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THE BAMBOO ROOF TEST

Jews eat in a *sukkah*, a branch-covered booth, during the autumn holiday of Sukkot—that is, most everyone, except Rabbi Yitzchak Greenberg and his wife Sara, who for eight consecutive years could not eat in their sukkah. No, this is not in the Soviet Union or some other country where religious freedom does not exist, or where Jews are such a minority that they are afraid to be different. No, this was New York City where Jews are everywhere and where religious freedom reigns.

Rabbi Greenberg earned his living as a high school science teacher in the New York City public school system. On the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, he served as the rabbi at the Interboro Jewish Center in East New York. The once flourishing Jewish neighborhood had become quite dangerous, yet the Jews who remained in the neighborhood had pure, simple faith. In the mid-Sixties, they had built a beautiful synagogue, with a stained-glass skylight and colorful murals on the walls.

Every Friday afternoon, Rabbi and Mrs. Greenberg would leave the comfort and safety of their Oceanside, Long Island, home and move into an apartment in East New York. The rabbi and his wife fell in love with the members of the synagogue, who were all so sweet and kind and sincerely religious. When Rabbi and Mrs. Greenberg would arrive in synagogue on Friday evening, everyone would stand and applaud. They deserved it! After services, as a safety precaution, the forty or so congregants, who were all middle-aged and elderly, would walk the Rabbi and his wife to their “Shabbos apartment,” and afterwards to each other’s homes.

During those years, one Jew after another was maimed, robbed, and even murdered, some in their own apartments. Nobody was safe. In the back of the synagogue, there had once been a sturdy wooden-framed sukkah. But every night during the Sukkot holiday, youngsters who lived in the apartment building overlooking the synagogue’s yard would hurl bricks and boulders onto the loose and flimsy bamboo poles that served as the *s’chach*¹ that covered the sukkah. Good luck pronouncing it, but this *s’chach* has to resemble the porous nature of the “Clouds of Glory” that protected the freed Hebrews as they wandered for 40 years in the Sinai Desert.

¹ Doesn’t have to be bamboo. Branches of palm trees, corn husks, grain stalks, reed or rattan woven mats, etc, so long as they grow naturally and the roof made from them is porous enough that stars can be seen through it and rain can’t be kept out completely.

Finally, in 1985, a week before Rosh Hashanah, the synagogue's president telephoned Rabbi Greenberg, "Rabbi, we're closing the shul. We can't even get ten men for a minyan."

Sad as he was to see the synagogue close down, Rabbi Greenberg was happy to finally have a chance to celebrate the upcoming Sukkot holiday in a sukkah. And what a perfect location for a sukkah—on the patio of his Oceanside home, facing the waterfront. He built a sukkah and it looked gorgeous. His wife adorned the table beautifully with silver candlesticks and fine china. Rabbi and Mrs. Greenberg eagerly looked forward to the evening, when they would eat the first festival meal in their sukkah.

Just before sunset, Mrs. Greenberg lit the *Yom Tov* holiday candles. Suddenly, it became dark. Thick, dark clouds filled the sky. Without warning, CRAACK! Lightning zapped across the darkened sky. Thunderous clapping and a fierce storm whipped across the waterfront. For five minutes, the house shook from the thunder and violent wind.

The storm ended as suddenly as it had begun. Fearing the worst, Rabbi Greenberg walked onto the patio. "*Ribono Shel Olam*—Master of the Universe!" he cried.

Amazingly, the sukkah was still standing (actually leaning, which was good enough for it still to be considered kosher). However, the bamboo poles, which served as the sukkah's makeshift roof, had crashed on the set table, knocking over the candlesticks and bouncing the china to the ground. Bamboo poles were everywhere except on top of the sukkah. Without the s'chach above, the sukkah was not considered a sukkah.

The Rabbi felt dejected. It was already evening and the Sukkot holiday had begun. The first two days of Sukkot are special like the Sabbath, and Jewish Law forbids one to build a sukkah on those days; one is not even allowed to touch the bamboo, let alone put it back on the sukkah's roof.

It's enough of a test of faith when it rains on the first night of the seven-day Sukkot holiday. Some people may even take it as a slight, or in a humbler spirit, as a sign of God's displeasure. After all, God invites every Jew to sit in His holy booth and then He dumps water on us!

A chasid tries to look at every situation in a positive light, and would view a rainstorm on the Sukkot holiday as a test from God. The chasid will show God that he loves the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah so much that he will joyfully eat in the sukkah even when the rain is pouring through. But Rabbi Greenberg did not even have that opportunity, because according to Jewish law, his sukkah was no longer valid to eat in.

"We sacrificed and suffered these past eight years not eating in a sukkah. And now this happens!" Rabbi Greenberg vented to his wife, who was quietly cutting vegetables for a salad. This was a difficult test, even for a chasid.

Rabbi Greenberg trudged upstairs to his study and searched in his tomes of Jewish law. In such a case, where he had no other sukkah to eat in, did the Law permit him to place the bamboo back on? He found the ruling: the s'chach can only be replaced on top of the sukkah by a non-Jew.

Where was he going to find a handy person tonight to fix his sukkah and come out in this weather?

Just then, Rabbi Greenberg recalled a story he had heard years earlier.

About 200 years ago, in a shtetl in Eastern Europe, the entire community chipped in money to help a poor bridegroom get started in a business. Following the community's advice, the groom bought a horse and wagon and drove to the market to buy flour, which he would then resell in the village.

One day, he bought sacks of flour with the remainder of his money, and carefully loaded them onto the wagon. While riding home, a violent gust of wind flipped his wagon over. All the sacks of flour were flung onto the rocky ground. The sacks burst open and the wind blew the flour away. The young man turned upright the empty wagon, and feeling totally distraught drove straight to his Rebbe. The sad groom told the Rebbe about the terrible misfortune.

After a few minutes of deep meditation, the Rebbe said, "God made that wind. I have to call Him to a *din Torah* (a rabbinical court hearing)."

The Rebbe wept and pleaded the case for the groom. Minutes passed. Finally, the Rebbe looked up and smiled. "You have won the case. Now, return to your village and all will be well."

On the road home, the groom's wagon got stuck in the mud. The unlucky groom took a broken branch and tried to dig out the wheel. The branch struck against something hard and he pushed it out of the mud. It was a chest! The young man pried it open and, behold, it was overflowing with gold coins and jewels.

After searching in vain for its owner, a judge ruled that since apparently robbers had hidden this treasure in the ground and there was nobody to whom he could return the treasure, the groom was allowed to keep it. The couple invested their fortune wisely, and became known throughout the land for their generosity and warm hospitality.

After recalling this poignant story, Rabbi Greenberg put his head on the table and cried. For eight years, he had been unable to eat a holiday meal in a sukkah because of the danger of eating outside in a sukkah in East New York. But, now, Rabbi Greenberg finally had the opportunity to eat in his own sukkah and God's wind had blown it down.

After intense concentration and heartfelt tears, Rabbi Greenberg lifted his head, smiling. “Dear,” he said to his wife, “I feel like I won the court case.”

Barely two minutes had passed, there was a knock on the door. A man stood at the door with a toolbox and rope. “Robby! What are you doing here?”

“I came to fix your booth,” Robby said. Then, without even waiting for a response, Robby entered the house, walked through the living room and dining room, and stepped onto the patio.

Rabbi Greenberg was in shock. He had not seen Robby for nine or ten years. Robby, who was not Jewish, worked as a licensed electrician for an observant Jew in Spring Valley, New York. Each time the business was going to be closed for a Jewish holiday, Robby would take the homebound train to Oceanside, Long Island, and pop into the nearby Ocean Harbor Jewish Center. There he would find Rabbi Greenberg, who at the time served as a part-time rabbi of this synagogue, and would ask the rabbi what the upcoming holiday that was providing him a vacation was about.

Now, standing on the Rabbi’s patio, Robby set down his toolbox and ropes, and inspected the damage to the sukkah. Rabbi Greenberg stood behind him, shaking his head in disbelief. “Robby, you’ve never been to my home. How did you know where I lived?”

“I knew you lived in Oceanside [Robby lived in Long Beach, which was one town over], so I looked up your address in the phone book,” Robby answered, while anchoring down the sukkah with ropes. “Now, Rabbi, if you don’t mind waiting inside your house, I’ll be finished in no time.”

Twenty short minutes later, Robby stepped into the house. “It’s all done, Rabbi. So now, have a happy holiday.”

“Robby, who sent you? How did you know to come here? You must be an angel of G*d.”

“No, I’m no angel,” Robby laughed. “During the storm, a crazy feeling lured me to go onto my veranda. When I saw the strong winds, I said, ‘Now it’s that holiday of booths. I bet Rabbi Greenberg’s blew down and he needs help.’”

Robby smiled. “Rabbi and Mrs. Greenberg, have a beautiful holiday.”

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Source: Modified and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article by Tzvi Jacobs, who heard the story directly from Rabbi Yitzchak and Sara Greenberg. **Tzvi Jacobs**, born in 1954 in Charleston, South Carolina, is the author of “*From the Heavens to the Heart*.” He currently lives in Monsey, New York. His books are now available on Amazon in book and Kindle editions. See [TzviJacobs .com](http://TzviJacobs.com).

*Why this Week?* Festival of SUKKOT