

Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah

Summary: The eight day harvest festival of Sukkot commemorates the Jews' forty years of wandering in the desert after their exodus from Egypt, as described in the Torah. Jews build sukkahs, temporary structures made of organic materials like bamboo and leaves in backyards, yards, or rooftops. Jews then eat meals—and, for some, sleep—in the structures. Shemini Atzeret is the eighth day of Sukkot. Simchat Torah, the following day, celebrates the congregation's yearly completion of the reading of the whole Torah, finishing the Book of Deuteronomy and beginning again with Genesis.

For more than 3,000 years, Jews have observed the harvest festival called Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). Building a simple structure called a *sukkah* in the backyard, in a corner of a college campus, on a synagogue lawn, or an apartment rooftop, Jews traditionally gather and eat meals there every day for eight days. The most observant Jews will eat and sleep in the *sukkah*, while many other Jews will eat there at least once a day. In this way, the Jewish community recalls the fragile structures in which their ancestors lived during the forty years in the wilderness following the exodus from Egypt.

One of the most joyous holidays of the year, Sukkot commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel wandered in the desert and lived in tents without the protection of sturdy walls or a roof. Agriculturally, it is the holiday of the harvest and a festival of thanksgiving, and thus booths may also recall the temporary structures built by farmers at the edge of their fields to live in during the busy season of harvest. For traditional congregations in the United States, the first two days of Sukkot are full holy days. In Israel and in Reform congregations in the United States, only the first day of Sukkot is observed, although for different reasons. The same is also true for Passover. Dating back to the time of the Talmud's composition, those in Israel celebrated for one day of each of these holidays. Since the sighting of the new moon, which would determine the dates of the upcoming holidays, was done in close proximity to the Jewish communities in Israel, all there were ensured that the date was known ahead of time. However, in the Diaspora (originally Babylonia, now anywhere but Israel), the message could not be delivered quickly enough, thus two days were observed so that no mistake would be made that might lead to working on the day when the holiday was meant to be observed.

During the full eight day festival, Jews are commanded to dwell in the *sukkah's* temporary shelter. This is seen as an act of thanksgiving for the miracle of God's protection during the long sojourn in the desert and a reminder of humanity's continued dependence on God, even in the midst of glittering cities and skyscrapers. Depending on the weather, one's health, and one's level of observance, dwelling in the *sukkah* can mean anything from eating meals there to spending the night. For some, Sukkot is seen as an opportunity to invite people to one's home for a special dinner under the stars. It is understood, however, that those invited to the *sukkah* include the spirits of the ancestors (*ushpizin*) who were also wanderers and exiles: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, David, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Devorah, Esther, Ruth, and Tamar are all guests.

Starting on the evening after Yom Kippur, people begin preparing to build their *sukkah*. Traditionally the *sukkah* must have at least three walls covered with a material which will not blow away in the wind, such as canvas. The roof, however, must be made of material that grew and was harvested from the ground, such as branches, reeds, or corn stalks. It should provide more shade than sun and should be left loose so that rain can get in and stars can be seen; at least some of the roof must be open to the sky. Stalks of bamboo are a favorite material as are cut green branches. In Los Angeles, the municipal park service makes piles of fallen branches available to the Jewish community for *sukkah*-building. Once construction is complete, people gather with family and friends to decorate the *sukkah* with fruits and vegetables, drawings and handmade decorations. In many locations, the community also builds a *sukkah* at the synagogue or on campus for those who cannot build their own.

Another observance integral to the Sukkot holiday is the gathering of *lulav* (a bundle of palm, myrtle and willow) and *etrog* (an aromatic citrus fruit). In the days before Sukkot, one will see *lulav* and *etrog* for sale in many city neighborhoods. During Sukkot Jews are commanded to take these plants, representing nature's blessings, and rejoice before the Lord, both in the *sukkah* and in the synagogue. With *lulav* and *etrog* in hand, one recites the blessing and waves them in the six directions—east, south, west, north, up and down—to symbolize God's omnipresence. One holds the *lulav* and *etrog* during the *Hallel*, or psalms of praise, in Sukkot synagogue services, as well as during processions around the *bimah*, the podium where the Torah is read, on each of the seven days of the holiday. These processions, recalling the processions around the altar of the ancient temple in Jerusalem, are called *hoshanahs* for the prayer accompanying them, which ends with the refrain "*Hoshanah*," meaning

“Please save us!” On the seventh day of Sukkot, seven circuits are made, a practice called the *Hoshanah Rabbah*, or “the great *hoshanah*.”

The eighth and final day is called Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Solemn Assembly. Despite the name and date suggesting that Shemini Atzeret is the eighth day of Sukkot, many Jewish scholars do not consider it officially part of Sukkot but a separate festival. This day does not include the rejoicing with *lulav* and *etrog*, although it is the last day people will take meals in the *sukkah*. After the last meal in the *sukkah*, the festival draws to a close.

However, the very next day is yet another festival of rejoicing, Simchat Torah, “Rejoicing the Law.” On Simchat Torah, the yearly reading of the whole five books of the Torah is complete, culminating with the last reading from Deuteronomy and beginning again with the first reading from Genesis. During this celebration of the Torah, Jews carry the scrolls in seven circuits around the *bimah*, through the congregation, and around the synagogue. Singing and dancing with the Torah, large communities even spill out into the streets in celebration. At the end of Simchat Torah, a whole month of intense Jewish festival observance, beginning in the month before the High Holy Days, comes to an end.