

Beyond Walls: Cultivating Safe Spaces in our Sukkah and in Education

Children need a safe space. Research shows that safe spaces can boost student aspirations and motivation to learn.¹ Safe spaces can take many different forms.

A safe space can be literal — like a physical location that offers protection from inclement weather, war or other violence. It could be anything from a steel-reinforced structure to a bench under a shady tree or a simple shelter from the rain.

But a safe space can also be emotional or intellectual — a place where people can be themselves without fear of bullying or assault. It could be a welcoming room that invites learners in, or a campus where all feel included and valued.

Safe spaces are not a modern invention. When David HaMelekh was running away from his enemies, he sought physical refuge in the caves in the wilderness of Judea, as well as spiritual refuge in the sukkah of Hashem, for which he proclaims gratitude in Mizmor 27.²

When Bnai Yisrael followed Moshe out of Egypt into the desert, Hashem provided them with a safe space in the form of sukkot, which the Rabbis interpreted to be either actual huts or a

series of protective clouds known as the Ananay HaKavod.³ We recognize and thank Hashem for His protection by observing the holiday of Sukkot.⁴

The Ananay HaKavod, given in the merit of Aharon, were one of three gifts, according to the Gemara, that Hashem provided for us in the desert.⁵ The others were water [in the merit of Miriam] and food/manna [in the merit of Moshe]. No holiday derives from those gifts. Why do we have a holiday, then, that commemorates the Clouds?

HaRav Ovadyah Yosef, in his talmudic commentary *Meor Yisrael*, quotes the 16th-17th-century Rav Chaim Kesufi of Alexandria and Cairo⁶ that there was an intrinsic difference between the Ananay HaKavod and the food and water that were also provided for Bnai Yisrael in the desert. It is impossible to survive in a desert without food and water, so after commanding Bnai Yisrael to leave Egypt and follow Him into the desert (Jer. 2:2), Hashem was obligated to provide those for their needs. The Ananay HaKavod were not strictly required in the same way, much appreciated as they obviously were, and reflect *ahavat Hashem*, the love that Hashem has for us and His desire to protect us. Hashem wanted to give us more than we needed. He wanted to make sure we had a space that was safe.

It is the very image of the love that Hashem has for us and His protection over us that we recall in the brakha after Shema during Maariv, when we ask



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Hashem: *pros aleinu sukkat shelomekha*, to spread over us a sukkah/canopy of peace and to direct us with good counsel and to save us.

Sometimes we take our safe spaces for granted, and sometimes we mistakenly believe we are safe. We tend to consider our homes to be safe spaces, but the COVID pandemic showed us otherwise. It highlighted the concern for children whose homes were not truly safe.

We feel it acutely since October 7, 2023 when people were attacked or burned in their homes; when others had to flee their homes in order to stay safe; when so many are still displaced from their homes.

For those of us who are teachers, we need to think as never before how to provide physically safe and emotionally safe places for our students, while not shrinking from teaching or discussing difficult issues, appropriate for the age level.

We can and should properly structure our physical environment. We can and should arrange the furniture in our room in a way that is inviting and welcoming. We can and should use natural light when possible and think about the sounds and smells that



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permeate the room. We can and should be there as class begins to greet every student as they enter the classroom, and make them feel welcome and special.

We can and must structure our educational environment. We can and must establish norms in the classroom that allow students to make mistakes and to learn from them. We can and must encourage creativity. We can and must encourage reflection and self-expression. We must never forget that students learn in different ways and can demonstrate what they have learned in different ways.

We can and will structure our social environment in schools and on college campuses. We can and will work with the students to establish norms of behavior where respect rules the day — respect between the teachers and the students, respect among the students, respect that each student should have for him or herself.

It has been a year since the safe spaces of those who live in Azza were violated; it has been a year of living on edge for all sensitive souls.

More than ever, we pray to Hashem *prosaieinu sukkat shelomekha*, to spread His sukkah of shalom over us and *ve-hagen ba'adeinu, ve-haser me-aleinu oyev*, to

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protect us and to remove our enemies, and *be-tzel kenafekha tastireinu*, to shelter us in the shadow of His wings.

Endnotes

1. Ward, N. et al. (2011). Creating a safe space to learn: The significant role of graduate students in fostering educational engagement and aspirations among urban youth in *Community Psychol.*44(1): 33–36. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4123117/>. See also Zins, J. E., Payton, J. W., Weissberg, R. P., & O'Brien, M. U. (2007). Social and emotional learning for successful school performance. In G. Matthews, M. Zeidner, & R. D. Roberts (Eds.), *The science of emotional intelligence: Knowns and unknowns* (pp. 376–395). Oxford University Press. Actually, we all need safe (and quiet) spaces particularly in our world where social media and other news and cultural updates continually impose themselves on our attention. I use the phrase “safe space” unironically in spite of the controversy (and ridicule in some quarters) that it has been subjected to. Of course, some have abused the notion of “safe space” to infantilize young adults or to push (or bully)

others to accept a particular position with no chance of discussion. That is not the sort of space any of us should need.

2. See Tehillim 27, 5: *כִּי יִצְפְּנֵנִי בְּסֻכַּת בְּיָוִם רָעָה: יְסַתְרֵנִי, בְּסֻתֵּר אֶהְיֶה לָּךְ, He will hide me in His sukkah in times of trouble, He will hide me under His tent.*

3. The *Sifra* on Vayikra 23, 43 cites two opinions about the sukkot. Rabbi Eliezer says the sukkot were actual huts in which Bnai Yisrael lived. Rabbi Akiva maintains that the sukkot were special protective clouds known as the Ananay HaKavod. The *Midrash Tanchuma* on Parashat Beshalakh explains that there were seven protective clouds: four that buffered Bnai Yisrael from each of the four directions, one that traveled above them, one that traveled below them. The last cloud, the seventh, traveled ahead of Bnai Yisrael to level the road.

4. Vayikra 23, 43 *לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם, כִּי בְּסֻכּוֹת אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, so that your generations will know that I made the Children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.*

5. TB *Taanit* 9a.

6. <https://halachayomit.co.il/he/Default.aspx?HalachaID=4083&PageIndex=59>

