

A CHILD'S TALE

Hamulah Celebrates Sukkot

Richard Jay Goldstein

IN THE TINY VILLAGE OF PASHOOT THERE LIVED A rabbi and his name was Rabbi Adeen.

It was the morning of the day before Sukkot and Rabbi Adeen was supervising the putting up of the synagogue sukkah. Of course, we all know how in the old days at harvest time people used to build little booths — called *sukkot* — out in their fields, to eat and sleep in at night after they worked hard all day, and save the trouble of shlepping home every day.

But Pashoot was very small and its tidy little fields came right up to the doors of the houses, and so it was that at harvest time the villagers did not *need* to build sukkot in the fields to sleep in while they cut the wheat and picked the apples and pulled up the onions. The people of Pashoot prided themselves on being very sensible folk. What would be the sense of building a damp and chilly hut in the fields, when they could work in the fields all day, and then in a few steps in the evening be in their own houses, eat hot meals at their own tables, and sleep sound in their own warm beds?

So it had been the tradition in Pashoot for many years to build a single sukkah next to the synagogue for the whole village, and so fulfill the mitzvah in a reasonable way. Pashoot followed the opinion of Hillel and used the same sukkah over and over every year. Only the sukkah roof of leafy branches was new each time. Once the sukkah was up and ready, everyone brought something to hang up in it. This was meant to symbolize that Pashoot had had such a good harvest they could use some of it for decoration, and show their gratitude for this fact. They made a party of it, because another of the mitzvot of Sukkot is to rejoice. Families took turns during the week of Sukkot sleeping and eating in the sukkah, and so fulfilled their obligations with a minimum of discomfort.

As he did every year, Rabbi Adeen had with him Tractate Sukkah from his precious and ancient set of the Talmud. Of course Rabbi Adeen knew perfectly well the rules of sukkah-building, since he had been supervising the putting up of the village sukkah for forty years. But it was also his tradition to always consult this important book while the building was taking place, just to be sure nothing was forgotten.

“Remember, there must be more shade than sun during the daytime,” called Rabbi Adeen, “but stars must be visible through the roof at night.”

The men piling leafy branches — the *skhakh* — on the roof of the sukkah smiled at each other. “Like so?” one asked the rabbi.

“Yes, exactly,” answered the rabbi.

When the sukkah was ready, and the bright golden sun was starting to slide down the western sky toward erev Sukkot, people came laughing from every house, carrying apples and onions and melons and cloth bags of goat cheese and flowers and strings of peppers and bunches of grapes. They hung and piled these wonderful things inside the sukkah, while they visited and gossiped. Then they took out picnic baskets and ate under the leafy ceiling of the sukkah or on the grass before it. When the sun disappeared, they lit candles and sang the prayers. Finally everyone went to their own houses to sleep, except for those whose turn it was to sleep in the sukkah.

* * *

At first light the next morning — the first day of Sukkot — Hamulah the hen was already out and busy scratching and pecking about. Hamulah belonged to Rabbi Adeen, but — as befitting the rabbi’s hen — she had the run of the village. When she got to the synagogue on her rounds, searching for grain and tasty bugs, she suddenly stopped and stared. What was that strange little building? She had never noticed it before. It had loose wooden sides and a leafy roof. Inside, all sorts of food was piled up or hung like fruit from the ceiling. Like most chickens, Hamulah was insatiably curious but also timid about anything new. She decided to ask around before going inside to have a look.

Hamulah hurried out to where the village barns and pens were located. She came upon Tayesh the goat, who was grazing on the grass which grew on the north side of the biggest barn.

“Tayesh,” began Hamulah, “you are looking especially lovely this morning.”

It’s always best to be complimentary when you want to find something out from a goat.

“Why, thank you,” said Tayesh, chewing her grass.

“My friend,” said Hamulah, “do you by any chance know what that strange new building is by the synagogue?”

“Why, yes, I do,” answered Tayesh. Goats are very nosy and usually know what’s going on. “It’s called a sukkah,” continued Tayesh. “The people put in it all the things they grow, to show God that they are grateful for life and for a good harvest.”

“My goodness,” said Hamulah.

“Yes,” said Tayesh. “There is something there from everywhere in farm and field. There are fruits from the orchards, vegetables from the gardens, sheaves of wheat from the fields.”

“My goodness,” said Hamulah.

“Yes,” said Tayesh. “Why, there are even bags of cheese made from my very own milk.” Tayesh looked quite proud.

“My goodness,” said Hamulah. Then she suddenly thought of something. “Thank you very much,” she said quickly. “My best to your kids. Good-bye.” And Hamulah hurried away.

“Goodbye, I’m sure,” said Tayesh, wondering what was bothering Hamulah.

Hamulah rushed back to the sukkah. She went inside, completely forgetting to be timid. She peered carefully up at all the things hanging above her. She checked the stacks of things piled on the floor. She went outside and looked at the leafy roof. It was just as she had feared. There were no eggs in the sukkah. Not a single one. How could there be things from everywhere in farm and field without eggs? How could there be gratitude for life and a good harvest without eggs? *She*, Hamulah, was as grateful to God as anybody. Why had she been left out? What would God think?

She would have to take care of this herself, if the people of Pashoot were too foolish to know that you could not have a sukkah of gratitude without good eggs.

She walked all around the sukkah. It seemed very tall. She eyed the leafy roof. Hamulah had put on weight during the summer, and she was not

much of a flyer, but it was now or never. She flapped her wings as hard as she could, and jumped up as hard as she could. She fluttered and wobbled into the air, then crashed back on the ground in a cloud of dust.

This would never do.

She stood up tall and squinted at the top of the sukkah, which seemed so far away. Then she flapped mightily, and jumped again. This time she got as high as some of the leafy branches hanging over the edge of the sukkah. She grabbed at them with her feet, clawed and flapped and squawked, and finally came to rest on top of the sukkah.

She rested for a moment, then wriggled around in the leaves until she had a shallow nest. She closed her eyes and waited. After a time she began to cluck, and proudly laid an egg. The warm brown egg immediately slipped through the leaves and twigs underneath her, and splatted on the hard ground below.

Hamulah stared in disbelief.

She sat up straighter, held her beak high. She waited and waited, ignoring her hunger and thirst and the hot sun beating down on her. Then when the sun was directly overhead she clucked again and laid another beautiful egg. This egg, too, fell through the sukkah roof, and splatted on the ground.

Hamulah hung her head.

* * *

In the late afternoon, as the air began to cool, Rabbi Adeen came out to the sukkah, to prepare it for the evening service. As he stepped into the shade of the sukkah, the first things he saw were the two broken eggs on the dirt floor. He frowned and looked around. He scratched his head. He looked around again. Then he looked up.

There was Hamulah, her wings drooping sadly.

“What are you doing up there?” he asked. Of course Hamulah did not answer, because chickens do not talk to people. She just drooped further.

The rabbi looked at her. “Did you think you...” He stopped. “Were you trying to...” He stopped again. Chills ran up his back. *Was it possible?*

“Hamulah,” said Rabbi Adeen, “we’ve left you out. How could we do such a thing?”

The rabbi walked slowly back to his house, his brow creased in thought. In a few minutes he returned with a ladder. He gently took Hamulah

down, then went to work with some boards and straw, and soon he had built a nest box on the sukkah roof. He placed Hamulah in it.

* * *

The next morning Hamulah the hen clucked proudly, flew down by herself from the sukkah roof, and set about her morning scratching. In the nest box on the sukkah roof were two beautiful brown eggs.

Rabbi Adeen came out later and climbed the ladder. He saw the eggs, bowed his head, and smiled.

* * *

Later, when Sukkot was over, and the sukkah — including the nest box — was taken down and put away for next year, Rabbi Adeen wrote a letter to the Great Council of Rabbis in the City far away. Of course he received no answer, because those Rabbis are always very busy.

Whenever Rabbi Adeen thought of the Talmud he had always imagined it as being like a great store-house. The big doors are locked so that only those with keys can enter. Inside are giant chests, and cabinets of exotic wood, and iron safes, and cedar boxes piled high, and barrels arrayed like troops — and all of them filled to bursting with truths and secrets and jewels of poetry and coins of wisdom.

But now — ever since his letter to the Great Rabbis — when Rabbi Adeen imagines his great Talmud store-house, he remembers to look past the great chests and golden coffers, and into a quiet corner where a simple cloth bag sits. In the bag is a small parchment, containing a new precept regarding the building of sukkot, of which few Talmud scholars will know:

...there should be more shade than sun in the daytime, but stars should be visible through the roof at night, and a chicken egg should not fall through....

RICHARD JAY GOLDSTEIN has been writing fiction and non-fiction for over twenty-five years. He lives with his wife and kids and grandchildren in the mountains east of Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's a lapsed ER doctor, and has published some fifty stories, essays, and poems in the literary and sci-fi/fantasy/horror presses, including a number of anthologies. His children's stories have appeared in previous issues of Kerem — "Little Pesach on the Prairie" (vol. 6) and "The Sixth Maccabee" (vol. 13).

