CHAPTER NINE

The Sukkah of Shalom

Arthur Waskow

In 2001, just a few weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the Jewish community celebrated the harvest festival of Sukkot. Many did so by building a *sukkah*—a fragile hut with a leafy roof, the most vulnerable of houses. Vulnerable in time, since it lasts for only a week each year. Vulnerable in space, since its roof must be not only leafy but leaky enough to let in the starlight and gusts of wind and rain.

In our evening prayers throughout the year, just as we prepare to lie down in vulnerable sleep, we plead with God, "Spread over us Your sukkah of shalom—of peace and safety."

Why does the prayer plead for a sukkah of shalom rather than a temple or fortress or palace of shalom, which would surely be more safe and more secure?

Precisely because the sukkah is so vulnerable.

For much of our lives we try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness:

Pyramids
Air raid shelters
Pentagons
World Trade Centers

But the sukkah reminds us: We are in truth all vulnerable. If as the prophet Dylan sang, "A hard rain's gonna fall," it will fall on all of us. And on 9/11/01, the ancient truth came home: We all live in a sukkah. Even the widest oceans, the mightiest buildings, the wealthiest balance sheets, the most powerful weapons did not shield us.

There are only wispy walls and leaky roofs between us. The planet is in fact one interwoven web of life. The command to love my neighbor as I do myself is not an admonition to be nice: It is a statement of truth like the law of gravity. However much and in whatever way I love my neighbor, that will turn out to be the way I love myself. If I pour contempt upon my neighbor, hatred will recoil upon me.

Only a world where all communities feel vulnerable, and therefore connected to all other communities, can prevent such acts of rage and mass murder.

The sukkah not only invites our bodies to become physically vulnerable, but also invites our minds to become vulnerable to new ideas. To live in the sukkah for a week, as Jewish tradition teaches, would be to leave behind not only the rigid walls and towers of our cities, but also our rigidified ideas, our assumptions, our habits, our accustomed lives.

Indeed, the tradition teaches that Sukkot is the festival on which we open ourselves to what is foreign to us. We pray especially that prosperity and peace pervade all nations, not only the Jewish people. Sukkot is the festival when we invite holy guests into the sukkah—"guests" precisely because they are our higher selves, our unaccustomed selves.

By leaving our houses, we create the time and space to reflect upon our lives. To "reflect" is to look in the mirror at our "reflections." Indeed, for a moment in 2001 many Americans did pause to ask themselves the question, "Why did those attackers hate us? Did we do anything to bring such hate upon us?"

But the government of the United States moved at once to change that question into, "Why did those attackers dare to hate us?" And it immediately gave the answer, "Because we are free and they hate freedom."

Can we imagine a president addressing Congress to say:

> For forty days your government will take no action except to gather evidence of who perpetrated this mass murder. We urge all Americans to gather in *sukkot*—in all the places where we might explore the open weave of half-walled space between us and the rest of the world, between humanity and the rest of the planetary web of life. We urge us all to reflect.
>
> We invite not only those who from a distance have studied Islam but those Americans and others who themselves are Muslims, to talk with the rest of us in these *sukkot* (the plural of sukkah).
>
> We invite those who have lived in the despairing slums and rain-ravaged huts of the world, who have studied alongside the humiliated, angry citizens of the future in the crippled nations that make up half the world, to talk with the rest of us in these sukkot. To reflect with us.

We can imagine it, but in 2001 we could not expect it from the government of the United States. For we have built a culture that has as little space for the sukkah of reflection, of hospitality to new, uncomfortable ideas, as it does for the sukkah of vulnerability and physical discomfort.

So we got what was most to be expected: not a call to reflect. Not a call to pursue the criminals through new forms of international and transnational law. Not a call to understand and address the underlying grievances that turned a few to terrorism and many more to rage against American power.

Instead, from the government of the United States a call to war. Not merely a war, but a "Crusade"—the word that beyond all others was most likely to arouse suspicion, fear, and rage in

the Muslim world. War and Crusade—the archetypal reverse of self-reflection. The opposite of looking inward. The impulse not only to look outward but to smash whatever is out there.

And in the year and a half that followed the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government launched not just one war but two. In each, all it cared about was smashing a repressive government that did not obey American dictates (repressive governments that did obey were not attacked) and establishing its control over resources or strategic territory that it wanted.

Our leaders responded to our vulnerability by trying harder to make ourselves invulnerable. But in a vulnerable world, this takes more and more ferocity, more and more coercion, more and more violence—at home as well as abroad.

What would it mean to recognize that we all live in vulnerable sukkot? Here are a few examples:

Could we teach all our children the Torah, the Prophets, the Song of Songs, the Talmud, the New Testament, the Quran, the Upanishads, the teachings of the Buddha and of King and Gandhi, as treasuries of wisdom—and sometimes of great danger—that are as crucial to the world as Plato and Darwin and Einstein?

Could we learn to see the dangers in "our own" as well as in "the other" teachings, and learn to strengthen those elements in all traditions that call for nonviolence, not bloody Crusades and jihads and holy wars for holy lands?

Instead of only mouthing wishes, could we insist on doing deeds: strengthening the International Criminal Court and expanding its jurisdiction to cases of international terrorism? Creating peace between a secure Israel and a viable Palestine? Sharing abundance between the Starving World and the Obese World? Sharing disarmament among nations with suicide bombers and those (like our own) with hundreds or thousands of weapons of mass destruction? Learning to breathe easy and use far less of the fuels that so quickly become a cause for

war—instead of choking and scorching the planet with greenhouse gases of mass desolation?

Not every demand of the poor and disempowered is legitimate simply because it is an expression of pain. But can we open the ears of our hearts to ask: Have we ourselves had a hand in creating the pain? Can we act to lighten it?

Can we create for ourselves a sukkah in time, a sukkah of reflection and renewal, as well as recognizing the sukkah of vulnerable space in which we actually live?

Could we in every year use the days that surround 9/11 to gather for reflection, for self-examination? Could we gather in a mood of Awe rather than fear, to mourn what tears the world apart and learn what weaves the world together?

The choice we face is broader than politics, deeper than charity. It is whether we see the world chiefly as property to be controlled, defined by walls and fences that must be built ever higher, ever thicker, ever tougher; or made up chiefly of an open weave of compassion and connection, open sukkah next to open sukkah.

Whatever we build where the tall Twin Towers once stood, America and the world will be living in a leafy, leaky, shaky sukkah. Hope comes from raising that simple truth to visibility. We must spread over all of us the sukkah of shalom.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow is director of the Shalom Center (www.shalomctr.org) and author of *A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: The Jewish Life-Spiral as a Spiritual Path* (with Phyllis Berman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), *Seasons of Our Joy* (Beacon Press, 1991), *Godwrestling, Round 2* (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998), and other books of spiritual search and struggle toward peace, justice, and healing the Earth. Part of this essay appeared in *From the Ashes: A Spiritual Response to the Attack on America*, by the editors of Beliefnet (Rodale Press, 2002). Copyright © 2003 by Arthur Waskow.

CHAPTER TEN

Getting Our Gaze Back

Rose Marie Berger

My office window faces east. Our unfriendly neighbor planted a peach tree in the tiny green space between her building and ours. My window frames the tree and the bright yellow spikes of winter cabbage gone to flower. Someone has dangled a plastic great horned owl from the telephone wires. I stare out. Two houses down, during the Iraq war, a blue-and-white banner hung from the second-floor porch. It said "Kalamazoo for Peace." Michigan is far from our inner-city, working-poor, Washington, D.C., neighborhood. Swallowtails, cabbage whites, skippers, and orange sulphurs follow scent trails to the tiny patches of flowers blooming furiously in the middle of the city. The window's iron security bars cast vertical shadows across my computer screen in the morning.

I've noticed about myself recently that I stare out the window and daydream when I'm desperate. The unrelenting beam of information aimed at me via the computer screen too often occupies my eyes. The mind silts up with details, images, pleas for help, advertisements, and thousands of worthy campaigns for social change. "Life shouldn't be this hard," I think.

Eventually, nothing can float freely in the stream of my consciousness; everything is stuck. After some time staring at my

in this book not as policy experts but as witnesses to the value of sitting down, again and again, to make peace with one's longtime enemies or to build bridges to those of differing political views. This may be as hard, in its own way, as willingly going to jail or facing down a bulldozer to protect a house or an olive grove. But if we're willing to do the moral and spiritual gruntwork and take the necessary leaps of courage, we can slow down, interrupt, and sometimes even halt seemingly intractable and destructive cycles. We can achieve what appears impossible, not only in the Middle East but in trying to create a more just and humane world.

No more convincing example of this kind of reconciliation exists than the extraordinary events that have taken place in South Africa since the end of apartheid, described by Desmond Tutu in "No Future Without Forgiveness." That country certainly is no paradise, but its bloodless revolution and its historically unprecedented attempt at reconciliation have inspired the world. "Who in their right minds," Tutu asks, "could ever have imagined South Africa to be an example of anything but the most ghastly awfulness, of how not to order a nation's race relations and its governance?" The long-awaited, seemingly inevitable bloodbath did not occur, proving that the "centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility, and disharmony" can be reversed.

History, as Barbara Ehrenreich rightly observes, has given us "no operating manual, no step-by-step instructions. Nothing is promised, nothing is guaranteed." But South Africa has proved that retribution isn't inevitable and that seemingly miraculous leaps of human dignity can occur. Displaying compassion in circumstances that normally give rise to rage, Mandela, Tutu, and their fellow countrymen have shown us the truth in W. H. Auden's admonition, "We must love one another or die."

Their victory will persist in memory, speaking fierce love to paralyzing rage, solidarity to isolation, and hope to despair, as long as the human experiment continues.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Only Justice Can Stop a Curse

Alice Walker

Let me start (but not end) with a curse-prayer that Zora Neale Hurston, novelist and anthropologist, collected in the 1920s. And by then it was already old. I have often marveled at it. At the precision of its anger, the absoluteness of its bitterness. Its utter hatred of the enemies it condemns. It is a curse-prayer by a person who would readily, almost happily, commit suicide, if it meant her enemies would also die. Horribly.

> To the Man God: O Great One, I have been sorely tried by my enemies and have been blasphemed and lied against. My good thoughts and my honest actions have been turned to bad actions and dishonest ideas. My home has been disrespected, my children have been cursed and ill-treated. My dear ones have been backbitten and their virtue questioned. O Man God, I beg that this that I ask for my enemies shall come to pass:
>
> That the South wind shall scorch their bodies and make them wither. . . . That the North wind shall freeze their blood and numb their muscles. . . . That the West wind shall blow away their life's breath and will not leave their hair grow, and that their fingernails shall fall off and their bones shall crumble. That the East wind shall make their minds grow dark,

their sight shall fail and their seed dry up so that they shall not multiply.

I ask that their fathers and mothers from their furthest generation will not intercede for them before the great throne, and the wombs of their women shall not bear fruit except for strangers, and that they shall become extinct. I pray that the children who may come shall be weak of mind and paralyzed of limb and that they themselves shall curse them in their turn for ever turning the breath of life into their bodies. I pray that disease and death shall be forever with them and that their worldly goods shall not prosper, and that their crops shall not multiply and that their cows, their sheep, and their hogs and all their living beasts shall die of starvation and thirst. I pray that their house shall be unroofed and that the rain, the thunder and lightning shall find the innermost recesses of their home and that the foundation shall crumble and the floods tear it asunder. I pray that the sun shall not shed its rays on them in benevolence, but instead it shall beat down on them and burn them and destroy them. I pray that the Moon shall not give them peace, but instead shall deride them and decry them and cause their minds to shrivel. I pray that their friends shall betray them and cause them loss of power, of gold and of silver, and that their enemies shall smite them until they beg for mercy which shall not be given them. I pray that their tongues shall forget how to speak in sweet words, and that it shall be paralyzed and that all about them will be desolation, pestilence and death. O Man God, I ask you for these things because they have dragged me in the dust and destroyed my good name; broken my heart and caused me to curse the day that I was born. So be it.

I am sure it was a woman who first prayed this curse. And I see her—black, yellow, brown, or red, "*aboriginal*" as the Ancient are called in South Africa and Australia and other lands invaded, expropriated, and occupied by whites. And I think,

with astonishment, that the curse-prayer of this colored woman—starved, enslaved, humiliated, and carelessly trampled to death—over centuries, is coming to pass. Indeed, like ancient peoples of color the world over, who have tried to tell the white man of the destruction that would inevitably follow from the uranium mining plunder of their sacred lands, this woman—along with millions and billions of obliterated sisters, brothers, and children—seems to have put such enormous energy into her hope for revenge, that her curse seems close to bringing it about.

In any case, this has been my own problem.

When I have considered the enormity of the crimes against humanity of the rich white men. Against women. Against every living person of color. Against the poor. Against my mother and my father. Against me. . . . When I consider that at this very moment they have taken away education, medicine, housing, and food, in Florida the right to vote. . . . That prominent commentators say the problems of blacks spring from genetic inferiority. When I consider that they are a real and present threat to my life and the life of my daughter, my people, I think—in perfect harmony with my sister of long ago: *Let the Earth marinate in poisons. Let the bombs cover the ground like rain. For nothing short of total destruction will ever teach them anything.*

And it would be good, perhaps, to put an end to the species in any case, rather than let these wealthy white men continue to subjugate it, and continue their lust to dominate, exploit, and despoil not just our planet, but the rest of the universe, which is their clear and stated intention, leaving their arrogance and litter not just on the moon, but on everything else they can reach.

If we have any true love for the stars, planets, and the rest of Creation, we must do everything we can to keep men like these away from them. They who have appointed themselves our representatives to the rest of the universe. They who have never met any new creature without exploiting, abusing, or destroying

it. They who say we poor and colored and female and elderly blight neighborhoods, while they blight worlds.

However, just as the sun shines on the godly and the ungodly alike, so does our destruction of our environment. And with this knowledge it becomes increasingly difficult to embrace the thought of extinction purely for the assumed satisfaction of—from the grave—achieving revenge. Or even of accepting our demise as a planet as a simple and just preventive medicine administered to the Universe. Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it. In any case, Earth is my home—though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe.

So let me tell you: I intend to protect my home. Praying—not a curse—only the hope that my courage will not fail my love. But if by some miracle, and all our struggle, the Earth is spared, only justice to every living thing (and everything is alive) will save humankind.

And we are not saved yet.

My activism—cultural, political, spiritual—is rooted in my love of nature and my delight in human beings. It is when people are at peace, content, *full*, that they are most likely to meet my expectation, selfish, no doubt, that they be a generous, joyous, even entertaining experience for me. I believe people exist to be enjoyed, much as a restful or engaging view might be. As the ocean or drifting clouds might be. Or as if they were the human equivalent of melons, mangoes, or any other kind of attractive, seductive fruit. When I am in the presence of other human beings I want to revel in their creative and intellectual fullness, their uninhibited social warmth. I want their precious human radiance to wrap me in light. I do not want fear of war or starvation or bodily mutilation to steal both my pleasure in them and their own birthright. Everything I would like other people to be for me, I want to be for them.

I have been an activist all my adult life, though I have sometimes felt embarrassed to call myself one. In the Sixties, many of us were plagued by the notion that, given the magnitude of the task before us—the dismantling of American apartheid—our individual acts were puny. There was also the apparent reality that the most committed, most directly confrontational people suffered more. The most "revolutionary" often ended up severely beaten, in prison, or dead. Shot down in front of their children, blown up in cars or in church, run over by racist drunks, raped and thrown in the river.

In Mississippi, where I lived from 1967 to 1974, people who challenged the system anticipated menace, battery, even murder, every day. In this context, I sometimes felt ashamed that my contributions at the time were not more radical. I taught in two local black colleges, I wrote about the Movement, and I created tiny history booklets which were used to teach the teachers of children enrolled in Head Start. And, of course, I was interracially married, which was illegal. It was perhaps in Mississippi during those years that I understood how the daily news of disaster can become, for the spirit, a numbing assault, and that one's own activism, however modest, fighting against this tide of death, provides at least the possibility of generating a different kind of "news." A "news" that empowers rather than defeats.

There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment and still be at peace. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the mountaintop. Gandhi dying with the name of God on his lips. Sojourner Truth baring her breasts at a women's rights convention in 1851. Harriet Tubman exposing her revolver to some of the slaves she had freed, who, fearing an unknown freedom, looked longingly backward to their captivity, thereby endangering the freedom of all. To be such a person or to witness anyone at this moment of transcendent presence is to know that what is human is linked, by a daring compassion, to what is divine. During my years of being close to people engaged in changing

the world I have seen fear turn into courage. Sorrow into joy. Funerals into celebrations. Because whatever the consequences, people, standing side by side, have expressed who they really are, and that ultimately they believe in the love of the world and each other enough *to be that*—which is the foundation of activism.

It has become a common feeling, I believe, as we have watched our heroes falling over the years, that our own small stone of activism, which might not seem to measure up to the rugged boulders of heroism we have so admired, is a paltry offering toward the building of an edifice of hope. Many who believe this choose to withhold their offerings out of shame.

This is the tragedy of our world.

For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.

In this regard, I have a story to tell.

In the mid-Sixties during a voter-registration campaign in South Georgia, my canvassing partner, Beverly, a local black teenager, was arrested on a bogus moving-violation charge. This was meant to intimidate her, "show her her place," and terrify her family. Those of us who feared for her safety during the night held a vigil outside the jail. I remember the raw vulnerability I felt as the swaggering state troopers—each of them three times Beverly's size, and mine—stomped in and out of the building, scowling at us. The feeling of solidarity with Beverly and our friends was strong, but also the feeling of being alone, as it occurred to me that not even my parents knew where I was. We were black and very young: We knew no one in white America paid the slightest attention to the deaths of such as us. It was partly because of this that we sometimes resented the presence of the white people who came to stand, and take their chances, with us. I was one of those to whom such resentment came easily.

I especially resented blond Paul from Minnesota, whose Aryan appearance meant, when he was not with us, freedom and almost worship in the race-obsessed South. I had treated him with coolness since the day we met. We certainly did not invite him to our vigil. And yet, at just the moment I felt most downhearted, I heard someone coming along the street in our direction, whistling. A moment later Paul appeared. Still whistling a Movement spiritual that sounded strange, even comical, on his lips, he calmly took his place beside us. Knowing his Nordic presence meant a measure of safety for us, and without being asked, he offered it. This remains a moment as bright as any I recall from that time.

All we own, at least for the short time we have it, is our life. With it we write what we come to know of the world. I believe the Earth is good. That people, untortured by circumstance or fate, are also good. I do not believe the people of the world are naturally my enemies, or that animals, including snakes, are, or that Nature is. Whenever I experience evil, and it is not, unfortunately, uncommon to experience it in these times, my deepest feeling is disappointment. I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act. Every time we decide to believe the world can be better. Every time we decide to trust others to be as noble as we think they are. And that there might be *years* during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope. The alternative, however, not to act, and therefore to miss experiencing other people at their best, reaching toward their fullness, has never appealed to me.

Only justice can stop a curse.

This essay includes material adapted from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Harcourt, 1983) and from *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* (Random House, 1997). Alice Walker's newest novel is *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart* (Random House, 2004).