

SUKKOT

The holiday of Sukkot follows Yom Kippur by four days. It is connected to the High Holidays by proximity, but is also the final “pilgrimage” festival. In ancient times, Israelites would travel to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and participate in public rituals during the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot. All three festivals were connected to the agricultural cycle, which was itself reflected in the Temple ritual. The three pilgrimage festivals are also connected in a historical sense. We begin with Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, continue on to Shavuot and the Revelation at Sinai, and then come to Sukkot, which recalls the wandering of the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land.

It may seem strange that Sukkot does not mark a specific event like Pesah and Shavuot. If Sukkot had commemorated our entrance into the land of Israel, it would seem to be the perfect ending to our story of the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land by way of Sinai. After all, that is how it “really” happened. Yet there is no festival or commemoration of the entrance to the land. Just as the Torah ends with the death of Moses and the people camped only on the border of the Promised Land, so too in our celebration of our mythic past, we conclude the cycle with the Israelites still wandering in the desert. Should we then look upon Sukkot as marking that dreams do not come true? The answer is a qualified yes.

Of all the holidays, it is only at Sukkot that the Torah commands us to rejoice as part of our celebration. Rejoicing would be easily explained if Sukkot did, in fact, celebrate our entry into the Promised

Land. Yet Sukkot does not represent the fulfillment of the vision, because then the story would be ended. We would be faced with the impossible question of why we are living in an imperfect world if the Jewish myth had already reached its “happily ever after.” Instead, Sukkot is the “to be continued” of our story. The story of the Jewish people, the story of each person, goes on. We all wander in the desert on our way to the Promised Land. The only question is how we make the journey. Some travel the landscape warily, always alert to danger. Others are just the opposite, oblivious of all they pass on the way. Many are poised to turn back to the security of some imaginary “good old days.” Sukkot suggests that the way to travel is with your “eyes on the prize,” with your distant goal always in mind. Yet even as you travel toward that horizon, you are aware of all that occurs to you at the moment. To this present, of course, you bring the past. Most useful in facing the challenges of that journey are the lessons of the Exodus (Pesah) and of Sinai (Shavuot)—that we have the freedom to make choices and an accumulated body of wisdom called Torah that can help guide our choices and give us direction.

Still, Sukkot reminds us that it is not the future goal that sustains us in the face of the hardships of our journeys. Our real goal (and challenge) is to live in the moment. We should do this neither with grim determination nor with an absolute faith in our abilities to overcome any obstacle. Rather we strive to journey in happiness and joy. How? By being aware of each blessing we encounter, especially the greatest blessing—having a Beloved Traveling Companion. For what Sukkot celebrates is not the story of the Israelites complaining for forty years in the desert. The picture evoked by Sukkot is different from the one you get from a simple reading of the biblical account. Rather, it is the picture of Jeremiah, who says, “I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—How you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2). This is the description of the youthful enthusiasm of a new relationship, of a people who so trust in God that they are willing to leave everything behind and head off into a desert with no real provisions for the way other than a vision of a goal at journey’s end. It views the period in the desert not as a story of failure but as a typical life’s journey with blessings and tragedies. It suggests

that the key to a successful journey is not reaching the promised destination, but rather being aware of every moment of the journey. To be successful you need to rejoice, to travel with *simha*, “joy.”

To travel with *simha* makes all the difference to experience. For you can be assured of two things. First, that you will be waylaid by Amalek on the way, will turn aside for Golden Calves, will thirst for sand and hunger for the harmful, and will too often be on the verge of returning to the fleshpots of Egypt. Most of all, you will discover that the fabled Promised Land always lies just over the next hill. Between you and the Land is not the river Jordan but the river Styx. Just as for Moses, death will not let us pass that final barrier. Frustrations, disappointments, suffering, and in the end death are on the itinerary of each of our journeys. It is how we cope that makes the difference.

Sukkot calls us to greet life with joy. It does not expect us to be joyful at the worst moments, but it encourages us to rejoice at the blessings of the everyday—every day that we are not sick, every day that our heart is not broken. It urges us to rejoice in the blessings of life: laughter, tasty food, relationships, or a good book. Sukkot is the explanation of how to live after the Exodus and Sinai—when you are no longer experiencing miracles or hearing God’s voice directly. Rejoicing along the path as the way to live life is the message of Sukkot. (For additional development of this theme, see “Numbers/Be-midbar,” pp. 396–424.)

The Sukkah

The main ritual of Sukkot is to dwell in a *sukkah*, “booth.” We build this temporary structure with a roof made of organic material. The roof should provide some cover and yet be porous enough to enable us to see the stars and thus to let in the elements. The booths can be built from any material in a wide variety of sizes. Most of the traditional rules focus on the roof. It is usually made from branches cut from trees. In warmer climes, Jews eat and sleep in the *sukkah*, making it a kind of temporary home. In the Northern Hemisphere, Jews generally eat in the *sukkah*, but sleep and carry on the rest of their regular activities at home.

You may wish to build your own *sukkah*. Kits for building them are available in local Jewish stores and on the Internet. Or you can plan and build your own. We are supposed to eat in the *sukkah*, but in case of rain, the tradition actually discourages us from doing so. Whenever we do eat in the *sukkah*, we say the blessing for fulfilling this *mitzvah*. We do not say the blessing if we are just visiting the *sukkah*.

It is also customary to decorate the *sukkah*. This can be turned into a joyful project for the whole family. Common decorations include the hanging of fruits or gourds, paper chains, High Holiday cards, pictures of Israel, and children’s drawings.

The *sukkah*’s open structure reflects the openness and hospitality of this holiday. Typically, people invite friends for meals in the *sukkah*. In some communities, Jews will go from *sukkah* to *sukkah* on the afternoon of the festival days, stopping to say hello and have a piece of cake. There is also a tradition of inviting *ushpizin*, “symbolic guests,” to the *sukkah*. These honorary guests are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. Some include women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail, and Esther. Each day one guest or a pair of guests is invited. Perhaps this emphasis on hospitality expresses a desire that in our life’s journey we not travel alone.

The symbolism of the sukkah The Talmud records two opinions regarding the symbolism of the *sukkah*. One says that the *sukkah* reminds us of the booths the Israelites lived in while they wandered in the wilderness. Modern scholars suggest that the *sukkah* is actually modeled on the booths in which Israelite farmers sheltered close to their fields during the fall harvest. During the forty years of wandering, the scholars suggest, the Israelites probably lived in tents, especially in the desert.

The second opinion is more intriguing, for it says that the booths are to remind us of the *ananei ha-kavod*, “the clouds of glory,” that accompanied the Israelites in their wanderings. According to the Torah, a cloud of glory would lead the Israelites when it was time for them to travel from place to place. When the Israelites encamped, the cloud would rest upon the sanctuary. The cloud was a sign of God’s Presence,

covering what cannot be seen by humans and showing that God accompanied the people of Israel in all their journeys. But in what sense is the *sukkah* a sign of God's accompanying Presence?

The answer is metaphorical. The *sukkah* is a peculiar structure in that it lacks the basic element of necessary comfort: a protective roof. The *sukkah's* roof of leaves and branches does not provide real shelter; but allows us to see the sky or the stars—the handiwork of the Creator. It is under God's sheltering Presence that we dwell. Like the cloud, the *sukkah* makes visible that which is invisible—the Holy One. Sukkot reminds us to “see” God in the everyday experience of our lives. The clouds of glory are all around us; they are the presence and pattern of life.

Lessons on the journey, or why we dwell in a sukkah As we journey through life, we construct our homes as places of refuge. We want to feel safe when we close the front door behind us. The *sukkah* is, by definition, a fragile structure. Our homes are supposed to be just the opposite. We try to accumulate enough “provisions” in them to be prepared for any emergency. The truth, of course, is that no provisions are sufficient for life's misfortunes. Yet we all pretend otherwise. We fill our homes with the accumulations of a lifetime, things that reflect our self-image and the image we wish others to see. These reflections of our financial accomplishments are meant to bring us pleasure, both aesthetic and sensory. Yet objects can only provide happiness on a temporary basis. Like good food or wine, life's pleasures should be enjoyed, but they are transitory. Dwelling in the *sukkah* reminds us that our attempts to create permanent castles are illusory. No matter how much enjoyment we get from them, on some level we can only journey through life with as much as our hearts, not our hands, can carry. Our sense of security and our happiness come from what we carry inside. They cannot be purchased; they can only be acquired by understanding what is possible and what is not. Fundamentally, all of us already have everything we need to be happy and secure, that is, the ability to be openhearted.

The Four Species

The other central ritual of Sukkot employs the Four Species (palm, citron, willow, and myrtle), together known as the *lulav* and *etrog*, from the words for the two most visible of the species, the palm branch and the citron. After the Four Species are gathered in a specified manner, the willow and myrtle are intertwined with the palm to create the *lulav*. Then the *lulav* and the *etrog* are ritually shaken each day of Sukkot.

Particular attention is paid to the aesthetic element on Sukkot. People try to choose the most beautiful *lulav* and *etrog* they can find. While the *lulav* and *etrog* will stay fresh throughout the holiday, it is harder to make sure that the myrtles and especially the willows last. The best method I have found is to keep them refrigerated when not in use.

Some people shake the Four Species in the *sukkah*, others at home. Some will wait to do this until right before Hallel is recited in the synagogue. Specifically, the ritual is to take the *lulav* in your left hand and the *etrog* in your right. Holding the *etrog* next to the *lulav*, you recite the blessing: “Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, the source of the universe, who has made us holy through the commandments and commanded us concerning the waving of the palm branch.” On the first day, you also say the *sheheheyanu* blessing: “Praised are You, Eternal One, our God, the source of the universe, for keeping us in life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this moment.”

The *lulav* is shaken a number of times during the Hallel service. The custom is to wave or shake the Four Species in all four cardinal directions as well as up and down; more commonly, the Species are shaken forward, to your right, behind you, to your left, and then up and down. This ancient ritual has no explicit rationale, but it is reasonable to suggest that since Sukkot is a harvest festival, this is a symbolic re-creation of the harvest, a ritualized prayer for future successful harvests, or an expression of gratitude for this year's bountiful harvest.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach taught that just as Sukkot marked the agricultural harvest, so do we mark our spiritual harvest “at the end of the year.” He thought of Sukkot as the end of the year, since it marked the last of the pilgrimage festivals as well as the end of the High Holidays. In his teaching the order and its meaning go like this: You begin by

stretching out the Four Species to the right, shaking them, and then drawing them back toward you and shaking them again. This is done three times. Then the same thing is done to the left, then upward, downward, backward and forward.

As with the counting of the Omer, the mystics have tied the Four Species to the *sefirot*, the emanations of God. We shake to the right, toward the *sefirah* of *hesed* or loving-kindness, becoming aware that just as the world begins in loving-kindness, we should begin with open-heartedness. We continue to the left, toward the *sefirah* of *gevurah* or limitations, becoming aware that just as we need loving-kindness, we also need to set limits and create boundaries for that love. We then point up, calling God's bounty to flow down toward us, and continue by pointing downward to ask that the bounty flow deep into the world. This flow is what gives life to all of creation. We then point behind us to bring forward all of our past, and we end by pointing forward to express our hopes for the future. We thus bring together both openness and structure, both God's bounty and our past, as we continue our journey into the future.

The Four Species are used again during the *hoshanot service*. Each day during Sukkot, we circle the synagogue carrying the Four Species. Someone is honored with holding a Torah scroll inside the circle. As the procession is made, certain poetic prayers are recited that have as their refrain *hosha na*, "save us." Traditionally, neither the circling nor the waving of the Four Species takes place when Sukkot and Shabbat coincide. The book of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, is read on the intermediate Shabbat of Sukkot.

Hoshana Rabbah

The seventh day of Sukkot is known as Hoshana Rabbah, "the great or many hosannas." On that day we circle the synagogue seven times instead of just once as we recite all of the *hoshanot* prayers. At the end of the circling, we take a fresh bunch of willows and beat them against a chair. This practice is adapted from Temple times. It is most commonly explained as one last effort of getting rid of our sins. Hoshana Rabbah is seen as the very last day of the High Holiday period.

SHEMINI ATZERET AND SIMHAT TORAH

Shemini Atzeret means the "eighth day of assembly." Originally, it was the conclusion to the holiday of Sukkot. In the Torah, God says, Tarry with me one additional day. (This is the traditional interpretation of Num. 29:35.) God is expressing reluctance at seeing the people leave at the end of the pilgrimage festival. Since the destruction of the Temple, *Shemini Atzeret* is characterized by the prayer for rain that is chanted in services. This prayer for rain still ties the liturgical cycle to the land of Israel. Soon after this time of year, the rainy season begins in Israel. Since almost no rain falls in the summer, a successful agricultural year depends on the winter season's rainfall. Thus this prayer is sung to a solemn melody evocative of the High Holiday liturgy.

Void of the rituals of the *sukkah* and Four Species, *Shemini Atzeret* seemed characterless until the Middle Ages, when the tradition of reading the whole Torah during the course of one year came to predominate. To celebrate the completion of the cycle, a new holiday developed called *Simhat Torah*, "rejoicing with the Torah." In communities that observe only one of the two days, *Simhat Torah* has come to overwhelm the relatively colorless *Shemini Atzeret*. In those communities that observe two days at the end of Sukkot, *Simhat Torah* is the second day and *Shemini Atzeret* is the first.

Circles of Torah

Both major holiday periods in the year climax with a festival devoted to Torah. *Shavuot*, which marks the giving of the Torah at Sinai, is linked

by the Omer to Passover. Simhat Torah brings to an end the fall holidays of Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Yet Shavuot is very different from Simhat Torah. On Shavuot, we remember the awesome moment of Sinai, the Revelation of both God and the Torah. There are no rituals for Shavuot other than devoting ourselves to Torah study. Simhat Torah's mood is opposite to the awe and grandeur of Shavuot. We embrace Torah and dance with it. It can be compared to the development of a relationship. At first you are tentative with the other person, unsure of what she or he likes. As time goes on, the relationship seems less fragile and intimacy grows. After receiving the Torah on Shavuot, we have come to know it through study, and so, by Simhat Torah, we are ready to embrace it. As at a wedding feast, we take our partner, the Torah scroll, into our arms and dance the night away.

The month of Tishri is filled with *mitzvot*—the shofar, the *sukkah*, the Four Species. However, when we come to Simhat Torah, there are no *mitzvot*, there is only the Torah itself to be embraced. Instead of an intellectual learning of Torah, we absorb Torah through our dancing, and our feet learn how to walk in *darkhei ha-shem*, “the path of the holy.” Throughout the month of Elul and the Tishri holidays, we recite Psalm 27, which includes the verse “One thing I ask of God, only that do I seek: to live in the house of God all the days of my life.” We stop saying this Psalm right before Simhat Torah, because on this holiday, as we dance with the Torah, we *are* in the house of God, before the Presence of the Holy One.

As we sing and dance on Simhat Torah, may we experience the Presence of the Holy One in our midst!

Customs of Simhat Torah and Shemini Atzeret

Simhat Torah and Shemini Atzeret are festival days marked by candle lighting, *kiddush*, and the prohibition on work. On Shemini Atzeret, the memorial prayer, Yizkor, is recited during morning services.

Simhat Torah's celebrations begin after the evening service in the synagogue. All the Torah scrolls are taken out and various people are given the honor of carrying the scrolls. A procession of scrolls circles the synagogue as a few verses are chanted. This is followed by singing

and dancing. There are seven *hakkafot*, “circlings.” Depending on the enthusiasm of the participants, the length of each one can vary greatly from synagogue to synagogue. There is a custom of giving children paper flags or apples to carry in the procession. After the seventh circling is completed, the scrolls are returned to the ark. One is left out for a reading of a section from the last portion of the Torah. This is the only time the Torah is read at night in a service.

The next morning, in addition to the regular festival services, *hakkafot* are done again, though not as enthusiastically. The highlight of the morning services is the reading of the last verses of Deuteronomy, followed by the first verses of Genesis. We thereby show that the cycle of Torah study never ends. As soon as we finish we begin again. It is considered a special honor to be given one of these *aliyot*. In fact, they are called *hatan/kallat torah*, the “groom/bride of Torah,” and *hatan/kallat bereishit*, the “groom/bride of Genesis.”

It is also the custom that everyone receives an *aliyah* on the morning of Simhat Torah. This is done either by group *aliyot* or by reading over and over again the verses in Deuteronomy. There is a custom that even children receive an *aliyah*. All children are invited up and a *tallit* is often spread over their heads as a canopy.

In the spirit of rejoicing, some communities include good-natured fooling around during the *musaf* service of Simhat Torah, particularly by children. The person leading services is often the target of the pranks. He or she participates in the spirit of the moment by chanting the service to funny melodies.