What does the succa tell us about where the ‘natural’ ends and man’s making, the ‘artificial,’ begins? Cheryl-Shira Leibowitz and Roald Hoffmann ponder the contemporary philosophical relevance of an ancient Jewish observance.

Can you build a Succa from an elephant?

In contrast to the carte blanche for walls, there are three strict requirements that dictate which materials may be used for the roof. Under the laws of Lev. 23:42-43, one must live in booths seven days, so your Sukkah may not be configured so that its walls may be of wood, cloth, plastic, and metal. "All things are valid for walls," says the Talmud (Bava Metzia 12a), which then challenges its own statement by asking: "Even live animals?"

This launches a debate about kosher materials. As of the wall, since it meets the minimal size requirements. Four objections are raised, and followed by responses: What if the wall wants to escape? So put it on a leash. What about the space between its legs? Fill it with palm branches. What if it sits down? So tie it with cords from above. What if it dies? Even if it leaves a bit, the succah still meets the minimal wall-size specifications. The bottom line is: Yes! An elephant is kosher to serve as a Succa wall.

Most certainly the Talmudic sages were not besotted by questions of kosher materials. Rather, the discussion is a search for the boundaries of a definition. The Mishnah declares: "All things are valid for walls" and the Gemara asks: "Even elephants?"

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joined in Deut. 16:13: "You shall make the Succot festival..." A growing vine is nature-made, and is not a fulfillment of this injunction ordering us, humans, to "make" the festival. Even cutting a vine that has been trained over the succa is not enough. After being severed, each vine has to be lifted and set down again on the tree. This is what we have done, making not nature, but the nature.

But lest we go too far in making the succa human-made, the upper boundary is restricted. Rule dictates that the succa will not become too man-made and lose its natural properties. It is phrased in the language of the Talmudic laws relating to ritual purity and impurity, but the implications are startlingly modern.

TO UNDERSTAND the third succa requirement, we must take a short excursion into the laws of ritual purity, because they are a bordering - e.g., ritual and unclean - and so much stone in Jerusalem excavations.

A pattern thus seems to emerge: materials that are further from their natural state and undergo more transformations are more susceptible to impurity - e.g., wood, leather, bone, cloth, sackcloth and baked clay can become impure. Glass is classified with metal because both materials are recycled.

A succa is made of materials from the living world, unrefined, not created by humans. Certain objects make people mindful of the natural world, and the world is made up of living beings, not just human beings.

One of the good things about a succa is that you should build your own. Even if it is made of materials that are considered impure, you should erect it yourself. Most of us live in houses or apartments built by others, and the purer parts of food bread baking and professional. Like baking-baking, succa-building gives us the chance to enjoy the fruits of our own labour.

A THIRD factor that makes us seek out the succa is the need for the chance, the unique, the growing that is life. A pine struggling to grow in a dry, stony soil is a living thing, and we feel it forward in time to when it, or its offspring, will eventually split that rock. Or it can send our memory back to a moment in their planting. This associative capacity of the soul is at work when we in our collective historical memories a reollection of God's grace in providing bread for us after we could not.

The fineness of the succa is designed to remind us of our own vulnerability to nature, which is neutral but often irrational to anthropocentric us. This is embodied in the law that a succa could not be built in a place where a succa.

WHAT EMERGES from the laws of Succot is that the Talmudic mind 2,000 years ago were deeply engaged in dividing the world around us into categories that at first seem bizarre. But their schemes of categorization shed light on our present-day concerns about the amount of artifice and synthetic in our lives.

In recent decades there has been renewed interest in issues concerned with nature vs. technology, and the "natural" vs. "crafted" debate continues to this day. The distinction between natural and artificial has a hold on our psyche in daily life. Why is it that we often seek out the natural, whether we are discussing the Talmudic debate, or readers of The Jewish Catalogue, or even chemists manufacturing synthetics?

There are psychological and ethical forces at work in determining our preferences for the natural. Some of these factors can explain the attraction of Succot for us moderns. One factor is romance, an irresistible drive for what no longer is or cannot be. This probably accounts for the popularity of the nostalgic painting of a succa by Oppenheim. There is a certain irony in the fact that this painting, indeed every succa, is an unnatural, but entrancing attempt to replicate the natural. Such romantic paintings have a hold on us that is stronger than reality because of the image in our minds. A reading out for nature, for real wood, the smell of hay, the feel of the wind in the sails, still determines our desires. Our penchant for romance extends to other areas. It doesn't matter that old trains are no more, dirty buildings. When we think of an old train station, we see Ingrid Bergman saying good-bye to Leslie Howard, and that scene forms an image in our minds of a train station should be like.

Similarly, it doesn't matter that feeding a large family cramped in a dingy succa on a damp, windy night is no picnic; our minds' succa is just right.

Another reason we are attracted to the natural is the alienation we feel when our circuits are overloaded with the unnatural and synthetic in the environment. Sometimes the superabundance of artificial objects repels us. The typical American motel room, for instance, offers little respite from the artificial. The variety of plastics and synthetic fibres in the furnishings is astonishing and even intellectually interesting, as a basis for a course in polymer chemistry. But one is hardly attracted to the setting. We are distanced from our tools, from the effects of our actions. We see it in routine work on an assembly line, in selling lingerie, even in scientific research. We work repetitively, not necessarily on something whole. But there is something deep within us that makes us want to see the nature of a human hand on a product.

The Jewish Catalogue prescribes certain rules that we need to know. One of the good things about a succa is that you should build your own. Even if it is made of materials that are considered impure, you should erect it yourself. Most of us live in houses or apartments built by others, and the purer parts of food bread baking and professional. Like baking-baking, succa-building gives us the chance to enjoy the fruits of our own labour.

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