

Sukkah more than symbolic Jewish routines help us cope

As we celebrate Sukkot this week, we'll be thinking about many things – notably, how lucky the vast majority of us are to have a solid roof over our heads. For most of us, the sukkah is but a symbol of our wandering in the desert all those years ago, a symbol to remind us to be humble, empathetic, grateful. However, for many living in Metro Vancouver, including members of our own community, homelessness is a reality.

Last week, we ran a good news story from Tikva Housing Society – residents were moving into the recently completed Storeys complex in Richmond. The Diamond Residences at the Storeys will house six singles (five of whom are seniors) and 12 families. Tikva Housing is also working with various partners on the development of 32 townhouses in Vancouver, and they anticipate accepting residency applications by early 2018. These new projects are in addition to Tikva's Dany Guincher House, in Vancouver – which has 11 units for people with low-income, people with disabilities who are independent and families fleeing abuse – and the Esther Dayson Rent Subsidy Program.

There is a lot of which to be proud. However, there is much more to do. Last year, Tikva Housing reported a decrease in donations to its rent subsidy program of more than \$15,000. As a result, the organization had to decrease the monthly subsidy it provided to singles, couples and families.

According to Tikva, more than 16% of Jewish Vancouver residents – more than 4,200 people – are low-income and at least 450 Jewish children under the age of 15 in Vancouver are “living in households that depend on income assistance.” Its 2015 report on housing in Metro Vancouver concluded a need for 1,827 affordable housing units in the Jewish community, including for “those under 65, low-income singles, couples and families.” Calling this “an unreachable goal,” the report nonetheless suggests some solutions, most of which the Jewish community is already pursuing, such as rent subsidies and partnering with other agencies to develop new projects.

Yet, the problem remains. And, of course, it is not a problem unique to the Jewish community. On Sept. 26, the final report on Metro Vancouver's 2017 Homeless Count was released. On the night of March 7, more than 1,200 volunteers conducted surveys throughout the region, on the streets and at shelters, “to obtain a 24-hour snapshot” of the situation. The final report confirmed the preliminary results – 3,605 were homeless in the metro area.

While there were four percent fewer homeless youth in 2017 as compared to 2014, there were five percent more homeless 55 and older. Overall, there was a 30% increase in homeless since 2014, “and the highest number since 2002, when the first metro-wide count occurred.”

According to the report, “The three most cited barriers to finding housing were the high cost of rent (50%), a lack of income (49%) and the lack of availability of housing that suits their needs (30%).” More than 80% of

respondents reported having “at least one health condition, including addiction, mental illness, physical disability or a medical condition/illness. More than half of the respondents (52%) have two or more health conditions.” More than 40% of respondents received income assistance, 28% a disability benefit; 22% were employed.

Following the local Walk for Reconciliation on Sept. 24, where some 50,000 people – including an organized Jewish contingent – gathered downtown to join in a “call to action,” it is sobering to learn that 34% of the respondents of the Homeless Count self-identified as indigenous/aboriginal. “Indigenous people continue to represent about one-third of the homeless population in the region,” states the report, noting that it's the highest proportion found to date in a regional count and “constitutes a strong over-representation compared to the total population, where two percent identify as aboriginal as per the 2011 Census.”

In a statement of the obvious, Mike Clay, chair of the Metro Vancouver Housing Committee, said, “In order to stem growing homelessness, it is clear we need more affordable housing options.”

But additional solutions are also needed, given the systematic discrimination that still exists for First Nations people and the health conditions many of the homeless are facing – and not only the homeless. Just last week, the *Independent* ran an article on the impact of addiction in our community. Jewish Addiction Community Service (JACS) Vancouver estimates that as many as 5,000 Jews in our community need support, “whether grappling with their own addiction issues or the addiction of a loved one.”

The Homeless Count's findings most likely underestimate the problem. The report references the “hidden” homeless, which includes people “who do not have a regular address of their own where they have security of tenure, and who may be staying temporarily in another household – often called ‘couch surfing.’” The Tikva Housing press release about the new tenants at Storeys noted, “One 83-year-old woman cried when she was told she would be moving into a studio unit, as she has not had a place to live for years and was sleeping on someone's couch.”

Then there are the tens of thousands of people at risk of becoming homeless. Apparently, housing shouldn't account for more than 30% of a person's or family's gross income, yet the Homeless Count report notes there were 56,000 Metro Vancouver households in 2006 that spent more than 50% of their income on shelter, and the number had increased to 62,355 by 2011. (More recent data weren't available but, based on skyrocketing housing costs, we can guess that the number of households spending 50% or more of their income on shelter has also increased.)

There is much to contemplate as we gather in our sukkot this week. And, once the holidays are over, once we celebrate Simchat Torah, thankful for the Jewish texts and traditions that have shaped the moral compass of even the most secular of us in some way, there is a lot of work to be done. ■

JOANNE SEIFF

At 7 a.m., I came downstairs on a school morning and discovered that one of my 6-year-old twins was busy. He'd filled up a container with water so he could watch his expandable water toys grow – again. After the toys grow enormously in the water, we dump out the water. We let them dry and shrink and put them away for a month. This is a frequently repeated ritual in our house. Any good science experiment is one worth repeating, right?

Good teaching requires frequent repetition. Life, it seems, is also probably the best teacher. I've been thinking about how to cope with and learn from the repetition of the Jewish calendar as it applies to life's ups and downs.

One of our dogs, Harry, has been very ill with lymphosarcoma. By the time you read this column, Harry, aged 13 and a half, may no longer be with us. For people who have animals, you know how hard this transition can be. Yes, there are all sorts of veterinary interventions for pets now, but this cycle of life and death can't be avoided. Although, historically, some Jews have lived in cities, away from animals, Jews have also lived, worked and loved animals on farms, in villages, towns and cities. The Talmud teaches us that we must feed our animals before we eat. More generally, Jewish tradition teaches that we must treat animals humanely, and cannot allow an animal to suffer unnecessarily. (This applies even in kashrut, to animals we eat.)

Harry's illness requires our kids to be careful. Our dog is very sore, and cries out sometimes at night, which wakes up the little boys. We've been slowly introducing the topic of dying at odd moments, when we sense our kids need to talk. Jewish tradition has supportive rituals for illness, death and burial. While these aren't necessarily applicable to our bird dog, it's a useful way of remembering that our tradition gives us help during times of illness, death, and in mourning.

The timing of all this has also hit my husband and me. When we pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life, both of us recall relatives who passed away around the time of the High Holidays in years past. If you keep track of the Jewish calendar (as well as the secular one), you may connect Jewish holidays with your personal history, such as associating, as I do, Kol Nidre with the death of a great-uncle, who was walking home from shul when it happened.

Writers have short memories

Editor:

Re: “JVP not enemies of peace” (*Jewish Independent*, Sept. 22). Your letter writers have a short memory of history – sad.

The real issue is that they believe the Palestinians (a piece of terminology invented after June 1967) have been wronged by Israel alone. These writers forget that all the residents in Judea and Samaria were under the thumb of the Turks, the British, the Jordanians and, only after 1967, partially ruled by Israel – they have more self-rule now than at any time in history.

What riles me about these so-called do-gooders, such as the letter writers, is that they completely neglect to mention the hundreds of thousands of Jews kicked out of Arab lands, particularly Yemen, in the late 1940s, and the Jews murdered by various of those countries.

Time to play fair.

Bill Gruenthal, Burnaby

Tying our lives to the Jewish calendar and to these mourning rituals helps us connect to generations of Jews who came before us, who mourned people (and animals) and who made an effort to live with joy as best they could.

Recently, my husband and I became Canadian citizens. We juggled our citizenship ceremony with three trips to the vet in one day. At the ceremony, the official suggested we would always remember the date. Instead, I wondered if I could forget Harry's medical needs while we were at the ceremony.

When we got home, we chose to celebrate becoming Canadian. Friends came over. They'd planned to meet our kids after school if we were late getting back from the ceremony, but we all gathered together instead. My husband got us a cake from Eva's Gelato, and Marcello, one of the (Jewish Argentine) owners, insisted on a big cake – because our citizenship was a big thing! (Thank you, Eva's!)

As Sukkot and Thanksgiving occur, we have this opportunity to reflect, with gratitude, on the amazing things we have. We can be thankful for plentiful harvests and food, for the opportunity to celebrate outside with our families and friends before winter hits, and for our good times, together.

Watching those silly toys expand in the water generated memories of other holidays and happy occasions. When we lived in Kentucky, we were fairly isolated and did not have many Jewish friends nearby. However, we mail-ordered a lulav and etrog, and we built our sukkah on a brick patio in our backyard.

Over the years, we had some big Sukkot dinner parties there. We lit candles, as it was dark in the sukkah, and we would eat a fancy meal with some (non-Jewish) friends to celebrate. Meanwhile, in the yard, just beyond the sukkah, the fancy table setting outside and the lights, I saw that our bird dogs, Harry (the setter mix) and Sally (the pointer mix), were doing every kind of rambunctious (and embarrassing) and loud dog play. Our guests were biology professors, like my husband. They laughed, making jokes about how to observe and understand dog behaviour, before returning to enjoying their meal and time outdoors. Harry the dog stopped roughhousing so he could chase crickets as they hopped about on the bricks.

We use ritual and holidays to mark time

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