

Grown, Cut, and Not a Tool

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 25 September 2026

The Three Laws of Schach and the Kind of Roof a People May Live Under

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This morning, all over Jerusalem, people are climbing ladders with armfuls of palm fronds, bamboo mats, and pine branches. By candle lighting the roofs will be on. Most of us will do it without thinking much about what the halakhah actually demands of the covering.

It demands three things. They are worth thinking about, because a roof is the most political object a person can build. Whoever covers you claims to protect you. The Torah is very particular about what may cover a Jew in the week of dwelling.

The rule

The Mishnah gives it in one sentence: *zeh haklal* — this is the principle — anything that is susceptible to ritual impurity, or that does not grow from the ground, may not be used as schach; anything that grows from the ground and is not susceptible to impurity may be used (Mishnah Sukkah 1:4; Sukkah 11a). Rambam codifies it at the head of his chapter on schach (Hilchot Sukkah 5:1).

Add one more condition from the same Mishnah and the Talmud's reading of it: what grows from the ground must be cut from the ground. A vine trained over the sukkah while still rooted does not count (Mishnah Sukkah 1:4). The sukkah must be *made*, not found — *ta'aseh v'lo min he'asui* (Sukkah 11b).

So the covering must be grown, it must be cut, and it must not be a tool. Each condition is a lesson.

Grown: the roof comes from below

Schach must come from the earth. Not metal, not hides, not woven cloth — something that grew.

The Talmud finds the source in a verse about the festival: *chag hasukkot ta'aseh lecha shiv'at yamim b'ospecha migornecha umiyikvecha* — you shall keep the festival of booths seven days, when you gather in from your threshing floor and your winepress (Devarim 16:13). The Sages read it as a specification of material: make the sukkah from the leftovers of the threshing floor and the winepress — the straw and the stalks, what remains after the harvest is taken in (Sukkah 12a).

That is a humble roof. It is not made of the grain, the prize of the year. It is made of what the grain grew on. The covering over a Jewish family in the week of joy is built from the byproducts of its own labor on its own soil.

There is a covenantal teaching in that. The protection over a people should come from the people's own ground and work, not be imported as a finished canopy from somewhere else. And it should be modest: the stalks, not the crown.

Cut: the roof is not the root

The second rule corrects the first. What grows from the ground is fit only once it is cut. A living vine arching over the booth, however beautiful, does not make a sukkah.

Why should that matter? A rooted vine is still drawing from the earth, still growing, still belonging to the ground it came from. It is covering you, but it is not *given* to you. It is part of a larger organism that has its own life and its own claims.

Cut schach is different. Someone harvested it, carried it, and laid it down on purpose. The roof exists because a person chose to build it, for a week, under a command. *Ta'aseh* — you shall make it.

This is the line between a covering that serves and a covering that possesses. A people needs protection that comes from its own soil. But it must not confuse that protection with the soil itself, as if the roof grew out of the nation by nature and could never be taken down. The roof is made. It is answerable to the One who commanded it. On the eighth day, it comes down.

Not a tool: the roof is not an instrument

The third rule is the strangest and the deepest. Schach may not be anything *mekabel tumah* — susceptible to ritual impurity. In practice that means it may not be a finished vessel or utensil, and it may not be food. A ladder, a bed frame, a mat woven for sitting on, a stack of old tools — even if made of wood — disqualify the roof.

In the laws of purity, what makes an object susceptible is, broadly, that it has become a *keli*: a thing shaped for use. The schach must remain raw material. It may not be something with a job.

Here is the teaching. The roof over a people in the week of dwelling may not be an instrument. It must not be something designed to be used — to carry, to sit on, to contain, to strike. The shade of faith covers; it does not serve a further purpose.

Elsewhere in covenantal thought we say the institutions of a people are a *keili* — a vessel, never the Source. That remains true of the house. But the schach teaches the week's sharper lesson: the covering itself, the thing directly overhead between you and the sky, must not be a tool at all. It must be the plainest stuff of the field, laid down to give shade and nothing more. A roof that is also a weapon, a lever, or a product is no longer schach.

What to look at tonight

When the table is set and the candles are lit, look up.

You will see stalks or bamboo or branches: grown from the earth, cut from their roots, and nothing in them shaped for use. Through them, if the halakhah was kept well, you will see a little of the night sky.

That is the roof the Torah permits over a Jew in the week of joy. It came from below, from the leftovers of your own harvest. It was cut and placed by choice, under command, for a season. And it is not an instrument of anything. It only covers.

A people could do worse than to ask the same of every roof it lives under.

Kid-table

1. Schach has to be something that grew from the ground, like branches or bamboo.

2. It has to be cut — a vine still growing over the sukkah does not count.
3. It cannot be a tool or a finished thing, like a ladder or a chair.
4. The Sages say the sukkah is made from the leftovers of the harvest.
5. The roof is there to cover us, not to be used for anything else.

Sources

- Devarim 16:13
- Mishnah Sukkah 1:4; Sukkah 11a–12a
- Sukkah 11b (*ta'aseh v'lo min he'asui*)
- Rambam, Hilchot Sukkah 5:1

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