The Elephant in our Sukkah
Rabbi Erin Polansky, Shmini Atzeret 5785

I really enjoy children's books and television shows. I find that I learn a lot from them because the really good ones have an extra layer. Sesame Street always had a hidden gem for parents that I never appreciated as a child, but as a parent, I found brilliant.

So I want to share a beautiful children's book with you that is actually more for adults than children. It's called the Elephant in the Sukkah by Sherri Mandell.

Before discussing the story, we need a little halakhic background about the walls of a Sukkah. The halakhah tells us that it doesn't really matter what the walls of the sukkah are made from. As long as they won't fall down when blown by a light wind, they're kosher. The sukkah usually has four walls; but can have three walls built against the side of a house. The key is that the walls are sturdy but not anchored, and that they are temporary—they are meant to come down after the week.

The walls are symbolic of relationships. This temporary holiday of Sukkot says—know your boundaries; keep out those negative influences we tried so hard to shun during Yom Kippur (people, habits, traits, etc.) and let the love and warmth of family and community come in. This is all an extension of the High Holy days as we are trying to increase in holiness, and to encourage healing, atonement, and peace.

There's another fun discussion about Sukkah wall in Talmud Sukkah 23a which pertains to my story book.

First, the Rabbis debate whether a sukkah is kosher if it is built on top of an animal. (Spoiler alert: it is!) So you can have your sukkah built on top of your donkey, sort of like an ancient sukkah-mobile.

Next, the Rabbis discuss the possibility of using an actual animal for one of the walls of the sukkah.
According to one sage, this sort of sukkah is unsuitable and according to another it is permissible. (Why would they agree, after all?) The Rabbis explained the reason behind the invalidity: Rabbi Abaye rules that this sukkah is invalid because if the animal were to die during the holiday a sukkah wall would be missing, and this would render the sukkah invalid as it would lack a wall. Rav Zira, on the other hand, rules that this sukkah would be invalid because the animal might run away in the middle of the holiday, leaving the sukkah lacking a wall and thus invalid.

But, the Rabbis continue, we can solve these problems if the animal were very large and tied down well, for example an elephant tied well would not be able to run away and if it died, it would still be large enough to serve as a sukkah wall; according to authorities, this sort of sukkah is valid. The disagreement amongst the sages that I just described concerns an untied elephant. According to the scholar who feared the animal might die, an elephant invokes no such fears because even if it does die, its body is still large enough to serve as a sukkah wall.

This may seem like an exercise in the absurd. The type of pilpul that our people are often criticized for. But this book that I mentioned changed my mind and made me wonder if the rabbis were actually speaking in metaphor.

The Elephant in the Sukkah. The book is about a retired elephant who used to perform as a singer in the circus and longs to sing again. One night, he hears singing from a sukkah. He stands outside and learns the songs. And then Ori, the little boy in the family, invites him in, but there is no room for him. How will this happy singing elephant fit into the sukkah? Eventually, the boy gets the idea to take out one wall of the sukkah and the elephant becomes a wall, which, as we just learned, is a kosher solution offered by the Talmud. It

seems like a delightful story about a boy and an elephant, but as with the metaphor we are familiar with, the elephant in the sukkah represents something much more meaningful.

The author, Sherri Mandel, had written two books prior on grief. She works as a grief counsellor and runs a camp for bereaved children, she herself mourning her son who was murdered by a terrorist in Israel.

She writes, "I was sure that the book wasn't about grief. But as I started to think about it, there was that elephant – the proverbial elephant in the room, the thing that stands there and is huge, but nobody wants to talk about because it's too painful. In the story, even when the elephant is in the sukkah, part of him is inside, but part of him is also outside of the sukkah. So he is both inside and outside. Which is similar to living with grief. You're part of the world but at the same time you're not fully in it.

"And then I remembered the last page of my book – the following year, Henry the elephant builds a sukkah that is big enough for him and for Ori and his family. And I realized: My book unwittingly records the stages of post-traumatic growth. At first, the pain of loss is too big to be contained – there's no place for it. We don't know how we will bear it. Then we learn to live with the loss and it becomes part of us. Not something we wanted but part of our lives. Eventually with the support of others, we may find a way to build from the pain – we create something new that is big enough to hold ourselves and others. In spiritual terms – a new vessel. Because the old vessel, what we formerly knew, is not enough to contain the trauma and sustain us, to offer us solace or comfort."

Sherri Mandell runs a camp called Camp Koby for mothers, widows and families who are survivors of terror attacks. They run healing retreats where these families can feel part of a safe community and feel happy. Because, she says, in the rest of the world, bereaved children and families often feel like they don't fit in. They feel isolated, especially around

the holidays when it seems that everyone else is rejoicing with full families. The intimate knowledge of loss and trauma can be a very lonely place.

She also sees that some of the families she works with eventually build from their pain. She can see that they are recovering when they are busy with their own projects.

And this is the journey and the goal for each one of us who has lost someone that we loved. To first acknowledge the elephant in our sukkah, as it were; to see it, greet it, and meet it. Eventually, we incorporate it into our proverbial sukkah—knowing it's there with us, but it is not taking up all the room, we may be able to move it over and incorporate it into our structure. And eventually, we use it to build something new—something constructive, and inclusive, loving and honouring the memory of those we loved and lost. This is how we make grief meaningful and constructive rather than paralysing and obstructive. We use our pain to create and build – families, foundations, shuls, community projects – in short, more meaningful lives.

As we read in Psalms, "They who sow in tears
shall reap with songs of joy.
Though he goes along weeping,
carrying the seed-bag,
he shall come back with songs of joy,
carrying his sheaves."

May we be privileged to turn our pain into happiness. To plant those seeds that they yield growth that sustains us.