

SUKKOT

ABOUT THE HOLIDAY

"You shall hold the Feast of Huts... You shall rejoice in your festival... for seven days... for the Lord your God will bless you in all your income and all your handiwork, and you shall be fully joyful". (Deuteronomy 16:13-17)

With the fullness of the moon in the month of *Tishrei*, exactly six months from the holiday of *Pesach* and following the solemnity of *Yom Kippur*, we joyfully celebrate the holiday of *Sukkot*, one of three pilgrimage festivals mentioned in the Torah. *Sukkot* reminds us of the time of traveling in the wilderness, (Leviticus 23:42-43) making camp in fragile, temporary huts, with the sturdy walls and familiar settings of home left far behind; with only the protection of God to surround us. These dwellings were also used as transitory housing during the ancient journeys to Jerusalem. A second name for the holiday is *Chag HaAsif*, the Harvest Holiday. The agricultural aspect is mentioned in Leviticus, 23:39. We celebrate the harvest, particularly in Israel, delighting in the ripened fruits of the land. A third name for the holiday is *Z'man Simchatenu*, the season of our joy, for at this time we begin the New Year with faith and optimism in the judgments that have been determined for us in the coming year. Additionally, King Solomon chose this time to dedicate the Temple in Jerusalem. During the time of the Temple, *Sukkot* included a ritual of water-pouring which was a time of intense and wide-spread celebration.

HOW WE CELEBRATE

Immediately upon the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*, we begin construction of our *sukkot* (here used as a plural for *sukkah* – the temporary hut as mentioned above. May be pronounced *sukkos*, rhyming with "book us" if you're from the old country). The *sukkah* should be large enough for a family to eat and live in, the walls are made of canvas or wood, and most importantly, the entire roof is covered with *schach*, a covering that is made of material that grows from the ground and has been cut from it, such as cut evergreen branches (Portland) or palm fronds (Negev desert) or bamboo sticks (PJA will use corn stalks). And most beautifully, the *schach* must be laid loosely on the roof in order to provide those within the *sukkah* a view of the moon, the stars, and the sky. Another Biblical observance which we still perform today is to take and shake the *aarbat minim*, or four species of plants. These consist of an *etrog*, (citron) and a *lulav*, which is comprised of a palm branch tied together with willow and myrtle branches. In traditional synagogues, there is a daily procession around the sanctuary with the four species in hand, while special prayers, called *Hashanot*, from the phrase "save us," are recited. Our Rabbis have compared the *lulav* and *etrog* with four types of Jewish people. The *etrog* is compared to the person who possesses both Torah learning and good deeds. The palm tree has no fragrance but produces dates that taste sweet and can be eaten, and so it is

compared to Jews who possess learning but no good deeds. The lovely myrtle, or *hadass*, has fragrance but no taste, and is compared to those Jews who possess good deeds but no learning. And finally, the willow has neither taste nor fragrance, and is compared to those Jews who lack both learning and good deeds. Yet, the Rabbis emphasized that the presence of each of the four plants is necessary in order to create the four species, the *lulav and etrog*. And just so, every type of Jewish person is necessary in order to make the Jewish community whole. Each individual fulfills an essential and unique role.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY CELEBRATION

Children love to decorate the *sukkah*, and the endeavor offers parents and adult friends the chance to get crafty, too. Typically, the *sukkah* is decorated with hanging fruits and vegetables, (the "seven species" mentioned in the Torah are: grapes, figs, dates, olives, pomegranates, wheat, and barley,) to commemorate the abundant harvest, and with beautiful scenes of Israel and signs with Bible quotations. Some modern families would rather not use food as a decoration, and create "fruit" from papier-mâché or laminated magazine cutouts. Decorating suggestions include paper chains; *Rosh Hashanah* cards strung along a long piece of yarn; posters of Israel; strings of beads, popcorn, or cranberries; ornamental gourds; mobiles depicting Jewish symbols; and placemats to use in the *sukkah*. To depict the special tradition of *ushpizin* that is practiced during *Sukkot*, an *ushpizin* chart can be created and hung. *Ushpizin* (oosh-pee-zeen) is a mystical custom begun and practiced in the sixteenth century by the mystics in Safed, Israel, to invite one of our ancestors to "visit" our *sukkah* as our "guests." These were traditionally Biblical characters, and included Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David. In recent years, our foremothers have been included: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, and Esther. Many families will enjoy "inviting" guests from their family ancestry, or including other heroes of Jewish history. Dramatically inclined family members may enjoy dressing up and portraying one of the characters. A "Who Am I?" guessing game, modeled after the game Twenty Questions, is lots of fun. Families with older children may ask the characters to respond to issues of contemporary life from the perspective of time past. Make a model doll-sized *sukkah* with young children to add to their dollhouses. Save the *etrog*, press cloves into the sides and use it for *besamim* (spices) at *Havdalah*. *Tzeddakah* collected during this holiday may be given to a food bank or other institution that feeds the hungry.

A FINAL WORD

Many contemporary thinkers emphasize the *sukkah* as a symbol of the joyful, yet fragile, nature of human existence. Perhaps we enjoy our lovely temporary *sukkot* so much because we are able to easily ascertain their precious and precarious qualities. A central theme of the holiday is hospitality and the gift of having the ability to share our bounty and our friendship with others. In times

when many of us live without close family members nearby, celebrating *Sukkot*, inviting others to share meals in our *sukkah*, is a wonderful way to build a "temporary family," to feel a part of the larger Jewish community. A *sukkah* seems to be always large enough for another chair, another paper plate at the table, making it possible for us to whole-heartedly welcome our own *ushpizin*.

Additional Resources:

For Adults

The Jewish Way: Living the Jewish Holidays; Irving Greenberg

The How to Handbook for Jewish Living, Kerry Olitzky and Ron Isaacs

A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, Isaac Klein

For Children:

Leo and Blossom's Sukkah, Jane Breskin Zalben

The Big Sukkah, Peninnah Schram

The House on the Roof, David Adler

A Tale of Three Wishes, Isaac Bashevis Singer

All About Sukkot, Judyth Saypol Groner

Night Lights: A Sukkot Story, Barbara Diamond Goldin

Building a Sukkah

"You shall live in booths for seven days" (Lev. 23-42)

What you need to know:

- A *sukkah* must have four walls (One of the walls can be a wall of your own house)
- Start building the *sukkah* as soon after *Yom Kippur* as possible

One *sukkah* building recipe is as follows:

Use back wall of house or garage as one of the four walls

Stack two cement blocks in the corner and insert two-by-fours (seven or eight feet long) into the blocks. Connect the two-by-fours with one-by-twos across the middle and the top.

- Stretch burlap cloth or plastic, or nail some thin plywood over the frame. (One wall can serve as the entrance if it is covered with burlap cloth.)
- Put one-by-ones running in both directions on the roof and cover with bamboo, twigs, corn husks, or other organic material. Remember to let the stars shine through!

Decorate the inside of the *sukkah* with fruit hangings, Rosh Hashanah greeting cards, posters, paper chains and the like.

Blessing over the Lulav and Etrog

Each morning during *Sukkot*, except for *Shabbat*, we recite a blessing over the *lulav* and *etrog*. We hold the *lulav* in our right hand and the *etrog* in our left hand. The stem of the *etrog* should be pointing up, and the *lulav* and *etrog* should be touching.

Baruch atah adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav u'tzivanu al n'tilat lulav.

Thank you, God, for these beautiful and fragrant fruits of the harvest, for the sun and the rain which make them grow, for the seasons of nature and the seasons of our lives.

After we say the blessing, we turn the etrog so that its stem is pointing down, and we wave the lulav and etrog together in all directions.

Blessings for Sukkot

Prior to eating or drinking in the *sukkah*, after the usual blessings for food, say:

Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu leishev basukkah.

Praised are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe, You made us holy with Your commandments and commanded us to dwell in the *sukkah*.