

Temporarily Permanent: Sukkot & The Injustice of Rikers Island

Sukkot 5786

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Chag sameach! There is a paradox at the root of our observance of Sukkot. The sukkah, our festival booth meant to remind us of the huts that the Israelites lived in after escaping from Egypt, is supposed to be both temporary *and* permanent. As we just read in our Torah this morning, we are to dwell in these sukkot for seven days every year; they are temporary structures, meant to be constructed for this holiday, and then deconstructed when Sukkot ends. Masechet Sukkah, an entire tractate of our Talmud, explains the ways in which this structure must be made temporary, detailing the maximum height of the structure, the contours of the roof, the allowable components to create the walls, and more. The sukkah is a temporary structure for a temporary holiday that reminds us of our fragility in the world.

And yet, for all of the temporary aspects of the sukkah, we are supposed to treat the sukkah as a permanent structure. Our ancestors dwelled in these structures, protecting them from the sands and heat of the wilderness. Again, in Maschet Sukkah, specifically in 28b, we read: “כָּל שִׁבְעַת יְמֵי הַיָּמִים אָדָם עוֹשֶׂה סוּכָּה סוּכָּתוֹ קָבֵעַ, וּבֵיתוֹ עֲרָאִי renders their *sukkah* their permanent residence and their house their temporary residence.” And how are we to make it feel permanent? We’re supposed to bring beautiful decorations from our home and put them into the sukkah. We’re supposed to bring our bedding from our home and put it into the sukkah. We’re supposed to eat and drink and sleep in the sukkah all week long. This sukkah is supposed to be permanent...at least for the week of Sukkot.

Again, our sukkah is a paradox: A structure that is fragile but also sturdy. A structure that protects us from the elements but allows us to feel connected to nature. A structure made to feel like home, but, at the end of the week, will be dismantled. Our sukkah is temporarily permanent and invites us to consider the pieces of our lives and of the world that are also temporarily permanent.

This morning, I'd like to share with you the experiences of New Yorkers, people in our city, who also find themselves in a temporarily permanent situation like our sukkah, but unlike our sukkah, they will not leave after seven days of joy and festival. Right now, 13 miles from here on an island between Queens and The Bronx, there are approximately 7,100 people incarcerated at Rikers Island Jail, our city's largest jail complex. Close to 90% of people incarcerated there are Black or Latino. Of the total number, 6,100, about 86% of the total population at Rikers, is there pre-trial, before having their day in court. In a country in which the Sixth Amendment assures each of us "a speedy and public trial", these folks would only be at Rikers for a number of days, perhaps weeks, while their cases work their way through the system.¹ Temporary...for the vast majority of people incarcerated at Rikers, their stay is supposed to be temporary, as the justice system operates. However, these stays have come to feel more permanent than temporary in many cases. The average length of time for an individual being incarcerated at Rikers Island has grown to 9 months. And right now, there are 200 people at Rikers who have been there for more than 3 years.

¹ Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution.
<https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/amendment-6/>.

When I spoke with Zachary Katznelson, a CBE member, one of the founders of our Dismantling Racism Team, and Executive Director of the Independent Rikers Commission, when I spoke with him about the current conditions at Rikers he said that a “speedy trial doesn’t exist at Rikers, it doesn’t exist in New York City.” Beyond people tragically languishing in jail without a trial, it’s even more devastatingly clear that Rikers is a temporarily permanent place when we remember the 12 people who have died while incarcerated at Rikers in 2025 according to the Vera Institute.² The number is more than 100 over the past 10 years. Whereas our temporarily permanent sukkah is a place that exudes joy, community, and celebration, the temporarily permanent jail cells of Rikers enact hardship, pain, and even death.

² <https://www.vera.org/news/nyc-jail-deaths>.

Although the situation at Rikers is one that should always trouble us, and is the reason why it is one of the advocacy priorities for the Dismantling Racism Team, there is a new development that deserves our attention - and is personally agonizing. Let me explain. A few summers ago, I completed a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. CPE is a requirement for rabbinic students, and gives us hands-on experience providing spiritual and pastoral care for people across different religious backgrounds. As the oldest and one of the biggest public hospitals in the country, Bellevue is open to anyone, literally anyone in this city. I spent much of my time meeting with patients who were uninsured, or undocumented, or unhoused. And, I spent time with patients who were injured while being arrested, handcuffed to their bed while bleeding or in pain in the Emergency Department.

And, I spent time with those who were already imprisoned at Rikers Island Jail. You see, for years now, two floors of Bellevue Hospital have been a satellite campus of Rikers because the facilities and staffing at Rikers weren't sufficient. One floor for people with physical injuries or illnesses, another for people with intense psychiatric needs. For many of these patients, they would be bussed back and forth between Rikers and Bellevue to receive treatment; but about half of the time, patients don't make it for their appointments because of logistical challenges. Over the course of my summer at Bellevue, I went through security, walked through the barred doors and along these floors, and met with these patients, attempting to provide them with any level of spiritual care and comfort one could provide to someone incarcerated and needing hospital-level treatment. I had to be extra courteous and cautious to the guards outside of their rooms, not wanting to jeopardize future visits because they had discretion about who the patients could see outside of doctors and nurses. And while I was grateful that Bellevue provided these floors and treatment to patients at Rikers, I also saw how insufficient it was, how complicated it was, and wondered how many more people at Rikers need this additional support and treatment and how we could make that happen.

As you may know, in 2019, the city legally committed itself to closing Rikers Island Jail by 2027. In making that commitment and planning to lower the number of people at Rikers, the city created plans in 2019 to open 350 new hospital beds for people at Rikers who have intense physical or psychological needs, including 104 beds at Bellevue Hospital. This new unit was supposed to open in 2022, one year before I worked at Bellevue as a chaplain. But with delays, the new and beautiful unit is just now ready to go, three years behind schedule. However, right now, it is sitting empty because the NYC Department of Corrections says that it doesn't have enough officers to staff the new unit.³ This staffing needs state approval, but the city must send staffing plans to the state, which it has not done under the Adams administration. Again, in talking with Zachary Katznelson, it seems that the biggest piece of leverage is to push the mayor, either Mayor Adams or whoever becomes mayor next, to enact this staffing plan, move more people off of Rikers Island, and get them the life-saving care that they need.

³ <https://www.thecity.nyc/2025/07/21/241-million-bellevue-hospital-jail-rikers/>.

This is just one piece, one part of a larger effort for us to close down Rikers Island and create a justice system that actually puts repentance, justice, and repair at the forefront and that works for all of us in this city. And I'm grateful to the leaders of our Dismantling Racism Team who will continue to lead our community in this work and hold our city leaders accountable to its legally mandated obligations regarding Rikers. Because right now we have a temporarily permanent institution that is destroying lives. It is the opposite of our temporarily permanent sukkah, which gives us joy and comfort and support and love. Rikers is supposed to be closed by 2027; by Sukkot of 5788, two years from now, may that be so, and may it be a time of true joy for everyone in this city. Chag sameach!