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Sukkot & Simchat Torah

the basics

interfaithfamily

Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life

sukkot simchat torah shemini atzeret

On the fifteenth day, then, of the seventh month,
when you have gathered in the produce of the land,
you shall celebrate a pilgrim feast of the Lord for a whole
week. During this week every native Israelite among you
shall dwell in booths, that your descendants may realize that,
when I led the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,
I made them dwell in booths.
I, the Lord, am your God.

[Leviticus 23: 39, 42-43]

Sukkot is the third and final festival that commemorates the Jewish exodus from Egypt. The escape of Israel from Egypt is remembered at Passover, entering into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai is recalled at Shavuot, and sleeping in a temporary hut or booth ("*sukkah*" in Hebrew) while wandering in the wilderness is memorialized in the holiday of *Sukkot*. "Sukkot" is the plural form of *sukkah*.

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Why Is Sukkot Celebrated?

Sukkot has agricultural roots as a fall harvest festival with a historical connection to wilderness dwellings. During the summer harvest in ancient Israel, the Israelites lived in makeshift shelters, or booths, close to their crops so they would not need to travel back and forth to their homes. After the hard work, there was a great celebration of gratitude to God for providing an abundant harvest.

When Is Sukkot?

Sukkot begins on the eve of the 15th of Tishrei, five days after Yom Kippur, and lasts for seven days. It is customary to begin building the sukkah on the day after Yom Kippur.

How Is Sukkot Celebrated?

There are two commandments concerning Sukkot. One is to build and live in a sukkah. This reminds us to avoid becoming excessively attached to material wealth and to slow down and reconnect with the natural world.

The second is the mysterious ritual of *arba minim* (Hebrew for "four species"), waving a cluster of four species of plants in six directions to indicate that God is wherever we are. This commandment also specifies that we are to rejoice, be happy!

How Is a Sukkah Built?

The sukkah is a temporary structure that we take down and rebuild each year. It must have at least 3 walls. The variety of materials that can be used for the sukkah walls is only limited by your imagination. The walls can be made of poles with a frame for canvas walls, quilts or rugs, or bamboo or lattice wood.

Anything that grows in the ground and that has been severed from its source can be used for the roof. The roof material is known as "*skhakh*," from the Hebrew for "covering." Palm or evergreen branches are often used; the branches must be left loose and not bundled. During the day, the roof must offer more sun than shade, and at nighttime, we should be able to see the stars between the branches of the roof.

The roof is not solid and the walls are not permanent, reminding us that it is not the strong walls and roof of our homes that protect us, but rather the shelter of God's divine protection.

Building a sukkah can be a wonderful family tradition. Some interfaith families use their heirloom Christmas tree lights to decorate the sukkah. Every family member, no matter what age or skill set, can make a contribution to the family sukkah. Inviting neighbors and extended family to help in the construction is a sweet way to share your joy and gratitude.

What Happens Inside A Sukkah?

Decorate the sukkah with symbols of the harvest and with homemade decorations. You may hang up seasonal fruits or drawings the children have made, or string paper chains or cranberries across the walls. Pictures, posters and ritual objects can also beautify the sukkah.

The commandment is to eat and sleep in the sukkah. Some interpret this to mean that all things done in a home should be done in the sukkah. Try playing games, taking a nap, reading a book or doing other activities in there as you would in your "other house."

Meals in the sukkah are often the highlight of the holiday. Together with family and friends, celebrate the bounty in our lives, both physical and spiritual, with songs and laughter and gratitude.

Welcoming Guests (Ushpizin)

For each day of Sukkot, the custom is to invite an ancestral guest to be with us in the sukkah. Traditionally, these *ushpizin* (Aramaic for "guests," the word is now used only for Sukkot guests) are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. In recent times, some Jews add seven spiritual women, or *ushpizot* (feminine plural version of the word), to enter their sukkah. These are the biblical women Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Avigail, Huldah and Esther.

Tradition tells us that each night a different one of the ushpizin enters the sukkah first and the others follow. Each of the *ushpizin* has a lesson to teach us that parallels the spiritual focus of the day on which they visit. Some families recall their relatives who are no longer living by decorating the sukkah with an *ushpizin* mural of the names of these relatives, their pictures and their favorite sayings or activities.

All guests are welcome in the sukkah – friends, family, neighbors; Jews or not, they are all welcome to come in and share a snack or meal.

Which Prayers Are Said?

Whenever we take the time to eat in the sukkah, the following blessing is said:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ
לָשֶׁבֶת בַּסֻּכָּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
A-SHER KID'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV
VITZ-I-VA-NU
LEI-SHEV BA'SU'KA.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
who has sanctified us
with Your commandments
and commanded us
to sit in the sukkah.
[A traditional translation.]

Thanks, big parent of this land,
supervisor of the universe,
who made holy these rules
and told us
to sit in this hut.
[An alternative translation from Storahtelling.]

The first time that we take a meal in the sukkah we say the *Shehechiyanu* prayer, thanking God for bringing us to this point in our lives.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
שֶׁהֶחֱיָנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ
וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לַזְּמַן הַזֶּה.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
SH-HEKH-I-YA-NU V'KI'MA-NU
V'HI-GI-A-NU LAZ'MAN HA-ZE.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the Universe,
who has kept us alive and sustained us
and permitted us to reach this moment.
[A traditional translation
from The Jewish Catalogue.*]*

Blessed be the Eternal One,
Source of Life,
Who has given us life, helped us to grow,
and enabled us to reach this moment.
[An alternative translation
from How to Raise a Jewish Child*]*

Arba Minim, The Four Species

The second commandment of Sukkot is the waving of the four species: the *etrog* (citron, which looks like a large bumpy lemon), *lulav* (palm branches), *hadasim* (myrtle branches) and *aravot* (willow branches).

> And you shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.
>
> *[Leviticus 23:40]*

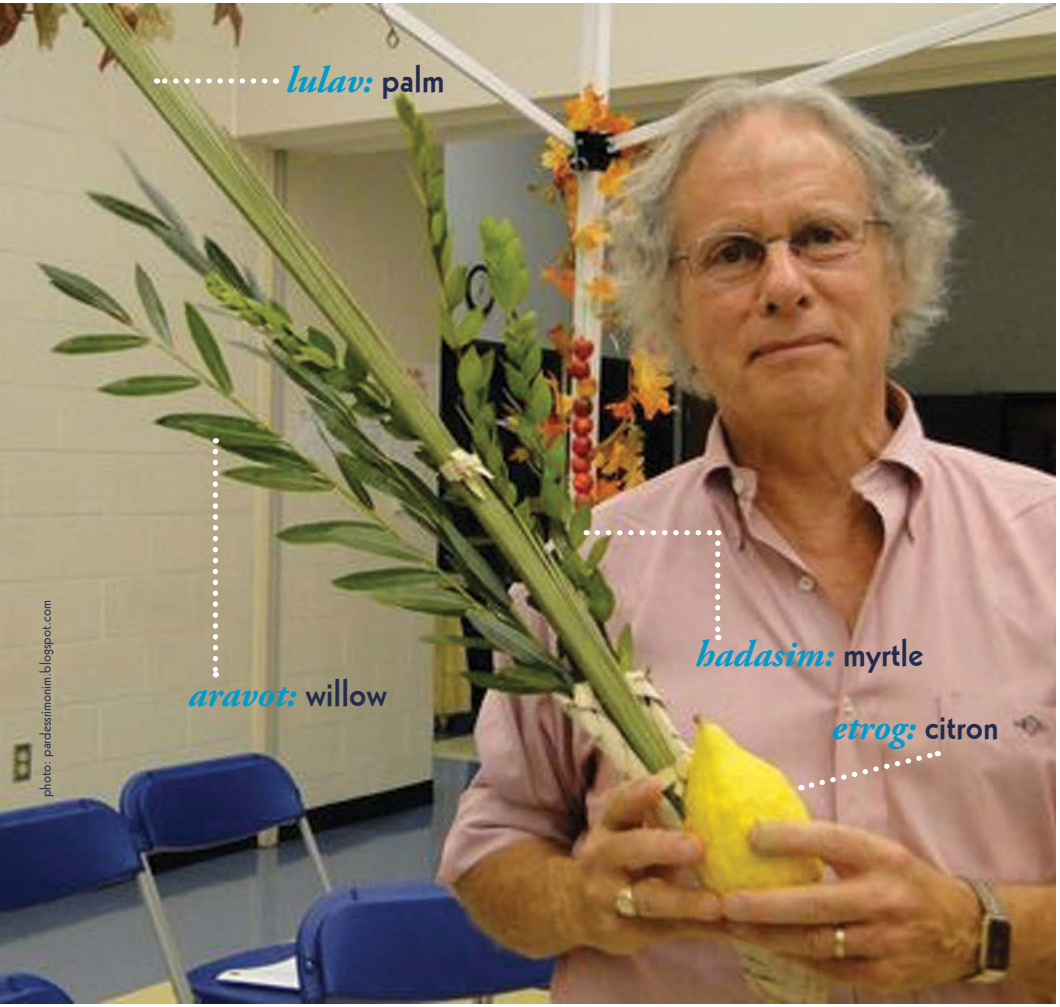
Why Do We Use These Four Plants?

Commenting on a verse from Psalms, the ancient sage Rabbi Mani taught that the four species represent different parts of the body. The palm resembles the spine; the myrtle resembles an eye; the willow a mouth, and the citron, a human heart. Just as four different species must be brought together to fulfill the commandment, so too must the different parts of oneself come together to live a Jewish life.

A second explanation is that each plant represents a different kind of Jew:

- The citron has a pleasing taste and a pleasing scent. It represents Jews who have achieved both knowledge of Torah and the performance of commandments or mitzvot (literally "commandments," also used to mean "good deeds").
- The palm has a tasty fruit but no scent, representing the Jews who have knowledge of Torah but are lacking in the performance of mitzvot.
- The myrtle leaf has a strong scent but no taste, representing the Jews who perform mitzvot, but have little knowledge of the Torah.
- The willow has no taste or scent, representing Jews who have no knowledge of Torah and do not perform mitzvot.

We bring all four of these species together on Sukkot to remind us that every person in our community is important and that we must all be united.



The Ritual of Arba Minim

Facing east, hold the cluster of three branches together. The spine of the palm faces the person holding it. The myrtle (the one with smallish leaves) should be on the right and the willow should be on the left. Holding the citron in our left hand with its stem facing downward, we recite this blessing:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֵנוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ
עַל נְטִילַת לוּלָב.

BA-RUKH A-TA A-DON-AI
EL-O-HEY-NU MEL-EKH HA-O-LAM
A-SHER KID'SHA-NU B'MITZ-VO-TAV
VITZ-I-VA-NU
AL N'TI-LAT LU-LAV.

Blessed are You, Lord our God,
Ruler of the universe,
who has sanctified us
withYour commandments
and commanded us
to take up the lulav.
[A traditional translation.]

Blessed are you, Yah,
Breath of Life,
who sanctifies us with Your
commandments and
has enjoined upon us
the mitzvah of the lulav.
[An alternative translation from Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt, via Ritualwell.org.]

Then we turn the citron over so the stem is facing up, and, still holding our hands together, shake the four species to the front, to the right, in back, to the left and up and down. On the first day of waving, we add the *Shehechiyanu* prayer (as above, on page 6).

What Do We Learn From Sukkot?

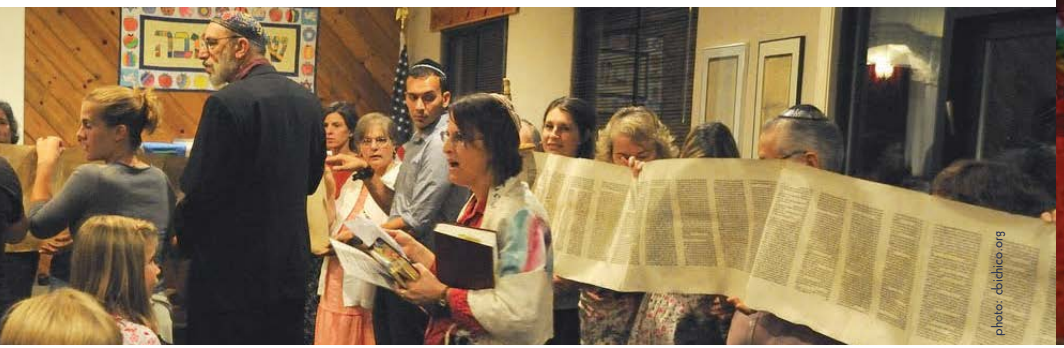
"Sukkot reminds us that the ultimate security is found
not within the walls of our home
but in the presence of God and one another."

[Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, The Tapestry of Jewish Time.*]*

The last day or days of Sukkot are really two additional holidays: Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. In Israel and in some Reconstructionist and Reform congregations, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated together on the eighth day of Sukkot. For others, Shemini Atzeret is the eighth day of Sukkot and Simchat Torah is the ninth day.

The Torah directs us to observe Shemini Atzeret, but we have little information about it otherwise.

On the eighth day, you shall hold a solemn assembly (*atzeret*);
you shall not work at your occupations.
[Numbers 29:35]



Simchat Torah

is the last of the fall holidays, arriving at the end of Sukkot. During Simchat Torah we can be filled with joy and love for God, for the Torah and for the Jewish community. The name of this holiday means "Joy of the Torah," and it marks the completion of the year long cycle of weekly Torah readings (*parshiot*).

Since the Torah is continuously read throughout the year, when we get to the end of Deuteronomy 34 we immediately start over by reading the first verses of Genesis. By doing that, we show the unending cycle of Torah study.

As the Torah reading concludes at the end of Deuteronomy, everyone rises and proclaims:

חֲזַק חֲזַק וְנִתְחַזֵּק!

CHAH-ZAHK, CHAH-ZAHK, V'NI'T-CHAH-ZEHK!

Be strong, be strong,
and let us strengthen each other!

In some synagogues, this final reading of the Torah is repeated so that as many people as possible can have an *aliyah* (the honor of saying the blessing over the Torah reading). Each time the reader comes to the end, the *Chazak* line will then be repeated.

How is Simchat Torah Celebrated?

Simchat Torah is celebrated with singing, dancing, good food and drink at the synagogue. There is no set home observance. At an evening service, all the Torah scrolls are removed from the ark and paraded around the sanctuary in seven circles known as *hakafot* (Hebrew for "encirclement"). In some synagogues, those who are in the seats close to the aisles touch their prayer book (*siddur*) or the fringes of their prayer shawl (*tallit*) to the Torah as it passes by. In others, congregants leave their seats, so they may dance alongside the Torahs as they make the circuits.

Many congregations liven up the celebration with music and dancing as they circle with the Torahs. Children participate in the dancing and singing; some may carry flags and miniature Torahs. Carrying the Torah during the procession is an honor, often shared by all who are present. Some synagogues unroll the entire scroll in a huge circle, with people carefully holding the parchment.

Is There A Worship Service?

Yes. In addition to the procession, there is a service with a Torah reading which in some congregations takes place under a wedding canopy or chuppah. The reader of the last portion of Deuteronomy and the reader of the first chapters of Genesis are called the bride (*kallah*) and groom (*chatan*) of the Torah.

In some Reform congregations, this service happens the first evening of Simchat Torah, as the holiday begins. In other denominations, the prayer service with Torah reading takes place the following morning.

What is Consecration?

In some synagogues, children entering religious school are consecrated or welcomed into the community on Simchat Torah. After a simple ceremony, they are given a small tallit or prayer shawl or a miniature Torah scroll. The rabbi may call the children up to the ark for a special blessing.

Simchat Torah ends the more than three weeks of the autumn holiday season with a commandment to be joyous, which will hopefully extend throughout the year.

Righteous Giving Or Tzedakah

Jewish holidays are a built-in time to express the Jewish value of doing good deeds to make the world a better place. Judaism does not leave the doing of good deeds to an impulse of kindness. It prescribes giving as a regular activity.

According to the Talmud, *tzedakah* (righteous giving) is as important as all the other mitzvot put together.

There is no notion of undeserving poor in Judaism. Giving is seen not only as a responsibility but as a privilege, an expression of dignity and one of the activities that defines a good and honorable person. Even the poor are required to give to those less fortunate than themselves, even if their gift comes from the tzedakah that was given to them.

Giving tzedakah is a way of both sharing the joy of the occasion and of acknowledging that personal happiness is incomplete in a world so badly in need of repair. In the small tight-knit Jewish communities of the past, tzedakah was part of every joyful occasion; local beggars were invited to wedding feasts. Jews also gave tzedakah to honor rites of passage.

Rabbi Chayim of Sanz said, "The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to one hundred beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving to one hundred beggars in the event that one might be a fraud."

*[*Darkai Chayim*, 16th century book of moral writing]*

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InterfaithFamily's mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

InterfaithFamily offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

You can join the InterfaithFamily Network or
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