

A Sukkah-Raising On A Berkshires Farm

When a shelter is a labor of love, and a labor of faith.

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Devora Steinmetz
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I'd never really built a sukkah before. Sure, I've put a few together, attaching metal poles, stringing up fabric, and unrolling bamboo mats. But this was different.

The morning didn't start out too promising. Of all the folks who had offered to help or whom I had recruited the evening before, only Dave showed up. Robert had forgotten that he had a doctor's appointment, Gabe was going home for the weekend, Joel couldn't get out of bed, Jessica was nowhere to be seen. But Robert had a few minutes to show us where we might find some wood, and Dave and I scavenged the farm to gather whatever materials we could find. We picked up a few old pieces of plywood in the shed near the sugar house, some more in the old greenhouse now used for storage, and some poles and long sticks, discarded from recent lumbering, between the gravel pit and the pig house.

We loaded our finds in the back of the pickup truck and drove it back to the site that we'd chosen, the flat grassy area not far from the dining room, where the old red barn used to be. Micah found us there and asked if he could help, so we all rode down to the corn – the animal corn, at Robert's suggestion, since it grows taller than people corn. Jessica had insisted, the night before, that corn would make good walls. Dave dug up an ancient-looking two-handed scythe, and he cut stalks of corn while Micah and I loaded them into the pickup.

This is Gould Farm, a therapeutic farm community in the Southern Berkshires, where people who are struggling with mental illness come to spend a few months as they grow toward more independent lives, working in teams with staff and volunteers on jobs that are essential to the life of the farm, living together and alongside staff and their families, and sharing meals, conversation, and leisure activities. Dave is a young staff member, great-grandson of a couple who came to the farm in its early years and lived and worked there their entire lives. I am a volunteer. The others are "guests," the term used for those who come to the farm in search of healing. The term has been used since the days when everyone really was a guest of Will and Agnes Gould, deeply religious Christians who founded the farm community nearly 100 years ago in an attempt to live out what they believed were the interwoven commandments to love God and to love one's fellow.

After lunch, everything turned around. Joel woke up and joined the group, Jeremy asked if he could help, and pretty soon Paul came by and pitched in. I hadn't touched a saw since I was a child, but Dave didn't say anything when I asked for a turn and took way too long to cut a couple of pieces of wood to size. Peter passed by and, silent as always,

gently moved the pole that I was cutting along the sawhorses so that the area marked for cutting was in the right spot. Soon I handed over the saw to Micah, so that he could share in the work. Here at the farm, the work that you do, no matter how amateurishly executed, is greeted with appreciation, as everyone knows that work — most often physical labor — sustains the community while restoring a sense of personal worth and meaning.

Pretty soon, the concept that Dave and I had worked out began to take shape. Boards were cut and laid out in a 12-by-9-foot rectangle, posts were cut and attached to the baseboards, and thin beams were nailed to the posts on the short sides for the frame of the roof. Soon, we had what looked like a regular barn-raising, as everyone worked together to hold up the two sides while Dave nailed them to the longer beams. The frame of the sukkah was complete.

The work picked up now, as we figured out how to arrange the odd-sized pieces of plywood to more-or-less fill in the walls. I'd decided to use them only for the bottom part of the walls and to complete the walls by nailing the corn stalks all around them. Dave started to nail the plywood to the bottom of the frame, and I suggested cross-beams to give them more stability. I marked the first one for cutting and soon the others started measuring and sawing and nailing the cross-beams into place. I borrowed the electric screwdriver to try out tacking a few cornstalks to the walls, while the guests spontaneously started on the framework to hold the branches that we would cut for the schach, or covering. Paul found some thin rope, and the group figured out how to tie down our odd-lengthed sticks to make a diagonal crisscross over the roof beams.

By the time we went in for 4 o'clock tea, our structure was completed, only waiting for the rest of the cornstalks to be nailed to the walls and for branches to be cut for the schach, work to be done at our leisure over the coming days. Building a sukkah at Gould Farm reminded me that Sukkot is about a journey through the unknown from a place of enslavement to a place that one can call home — and that, while the journey may be more rawly apparent for the guests at the farm, we are all fellow travelers through this wilderness.

Building a sukkah at the farm reminded me that Sukkot is about gratitude and about appreciating the fruits of one's own and one's fellows' labor — and that work is valuable according to the effort put in and the service that it performs for others.

Building a sukkah at the farm reminded me that Sukkot is about leaving behind, if only temporarily, the stuff that we think we need and basking in the shelter and protection of caring and presence — a shelter that can be built of fraying plywood and animal corn lovingly gathered in a community built on faith.

I never built this kind of sukkah before.

Devora Steinmetz has taught Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Drisha Institute, Havruta, and Yeshivat Hadar, and she serves as an educational consultant for the Mandel Foundation.