternal grandmother, Jenny, made, but I have tried to revive their memories. I make corned beef with brown sugar and mustard glaze. As we enjoy its spicy sweet flavor in our sukkah, I tell them it is grandma Florence's recipe, which I serve with basmati rice, dill, black-eyed beans, and braised cabbage, my mother, Rouhi's food. We sit in the sukkah and compare: Who would like *gondi*, dumplings made of roasted chickpea flour, ground chicken

