

Where We Find Ourselves

Jewish Women around the World Write about Home



Miriam Ben-Yoseph and Deborah Nodler Rosen, editors

My Iranian Sukkah

FARIDEH DAYANIM GOLDIN

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 *sekkbag*, 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

and cumin, my maternal grandmother Touran's favorite? Who prefers *koofteh*, meatballs with herbs and rice, the way Khanombozorg Tavous, my paternal grandmother made them? To remember Fanny, I make gefilte fish from the frozen loaves (not so bad for a Mizrakhi woman). Our stomachs full and cozy, our spirits high, our hearts warm, we know we are at home in our shaky sukkah even if many others are not.

My father stopped building sukkahs over a quarter a century ago. Sometimes it is hard to believe that the Iranian Revolution is that old. The image of an angry man with black turban and bushy eyebrows is still fresh even though Ayatollah Khomeini has been dead for years. The image of American hostages with wide bands over their eyes, hands cuffed, is still vivid.

The chaos at Mehrabad airport in Tehran as my family rushed to escape Iran on one of the last El Al flights to Ben Gurion still haunts my father's sleep. Vivid nightmares wake him up in the middle of the night. He screams incoherent words, sweating, thrashing. My mother shakes him, "Wake up, wake up." He sits in bed jabbering and trembling: they have come to arrest him; they have called the police with lies; they have taken away his home; they are tearing apart his farm and orchard. We never know who "they" are: the government, the enemies in the community, the envious villagers, and, of course, ever-present, daunting fate.

My father had built his sukkah strong, his house even stronger, and his business indestructible. Everything was built carefully, the house, the farm. The foundation of his life had been put together, slowly, thoughtfully, methodically. He had invested all he had in the land, convinced that it would be hospitable. He had made the earth friendly, removed the stones, dug a deep well, and watered the dusty unyielding land. Against all odds, he had made the Iranian desert bloom with flowers and apricot trees. He had built a poultry farm in Shiraz out of a dream shaped during his trip to an Israeli kibbutz. He fed the city with more chickens and eggs than they had ever seen—not just scrawny chickens that came from someone's backyard,

not the two eggs you had to beg the grocer to put in a corner of your chador just to find that they had become rotten on their way from some village to the store. My father had made the impossible a reality. He had tamed the land by encircling it with a protective wall that shielded the top soil from the spring floods that came roaring down the mountainside. He had built a house of stones and bricks; he had built a sukkah that took hours to dismantle. And they all disappeared in a puff of the Revolution, worse than a storm, worse than a hurricane, unpredictable and fierce. He lost everything.

I think that maybe a sukkah should rock and sway with the wind. A sukkah should lose its roof and surrender the protection of its inhabitants to the rain or the sun. I think that a sukkah should crush and fall to pieces once in a while. I think that my father became too attached to the land. Switching his business from being a goldsmith to a farmer, he wanted to forget that Jews have always lived on shaky grounds; that a Jewish home is ephemeral even in lands that seem secure.

My father lost his home and because he has not found it yet, neither have we, his children. Of course we have our own homes, our own families, our spouses and children—but we are always insecure in our hearts.

I felt personally attacked on September 11, 2001. Irrationally, I insisted that we should pack and leave. This time, however, the escape route wasn't so clear. The world Jewry has found a cul-de-sac in America. This is our last stronghold.

Ironically, my siblings and I have married Americans who are strongly rooted in this culture, who have long forgotten the tyranny and pogroms their grandparents struggled to leave behind in Eastern Europe. Our spouses are outraged when Iranian Jews in America must report to the immigration office because they are from a country within "the axis of evil." Yet the situation isn't as personal to them as it is to us who were born in Iran, who experienced discrimination, who even feared for our lives. How can the Iranian Jews explain to the authorities that they are in a state of limbo? Homeless, with-

out a country, will they be sent back to Iran to face false charges of treason and spying for America and Israel just because they are Jews, just because they might have visited Israel, just because they escaped to America? Or should they break the law and not report until the storm passes? Can they ever find HOME, where they don't have to worry about their accents, about JEW or IRAN stamped on their passports, where their breath, smelling of *ghormeh sabzi*, herb stew, fresh limes, and raw spring onions, would be as pleasant as the breath of another smelling of chocolate? Our spouses sometimes don't feel the pain as deeply as we do; time has eroded the memory of their grandparents' fears, replacing it with the American promise of freedom and equality.

My husband does sometimes conjure his Ashkenazi ancestors. He reminisces about Grandma Fanny, who at age fourteen left Kiev in steerage, never to see her mother again. Once when Norman was a teenager, the same age as his grandmother when she left home behind in Russia, he and his siblings took her to see "Fiddler on the Roof." To their chagrin, Fanny jumped from her seat as the Cossacks attacked, screaming, "I REMEMBER! I remember those mamzerim, those . . ." The grandchildren were horrified, and tried to pull her down, "Grandma, sit!" And when she wouldn't, they became terse with her the way one disciplines a child: "STOP IT!" At the same time, they were relieved that that audience didn't understand the expletives uttered in Yiddish, a language they didn't understand themselves because Fanny didn't teach it to her children, or maybe it was easier to erase it in order to forget the old country.

My children are proud of me for having written a memoir, for being an author. They brag about me, but I know that when their friends and co-workers get excited about my book and want to purchase it, my children's pride is mixed with just the tiniest bit of apprehension. I know that a small voice inside wishes Mom had written a happier story, not something so private, not something so dark.

I am lucky to have had enough command of the English language to record a tiny portion of Iranian Jewish life. Still, I wonder

if the memory will prevail, if my grandchildren and their children will remember my stories.

To make the children laugh, Norman used to mimic his Russian grandmother's accent. "If you misbehave," he used to tell our youngest, Rachel, "do you know what you'll have for dinner?" With a twinkle in her eyes, with a grin showing two missing teeth, our daughter would reply, "Vater and a toot-peek!" Water and a toothpick indeed. Will my grandchildren remember me for my accent, for my mispronunciation of th's and w's? Will they remember and laugh in good humor about the fact that I can never remember where to add "the" and where not to? Or will they also remember *my* story, my parents and my grandparents' stories; the stories of the Iranian Jews?

I wrap these memories, happy and sad, new and distant, in sweetness of baked beets and turnips, the aroma of dill and cilantro, the pungent flavors of cardamom and cumin, the yellows and oranges of turmeric and saffron. I share them with my oldest daughter Lena as we chop and sauté, as we caramelize and braise.

And to keep reminding myself of past sukkahs, in order not to forget Shiraz myself, I planted pomegranate trees in our tiny yard. When one finally gave fruit this year, I cut a cluster with leaves attached. Before storing them in the refrigerator, I took them to visit our Web site-purchased sukkah, which Norman built and I decorated.

This coming Passover, the mixture of walnuts, apples, and wine will be a reminder of the mortar our ancestors were forced to work with in Egypt; of our hardship, bondage, homelessness. When the earth rejuvenates itself this spring, the pomegranate seeds will glitter like rubies in the thick brown paste, reminding us also of the promise of freedom, of our hopes for a safe homeland.