



STARTING in the 1860s, the German-Jewish painter Moritz Oppenheim produced a set of 20 "Pictures of Traditional Jewish Family Life" that brought him fame in his lifetime. The book version of the series may have been the most popular Jewish book ever published in Germany. One of the scenes features a succa. (See reproduction of Oppenheim's painting)

A well-to-do Jewish family is seated at the holiday table in the succa, erected in the leaf-strewn yard. We peer in through the curtained doors to see the family patriarch making Kiddush over what is probably a home-made raisin wine, while the *halla* is covered with a delicate silk damask. His wife, holding the baby, sits at the table with the other family members. As the maid brings the steaming chicken soup, the family cat watches her hoping that she will spill the porcelain tureen. Two German schoolboys peek in at the curious scene and probably wonder: Why on earth are these Jews eating outdoors in this weird booth on a chilly autumn day?

The scene is ostensibly a celebration of nature. Or is it? What is natural about this succa and what is unnatural?

The family pictured is not really back-to-nature. From floor to ceiling the succa is festooned with the refinements of the bourgeois family it houses. No leaf or stray bit of nature touches the lush carpet that covers the wooden floor. The drapes, no flimsy affair, are the very same heavy satin curtains that appear in the other scenes Oppenheim painted of the family's regular dining room. The oil-filled crystal chandelier would be equally in place in a ballroom. The mahogany-framed painting on the wall, the fine linen tablecloth, the hand-painted china, and the holiday finery remind us that this is no picnic in nature.

In fact, the whole idea of building a succa is unnatural. We erect a patent-synthetic imitation of the booths that sheltered the Israelites during their desert wanderings, as commanded in Lev. 23:42-43. "You shall

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?

live in booths seven days...so your descendants may be reminded that I provided booths for the Israelites to live in when I brought them out of the land of Egypt..."

The timing of the festival is also most unnatural – just at the start of the autumn rains in Eretz Yisrael, when most people would rather be indoors.

The only intrusion of nature is the succa's roof, which is bathed in – indeed, made of – leafy boughs. Everything else is unnatural – that is, made by human hands.

In contrast to the idyllic scene Oppenheim portrays, the reality of eating in a succa is not always so attractive. A rabbi from Phoenix, Arizona, where autumn temperatures can go

up to 40 degrees centigrade, reports that the question most frequently posed to him was: "Is it kosher to air-condition the succa?"

On the other hand, olim from Anchorage, Alaska tell of building the succa walls from igloo-like ice-blocks!

The only item these two structures have in common with each other, and with Oppenheim's succa, is the leafy roof. The name of the holiday reveals that the root of "Succot" is the roof.

"One's name reflects one's essence" – "...*khishmo kayn hoo*," we read in I Sam. 25:25. Succot is the plural of "sukka," which means "booth" or "tabernacle." The root of "sukka" is "s'chach," meaning "covering" or "protection." Thus, for the

essence of the succa, and of the entire holiday, we must look up to the roof.

JEWISH LAW devotes much thought to defining which materials are kosher – valid – for the roofing, the *s'chach*. Here we gain insight into how tradition differentiated natural from unnatural, and perhaps find an answer to our question about Oppenheim's succa: Where does the natural leave off and the man-made begin?

The material that goes into the roof is crucial to the answer to this question, in contrast to the irrelevance of the material that forms the walls.

There must be at least three walls, and they must be of a certain height, width, and length. But there are no restrictions on material. The succa

walls may be of wood, cloth, brick, plastic, or metal. "All things are valid for walls," says the Talmud (*Succa* 12a), which then challenges its own statement by asking: "Even live animals?"

This launches a debate (23a) about whether an elephant may be used as a wall, since it meets the minimal size requirements. Four objections are raised, and followed by retorts: What if the elephant 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 Jumbo shrinks a bit, the carcass 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 besieged by questioners wishing to build succot from elephants. Rather, the discussion is a search for the boundaries of a definition. The Mishna declares: "All things are valid for walls" and the Gemara asks: "Even elephants?" The sages are not satisfied with generalizations, but demand logic and specificity when fleshing out a definition.

IN CONTRAST to the *carte blanche* for walls, there are three strict requirements that dictate which materials may be used for the roof. Underlying these dry laws we find a very complex philosophical approach to the question raised above, "What is natural and what is unnatural?"

The *s'chach* covering the succa, to be kosher, must

- 1) have grown from the ground;
- 2) be cut off from its roots;
- 3) be incapable of becoming ritually impure.

The first two requirements imply that the roofing materials must originate in nature but may not be used in their natural state. These rules form the lower boundary of the spectrum of kosher materials. A growing vine trained across a succa top is too natural. It is not kosher because human beings did not make it. We are en-

