My Moroccan Succoth

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My father, of blessed memory, was born and raised in the Mellah of Marrakesh. All of the Moroccan traditions I practice on Sukkot are customs I learned and inherited from him.

Those special Moroccan traditions – which I grew up with and practice to this day – adorn Sukkot with an aesthetic beauty and mystical spirituality all its own.

In my Moroccan tradition, the Lulav is far more than the plain spine of a palm branch. Upon bringing it home from the store, the first thing we do is decorate the Lulav with golden threads or ribbons. This is based on a unique tradition dating back to the Mishnah, where it says “The People of Jerusalem bound their Lulavs with strands of gold” (Mishnah Sukkah 3:8). How did this Jerusalem tradition arrive in Morocco? The simple answer would be that someone from Jerusalem brought it there. I think otherwise. If you’ve ever been to a Moroccan Shabbat dinner and seen how we adorn our tables with a colorful array of foods, it makes sense that we’d be attracted to a tradition that decorates our Lulav! As a child, I loved watching my father decorate my Lulav, but that Moroccan custom now belongs to my Ashkenazi wife Peni, who does it with love and her unique creative flair.

Fresh from decorating the Lulav, we enter the Sukkah, often with the spool of golden ribbons still in our hands. Bamboo sticks – not palm fronds – sit above our heads. My father taught me that in his family, the Sukkah was treated as more

than a temporary dwelling place or dining room. It was a sacred space modeled after the Mishkan (Tabernacle), Judaism's original portable sanctuary. In that spirit, the décor of our Moroccan Sukkah – a colorful assortment of fabrics and materials – was inspired by the Torah's commandment to hang in the Mishkan "a curtain made of blue, purple and crimson cloths" (Exodus 26:31). It probably helped that my grandfather sold fabrics for a living! The colorful fabrics are fastened to the Sukkah's walls with decorative hooks, and the golden ribbons left over from decorating the Lulav help line the fabric adorned walls. Moroccan lanterns made of bronze or copper hang as the Sukkah's light fixtures. Upon entering my Moroccan Sukkah, I always feel the striking blend of colors and lights exuding a warmth that is at once physical and spiritual.

A special custom practiced by my father's family was hanging a small "Elijah's Chair" in the Sukkah. My father's grandfather was Rabbi Yosef Pinto, a Kabbalist descended from a long line of mystics originally from Spain. Rabbi Pinto taught my father that the reason we hang Elijah's Chair in the Sukkah is because Elijah the Prophet is the primary teacher of Kabbalah for saintly Moroccan Kabbalists, and on Sukkot, we hope that the spirit of Elijah's sacred teachings permeates our Sukkah. Perhaps my great-grandfather learned this from Elijah himself?

Elijah's Chair was decorated with colorful Moroccan pillows, and it was customary to place various special Sukkot-related books on those pillows.

One of these special books is "Hamad Elohim" (God's Desire), a Sephardic liturgical book devoted entirely to Sukkot. "Hamad Elohim" was the "official Sukkot book" for my father's family, and it remains that for my family today. The book is divided into seven sets of Kabbalistic texts read each night, corresponding to the "Seven Ushpizin" – the seven "special guests" (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David) we invite to our Sukkah. My family welcomes each "special guest" by reading and chanting "Hamad Elohim's" mystical texts in honor of that night's guest.

I have fond memories of sitting with my father and reading from his "Hamad Elohim" every night of Sukkot. The pages radiated a unique aura of spirituality, and my father's sweet chanting animated every sentence on the page. Reading "Hamad Elohim" with my father transported me back to the Sukkot of his upbringing in Marrakech, but it also helped bring the beautiful Moroccan customs from this book into my own Jewish life here in America.

One of those special customs is the “Tikkun Leil Hoshana Rabah,” the all-night Torah study and celebration on the last night of Sukkot. Inspired by the Talmudic description of Hoshana Rabah as an all-night celebration in the Temple in Jerusalem, the Kabbalists turned this last night of Sukkot into a beautiful all night event in the Sukkah. My father’s family hosted the “Tikkun Leil Hoshana Rabah” in their Sukkah for his community in Marrakesh. His description of the evening included a dazzling array of sweet pastries, fresh and dried fruits, and lots of Moroccan Mint Tea with Nana. Of course, there was the presence and Torah teachings of his grandfather, Rabbi Yosef Pinto.

While my upbringing in America and the Sukkah in my own family life lacked the presence of my saintly great-grandfather, we continue to study Torah and eat delicious Moroccan pastries in the Sukkah on Hoshana Rabah.

My father’s favorite Sukkot song was “Sukkah Ve-Lulav,” a Kabbalistic poem composed in Meknes, Morocco by Rabbi Moshe Adahan in the 18th century. With its rhythmic stanzas and joyous tunes, “Sukkah Ve-Lulav” expresses our ultimate state of happiness in observing this beautiful holiday. “Let Israel rejoice in the shade of God’s Sukkah,” we sing, and “Happy are the pure of heart who set their intentions on the secret essence of the Lulav and its accompanying species.”

In January 1993, one week after Peni and I got married, my father gave us a special gift – his “Hamad Elohim” Sukkot book from Morocco. In the personal inscription, written in a beautiful Hebrew, my father wrote to us: “This copy of Hamad Elohim belonged to my beloved father Shalom Bouskila of blessed memory. I’ve held onto this book for forty years, and I now hope that you will hold onto it for many more years, using it every year on Sukkot. May the Seven Ushpizin always protect you.”

Our kids grew up with my father’s “Hamad Elohim” in our Sukkah, along with all of his family’s beautiful Moroccan Sukkot traditions.

I’m proud that we’ve kept these beautiful traditions alive, and look forward to the day when we will inscribe something in our “Hamad Elohim” and pass it on to our kids.

In the spirit of Sukkot, that brings me tremendous joy.