MY SUCCAH DECORATIONS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

As I aided my grandson and two of his friends in helping erect and decorate our succah I was struck by the fact that not only had I aged and no longer enjoyed climbing ladders but that many of our succah decorations had also seriously aged, faded and some have even disappeared from the scene entirely.

I was delighted however that many of the succah decorations that have hung in my succah for more than fifty years in Chicago, Miami Beach, Monsey and Jerusalem were, like me, around and still in serviceable condition. Naturally, each of those decorations brings back a flood of memories - of cold and snowy Succot holidays in Chicago and Monsey, of boiling hot and drippingly humid Succot in Miami Beach and of the joy of being able to sleep comfortably in my succah here in Jerusalem.

And as the years have gone by, there are the beloved ones who visit my current succah only in the form of spiritual ushpizzin, but whose presence are nevertheless very real to me. We have decorations from the whole world hanging in our succah and therefore every little bauble carries with it a memory of a place visited and an experience tucked away in the recesses of our mind.

Thus, putting my succah together is always an emotional experience for me, a time of memories and recollection. My grandchildren who have helped me to decorate the succah have done so fairly dispassionately since they enjoy the curios from far distant lands and places but they have no personal attachments to the objects and they do not awaken any memories for them. But, that is not the case for their old grandfather, for whom the succah decorations are, in a large measure, the story of his life.

The custom of decorating one's succah is an ancient but sporadic one. Usually agricultural decorations - dried corn and grains, honey in jars, dried fruits, etc. - were used when they were available. This was in keeping with the biblical theme of Succot as the harvest festival of the Jewish calendar year.

In many climes there was no possibility of such decorations. In my youth I remember that in my father's synagogue's succah and in the yeshiva's succah there were little or no decorations. And, they didn't have much color or any pizzazz attached to them. Over the past number of decades, as having a succah for one's self and family has become increasingly popular in the United States and here in Israel, the succah decoration industry has flourished.

Many succot now come with their own built in decorations on their panels and the Chinese are hard

at work thinking up new types of decorations for our succot from year to year. Many tinsel decorations originally manufactured for non-Jewish holidays find their ways into succot, especially here in Israel where certain sections of the population are completely unaware of the original reason and purpose of their manufacture. It is an interesting and sometimes even amusing world that we live in.

I find that the unseen guests - the ushpizin - are in many ways the stars of the Succot holiday. They have come to visit Jews in every clime and location on the globe. The Talmud itself has many illustrations of possible succot that were constructed in its time and in later times as well. There is a park in Israel called Neot Kedumim where all of these different types of succot are on view.

Though there are many variations possible, a succah basically is composed of a structure with a little more than two plus solid walls and a roof of natural agricultural materials that is partially open to the sky. In rainy climates there was always an attempt to protect the succah during the rain storm by ingenious methods.

The rain always plays havoc with the succah decorations and many of my mine have fallen victim to the rains in America. Even here in Israel, ten years ago we experienced a violent rain storm on Succot that pretty much soaked everything and everyone. The heavy rains have not as of yet arrived here in Israel this year but the early fall rains have happened and since Succot is "late" this year, there does exist a possibility of rain for the holiday.

Nevertheless, my succah decorations are proudly established in the succah and the holiness and anticipation of this holiday of family joy is felt anywhere you go in Jerusalem. May God's succah of happiness and peace envelop and protect all of us all year long.

Chag Sameach,

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com