

What's the Truth about . . . Schach?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: If stars are not visible through the *schach* (roof of the sukkah), the sukkah is invalid.

Fact: According to many opinions, ab initio, one should be able to see starlight through the *schach*. However, even if one is unable to see stars, the sukkah is kosher according to most authorities.

Background: A sukkah has two main components—the walls and the *schach*. Each of these has its own set of requirements regarding materials used, size and durability.

Because a sukkah must be a temporary dwelling,¹ there are certain guidelines governing its construction. For example, the rabbis banned the use of certain building materials for *schach* including boards that are four *tefachim* wide (about twelve inches), which were commonly used for roofs during the Talmudic period.²

To further distinguish a sukkah from a permanent edifice, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* says that the *schach* should

not be so thick as to prevent one from seeing stars. The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 631:3) does not follow this ruling and states that even if the *schach* is as thick as an ordinary roof, such that no stars are visible, it is kosher as long as it is made from appropriate materials. Despite the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Mishnah Berurah* (631:5) cites later authorities who require that some stars be visible through the *schach*. Nonetheless, the *Mishnah Berurah* (631:6) rules that a sukkah in which stars are not visible through the *schach* is kosher. The *Mishnah Berurah* also cites the Peri Megadim as saying that even according to those who require stars to be visible, if there is at least one spot in the *schach* where the stars can be seen, that suffices to make the entire sukkah acceptable. The *Aruch HaShulchan* (631:6) also recommends this method of constructing a sukkah but states that, post facto, the sukkah would be acceptable even if it were not constructed in such a manner.

A related issue concerns whether or not rain can penetrate the *schach*. The Tur (OC 631) and the *Mishnah Berurah* (631:6) quote Tosafot,³ who,

they claim, implies that if rain cannot penetrate the *schach*, it is a sign of permanence and hence, the *schach* is not kosher even post facto.⁴ Tosafot maintains that the sukkah must be constructed in such a manner that the walls could be potentially temporary or “flimsy.” Once the walls have that potential, they may even be made of bricks and cement. However, it is not enough for the *schach*—which is the essence of the sukkah—to be potentially temporary; it must truly be of a temporary nature. *Schach* that is impenetrable to rain is, by definition, permanent, and according to Rabbeinu Tam, invalid. The *Mishnah Berurah* views such thick *schach* as invalid and maintains that even an area of such *schach* measuring four *tefachim* wide and running the length of the sukkah would invalidate the entire sukkah.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch (*Moadim Uzmanim* 1:96) disagrees with the above and asserts that the sukkah is invalid only if the entire roof has such *schach*. According to him, even a small section of *schach* that rain can penetrate would validate the sukkah. Emphasizing his point, he cites Rav

Chaim Volozhin’s tradition of having thick *schach* throughout the sukkah, with the exception of a small section. This enabled Rav Chaim to fulfill the mitzvah of eating in a sukkah even when it was raining (*Moadim Uzmanim* 8:1:06).

The discussion of how much “thick *schach*” invalidates the sukkah is predicated on Rabbeinu Tam’s position that if rain cannot penetrate the *schach*, the sukkah is invalid. While this position is accepted by the Levush and the Bach (OC 635), it is not cited by the *Shulchan Aruch*⁵ who rules quite clearly (OC 631:3) that even if the *schach* is as “thick as [the roof on] a house” it is kosher. The Tur (near the beginning of OC 631) cites Rabbeinu Tam’s position and then states (with seeming approval) that his father, the Rosh, did not cite Rabbeinu Tam’s position in his rulings.⁶ The Beit Yosef (OC 631) cites the Mordechai (*Sukkah*, chap. 1) as pointing out that Rashi seems to disagree with Rabbeinu Tam as well. Furthermore, the *mishnah* on *Sukkah* 22a⁷ seems to support the Rosh’s position that rain-tight *schach* is valid. Incidentally, it seems that⁸ Rabbeinu Tam had a brother-in-law who did not agree with his ruling and constructed a rain-tight sukkah.

This debate seems to have pitted many Rishonim against each other.⁹ However, most of the Acharonim felt that one should try to build a sukkah that is not watertight. Both the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Aruch HaShulchan* rule that, post facto, one may use a sukkah that is impermeable to water and rely on the opinions that reject Rabbeinu Tam’s position.

The reason many people believe that stars must be visible through *schach* and that rain cannot penetrate *schach* at all may be due to the immense popularity of the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Rav Ganzfried) and the *Chayei Adam* (Rav Danziger). These halachic works, written about 150 years ago, were widely studied by Eastern European Jews. The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (134:5) writes that, ab initio, one should be able to see stars through the

schach and, post facto, the *schach* is invalid if rain cannot penetrate it.¹⁰ Similarly, the *Chayei Adam* (147:18) rules that if no stars are visible the *schach* is valid, but preferably the *schach* should be sparse enough to see stars. He further rules that if heavy rain cannot penetrate the *schach* it is invalid because of the rabbinic decree against building a sukkah like a house (*gezeirot bayit*).

There are thus two *halachot* regarding the thickness of the *schach*; one is related to stars, the other to rain, and both contain philosophical nuggets as well. Seeing the stars while in the sukkah emphasizes the ephemeral nature of existence and highlights the idea that we are sitting under God’s watchful eye. Similarly, the sukkah provides inadequate protection from the elements so that one realizes that just as the Jews in the desert relied on God’s protection from the elements, we must rely on that protection today.

Philosophy aside, the requirement to see the stars was not accepted as binding by any authorities and is merely offered as a worthy suggestion. On the other hand, while the Talmud and many early authorities did not rule out *schach* that is rainproof, it was deemed unfit by no less than the great Rabbeinu Tam and was therefore strongly opposed by later codifiers. **JA**

Notes

1. This is in contradistinction to the opinion (offered by Rabbi Yehudah, Beit Shammai, Rebbi, etc.) in *Sukkah* 7b that a sukkah must be a *dirat kevah*, a permanent dwelling. The *halachah* does not agree with the opinion above but rather with that of Rabbi Akiva (in *Sukkah* 23a) and others who state that it must be a *dirat aray*, a temporary dwelling.

2. See *Shulchan Aruch* OC 629:18. Whether this decree includes thinner slats of wood that are bound together is subject to debate. See Rabbi Yeshai Koenigsberg, “The Canvas Succah,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 15 (Sukkot 5761): 27-45, in particular: 44-45.

3. Tosafot, *Sukkah* 2a, s.v. *ki avid*. This is based on a *gemara* in *Taanit* 2a that views rainfall on Sukkot as a bad omen

since it prevents one from fulfilling the mitzvah of sukkah. Based on the *gemara*, Tosafot states that *sukkot* cannot be rain-tight. The Pnei Yehoshuah, commenting on this Tosafot, has a problem with that logic. He argues that this *gemara* is not a proof that *sukkot* may not be rain resistant; it is merely that most *sukkot* are in actuality not watertight.

4. The Taz (OC 629:21) writes that even though the verse (Deut. 16:13) expressly sanctions using straw as *schach*, it is common to use branches and the like. This is because unlike branches or bamboo, straw that is packed tightly prevents rain from entering the sukkah. The Taz (OC 635:2) then questions how a hollowed-out haystack may be a good sukkah since it is impermeable to rain. He concludes that even according to Tosafot, a rainproof sukkah is only invalid rabbinically because of the concern that it will be confused with an ordinary permanent house, which would not apply to a haystack. The Peri Megadim (*Mishbetzet Zahav*, 635:2) disagrees, claiming that Tosafot believed that such a sukkah was invalid even Biblically, and this seems to be how most understand the Tosafot.

5. See, however, Tur OC 629 (near the end) in the name of the Smak, who implies that the *halachah* of not using boards for *schach* is based on the reasoning of Rabbeinu Tam. Thus, according to the Smak, the *Shulchan Aruch* does follow the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam. See also *Sha’arey Tziyun* 633:6.

6. In actuality, the Rosh cites this Rabbeinu Tam in *siman* 12. However, the Beit Yosef explains that when the Tur claims that the Rosh omits this *halachah*, he means that he omits it in its proper place, that is, in the *mishnah* in *Sukkah* 22a.

7. The *mishnah* implies that, a priori, one should be able to see the stars, but states that if one cannot, the sukkah is still kosher. According to Beit Hillel in the *gemara*, even if the sun’s rays do not penetrate the *schach*, it is still kosher.

8. See *Hagahot Maimoniot*, *Hilchot Sukkah* 5:9.

9. On the lenient side were Rashi, the Rosh, the Mordechai and Rabbeinu Tam’s brother-in-law, among others.

10. Rav Ovadiah Yosef rules similarly [as recorded by his son in *Yalkut Yosef Moadim*, (5748, p. 130)]. See the comprehensive discussion in *Yabia Omer* 4:49.

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