

I Did/Didn't Build It

A few years ago, during the 2012 US presidential election, a brief but fierce controversy erupted, as it always does, over a few words spoken by one of the candidates. President Barack Obama had said, “You didn’t build that” and seemed to refer to businesses. The Republican’s immediately responded with the counter: “I built it!”, which they plastered on shirts, bumper stickers, and posters.

Like many of these debates in the hothouse of electoral politics, the argument was actually much ado about nothing. A slogan sounds good at a rally, but it is not policy. The real debate is one of emphasis. Democrats make the argument that governments provide police, fire departments, education, and infrastructure that allow businesses to thrive, but surely individual ingenuity builds the actual companies. Republicans focus on the American spirit of rugged individualism, originality, and entrepreneurialism that sustains free enterprise, but surely these things cannot survive without the resources of a thriving collective community.

In fact, the “You didn’t build that” discussion sheds a little bit of light on a dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer over the inspiration for the sukkot (booths) we use on the holiday (Babylonian Talmud Sukkah 11b). Rabbi Akiva said that the sukkot were the actual booths that the Israelites lived in when they left Egypt; Rabbi Eliezer insisted that the sukkot we build are reminders of the clouds of glory that escorted the Israelites in the desert. I can imagine each rabbi’s students printing up tee shirts with slogans like “The sukkot were real!” or “Clouds of glory!” to make their case.

The ancient debate mirrors the controversy of 2012. Is Rabbi Akiva really saying that God’s presence didn’t escort the people of Israel in the wilderness? The Torah says explicitly that a cloud of God’s presence guided the people. And did Rabbi Eliezer really think that the Israelites slept on the ground under the stars, with no shelter for those forty years except little clouds of glory? That doesn’t make logical sense. In fact, the rabbinic dispute, like the political one, is a problem of emphasis. The Israelites needed both God’s protection and physical shelter. The question is, which is more important, or more significant.

These debates are relevant to my life in particular. Every year when I build my sukkah I feel like a rugged individualist. My family and I spend hours putting up the walls, finding *s’khakh* (the roof), placing the lights, and decorating our sukkah. At the end, looking at a new structure that wasn’t there the day before, I think, “Yeah, I built it!” But then I realize that despite all the work I put in, I didn’t build it from scratch. Someone else designed and manufactured the kit I use as well as the lights and decorations. We just put it together each year, and I am compelled to acknowledge, “You didn’t build that.”

That is the beauty of the sukkah; it is a brand-new structure each year. And yet, it is not so new. It’s the same basic sukkah that we put up last year; it either came from a kit or was designed years ago. On Sukkot we hold two different, but not necessarily contradictory, ideas at the same time. We are living in a temporary space that is also supposed to be our main residence. The sukkah is a new building but made from older materials. They represent clouds of God’s glory but are also reminders of the booths our ancestors used in the desert. You didn’t build that, but, in fact, you did build it. Sukkot trains us to break down categories and think of the world as a containing multiple meanings. Human beings can do great things as individuals ... with some help from others.

Hag Sameach,

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