

Spread Over Us A Sukkah Of Shalom

By Arthur Waskow

One of the deepest themes of the fall cycle of Jewish festivals is that we turn toward life. From Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, we reach within ourselves to make this turning; and then at Sukkot we go out into the world to build a house of life.

This year, the ancient Jewish cycle of festival-time coincides with a modern American cycle of decision-time, the election cycle. And this year, in both cycles it will be especially appropriate to focus on turning toward life -- life for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren. For this year we face the serious possibility of putting a brake on the nuclear arms race and thus turning one small step away from the dreadful death of all Earth's children and our entire planet.

For years, many Jewish organizations have urged a halt in the nuclear arms race. Now the U.S. House of Representatives has voted to take

part, along with the Soviet Union, in a moratorium on tests of nuclear weapons. The road is not entirely clear, because the Reagan Administration is opposing such a moratorium -- even though the Soviets have invited on-site verification. So in the American election cycle, there is now more possibility of turning toward life and away from nuclear death than at any time in years.

In the Jewish cycle, the harvest festival of Sukkot has in the last few years become "Sukkat Shalom" -- a focus for concern with life and peace. This year, Sukkat Shalom has grown much stronger at both national and local-community levels. Such national organizations as the American Jewish Congress, the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogue bodies, and New Jewish Agenda have joined with the Shalom Center to encourage observance of Sukkat Shalom. The United Synagogue's Commission on Education has identified Shemini Atzeret at the end of Sukkot as a time for Atzeret L'Hayyim -- a Gathering for Life.

Why has the community identified Sukkot as the time to address this question? One of the most moving prayers of our tradition begins, "Ufros alenu sukkat shlomkha" -- "Spread over us the sukkah of shalom." For sukkah is vulnerable and open. If its leafy roof keeps out the rain -- then it is not a sukkah. Offhand, this seems not the house for feeling one's self secure and peaceful; for it is too vulnerable to enemies.

Yet this is just the point. Our ultimate security, the sukkah teaches, lies in sharing the knowledge of how insecure we are.

And in the nuclear age, this is especially true. Under the shadow of the H-bomb, all peoples and all life on earth live in a sukkah. No fallout shelter or "invulnerable laser shield" -- the exact opposites of sukkah -- can protect us. Even if "our own" H-bombs landed half a world away in the Soviet Union, they would be triggering nuclear winter, destroying life in North America. Chernobyl was only a hint of how meaningless the Bomb makes national boundaries.

And so in our generation the best path toward shalom is recognizing our vulnerability and working to end the nuclear arms race.

In 1986, and 1988, and 1990...there will be a national election a few weeks after Sukkot. The value-commitments that Jews make during Sukkot can become action-commitments a few weeks later, when the time comes to vote. We can carry our commitment from harvest booth to voting booth.

What does it mean to make Sukkat Shalom? In Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles, there will be major candidates' forums at leading synagogues. First a Jewish speaker will lay out a "Jewish yardstick" for judging the arms-control issues that will come before Congress -- and

then the Democratic and Republican candidates for House and Senate will respond with their own positions.

In San Francisco and Miami, the Jewish Community Relations Councils will dedicate a community-wide Sukkah as a Sukkat Shalom.

In hundreds of synagogues and local Jewish organizations, rabbis will be giving sermons, schools will be teaching, and sisterhoods, brotherhoods, youth groups, and social-action committees will be studying how to apply Jewish values and history to the nuclear issue. Materials for such programs are available from The Shalom Center, Church Road and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, PA 19095.

So this year there is a way to take the promises we make to our selves, each other, and God on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur -- and make them real in the world at Sukkot by turning toward life for ourselves and all our children.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Copyright 1986 by The Shalom Center. Waskow is the author of Seasons of our Joy, a handbook of Jewish festivals; director of The Shalom Center, a national center for Jewish perspectives on preventing nuclear holocaust; and a member of the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.)

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Jerusalem...Danny Blau, a medical electronics engineer at the Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, has been named the "Best Worker in Israel" by Maariv, the nation's leading evening newspaper. Blau, the father of five children who immigrated to Israel from Yugoslavia in 1949, is responsible for the installation and maintenance -- and, when necessary, the invention -- of the Medical Center's highly sophisticated electronic equipment. Among the instruments he developed are devices for controlling drug dosage during inhalation therapy for asthma and for measuring hydrogen levels in the brain.

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