Sukkah more than symbolic

Joanne Seiff

A s 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 shared 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 Guichner 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 to do as well. Last year, Tikva Housing reported a decrease in donations with other agencies to develop new projects. Tikva Housing reported a decrease in donations with other agencies to develop new projects.

As Sukkot and Thanksgiving occur, we have an 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 mailed-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 dog, Harry (the setter mix) and Sally (the pointer mix), were doing every kind of rambunctious (and embarrassing) and loud dog play.

The Tikva Housing press release about the new tenants cited 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. Since 2002, when the first metro-wide count occurred.

While there were four percent fewer homeless people in Metro Vancouver in 2017 compared to 2016, there were five percent more homeless 55 and older. Overall, there was a 30% increase in homelessness since 2014, and “the highest number since 2001, when we counted the first metro-wide count occurred.”

According to the report, “The most cited barriers to finding housing were the high cost of rent (49%), 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.”

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 to join in prayer 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, some of which Harry had, but the quality 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.

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!)

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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 outside. 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