

# SUKKOT

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חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת  
Chag ha-Sukkot  
the festival of Booths

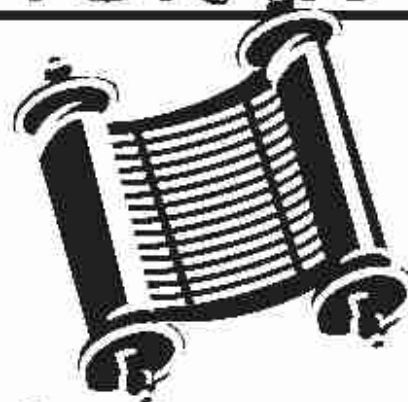
חַג הַאֲסִיף  
Chag ha-Asif  
the festival of Ingathering

# SIMCHAT TORAH

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שְׂמֵחַת תּוֹרָה  
Simchat Torah

זְמַן שְׂמֵחָתֵינוּ  
Z'man Simchatainu  
the festival of Rejoicing with Torah



**Jewish Family Education Booklet**  
**Sukkot and Simchat Torah**

Sukkot is the third of the three pilgrimage festivals.

***What are the pilgrimage festivals and what significance do they have?***

A pilgrimage festival is one for which, in ancient times, before the Temple was destroyed (which happened in 70 C.E.) Jews would make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to make sacrifices to God.

The 3 pilgrimage festivals are:

Passover (Pesach, פסח)

Shavuot (Shavu'ot, חג השבועות)

Sukkot (Sukkot, סוכות)

All 3 Pilgrimage festivals:

1. commemorate an important event in Jewish history
2. are agricultural festivals; i.e. mark a stage in the harvest season
3. teach some important religious truth
4. share the same rules regarding prohibited and permitted work
5. have contemporary meaning for us, today.

***What is the historical aspect which Sukkot celebrates?***

The Bible stresses Sukkot as a time to recall our Exodus from Egypt, during which time our ancestors lived in booths in the desert.

"You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 23:42,43)

***What is the agricultural aspect of Sukkot?***

Sukkot corresponds, in Israel, to the gathering of the harvest. (Hence, one of the other names for Sukkot, the Feast of Gathering חג האסיף) So, even in the Diaspora, (lands outside of Israel) Sukkot is a time for us to rejoice over the bounty of our harvest, and to thank God for His blessings.

***What religious truths does Sukkot seek to impart? How are they relevant for us, today?***

There are differing Rabbinic interpretations of the Biblical phrase "that I make the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." (Lev. 23:43) Some say that the booths were real, actually physical booths in which the children of Israel dwelt while in the desert. Others suggest that the term is not to be taken literally, but rather that the meaning of booths was "clouds of glory with which God surrounded the children of Israel to protect them while they wandered in the desert" (BSuk. 11b)

This latter interpretation can be expanded and understood to mean that the purpose of our building a Sukkah is to infuse us with faith in God, especially in times of stress as our ancestors trek through the desert was. The festival of Sukkot reminds us, as do so many other Biblical references, of God's special relationship with the Jewish people.

***Why should I build a Sukkah with my family in the suburbs of Massachusetts in the 21st century?***

It is precisely because you are so busy that the Bible and our ancient and modern Rabbis encourage us to build a Sukkah and to be in it as often as possible during the 7 (or 8) days of Sukkot.

When the children of Israel entered Canaan after 40 years in the desert, they encountered the vices and corruption of urban civilization. Although their days in the desert were hardly care-free, they began to see that period of time, as one of freedom from corruption, from foreign or corrupting influence. They longed to reproduce the purity of their civilization as nomads. In our day, Sukkot can become a call to the ethical, more simple life; to a life more free from corruption and the vices of an affluent society. Mordecai Kaplan wrote:

"From the foregoing circumstances [that life in the wilderness was purer and freer than life in the civilization of Canaan] it follows that having the Israelites relive their Wilderness experience on the festival of Sukkot [by living in a Sukkah] was bound to place them in a frame of mind which enabled them to detach themselves from the order of life which they had come to accept as normal and to view it critically."

So, Sukkot can be a time of reaping the harvest; an opportunity to be thankful for the abundant food we have. And Sukkot can be an opportunity to retreat from the demanding and often corrupting complexities of our modern, relatively affluent lives. Our Sukkah, acting almost like a time machine, can remind us of historical events of long ago and can help us appreciate our freedom while we remember how our people became a nation. One of the most beneficial things about a Sukkah is that we build our own. Most of us live in houses or apartments built by others. Building a Sukkah can give us a chance to enjoy the fruits of our own labors, to invite others to share in it and to get a sense of pride and fulfillment.

***What are the lulav and the etrog? What do we do with them? Why do we use them on Sukkot? I have heard of the four species. To what does that refer?***

The **Etrog** (אֶתְרוֹג) is a citrus fruit. In its most perfect form, it has a thick, bright yellow skin. Unlike other citrus, it requires constant irrigation. In order to use it for religious purposes in a Sukkah, it should taper upward at the top rather than be spherical. Its surface should be rough, not smooth like a lemon and it should have an unblemished stem called a pitma (פִּטְמָא). **Lulav** (לוּלוֹב) means "'a shoot' or a 'young branch of a tree'"... The use of this term was particularly confined to the palm branch, one of the components of the 4 species used on Sukkot. The Lulav is composed of 3 kinds of plants: willow, myrtle, and palm. Together with the Etrog, they are referred to as the 4 species. A Lulav should be fresh, not dry. It should be straight and without broken or bent leaves.

When we recite the blessings over the lulav and etrog we hold the etrog in the left hand, close to the heart, and wave the lulav in all directions during the recitation of the Hallel. The waving is a way of asking God to bless all of the fields with rain and also to indicate that God is everywhere. We wave the lulav three times each to the east, north, west and south and then upwards towards the heavens and down towards the earth.

Actually, the Torah (תּוֹרָה) makes the use of the Etrog and Lulav a mitzvah, but does not tell us why. This, of course, in splendid Jewish tradition, leaves the door wide open for *midrash*, for many different *interpretations*. Here are a few:

"Just as the Etrog has taste and fragrance, so there are in Israel men who are both learned and doers of good deeds; as the Lulav, whose fruit is palatable but is without fragrance, so there are those who are learned but without good deeds; as the myrtle has a pleasant odor but

is tasteless, so there are men of good deeds, but who possess no scholarship; as the willow is neither edible nor of agreeable fragrance, so there are those who are neither learned nor possessed of good deeds' (*Wayiqra Rabbah* 30:12). In binding the species together and pronouncing the benediction over them, we assert that the unity must include all segments of the community; only when each has its proper place, can there be a benediction."

Another midrash, interpretation, says "the Etrog and Lulav are like a person. The palm looks like a backbone. The myrtle leaves look like eyes. The willow leaves look like a mouth. And, the Etrog looks like a heart. The lesson is that we are supposed to thank God with our whole body."

***What are the specifications for building a Sukkah and why does it matter exactly how you do it?***

The Sukkah must be a temporary structure. This is the reason for some of the regulations. It must be erected in open air, under the sky, not in a building or a room, or even under a tree. It has 3 or 4 walls and a removable covering. The roof covering, called sekhach, must be made of material that grows from soil. An animal hide, for example, is not suitable. The roof covering should allow us to see the sky. There can be no openings greater than about 12 inches. No quickly drying or falling leaves or items with an offensive odor may be used. The Sukkah should not be more than about 30 feet high, otherwise it could be considered permanent because the walls would need to be very strong, nor less than 3 feet high. There should be at least enough space for one person to stand in it. It should be attractively decorated.

***What do we do in a Sukkah? How do we celebrate?***

First, the celebration can/should begin immediately after Yom Kippur (יום כפור) with the building of the structure. One could have a decorating party (see list at the end for decorating suggestions). Friends and family and neighbors can be enlisted for help and support and to join in the celebrating. Second, of course, one can eat and drink in a Sukkah, or even sleep in it. The decorated physical structure itself, lends itself to a feeling of togetherness and happiness and is perfect for instigating celebration. The atmosphere should be informal and relaxed.

***What blessings should be said?***

1. The blessing over the candles, as with all festivals:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו  
להדליק נר של (שבת ו) יום טוב

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam, asher kiddishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu  
l'hadlik nare shel (Shabbat v') shel Yom Tov*

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe,  
Who has commanded us to light (the Sabbath and) the Holy day lights

2. The Kiddush, the festival blessing over the wine:

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam borai p'ree ha'gofen*

Blessed are You, Lord our God King of the universe, Who created the fruit of the vine

(complete Kiddush not included here)

3. Shehecheyanu, the blessing for the new season, said on the occasion of theating of the first of the harvest, or on the first night of the festival:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַחַיִּינוּ וְקִיְמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam shehecheyanu v'keemanu v'heegyanu laziman ha zeh*  
Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe  
Who has kept us alive, sustained us and allowed us to reach this important occasion

4. The blessing in the Sukkah:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לִישֵׁב בַּסֻּכָּה.

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam, asher kiddishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu layshave ba sukkah*

Blessed are You, Lord our God. King of the universe Who has blessed us with His commandments and commands us to sit in the Sukkah

5. The blessing over the Lulav and the Etrog:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת לֹולָב.

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam, asher kiddishanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al niteelat lulav*

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has blessed us with His commandments and commanded us to take up the Lulav and the Etrog.

This blessing is postponed until after Shabbat if Sukkot falls on Shabbat. The Lulav and the Etrog are passed from person to person, then the bread is blessed and all sit down to eat.

6. The Motzi:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ

*Baruch ata adonay Elohainu Melech ha'olam, ha'motzi lechem min ha'aretz*

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Decorating suggestions:

hanging cornstalks, strung fruit, strung popcorn and cranberries, construction paper chains, bright colored branches, children's drawings, strung packs of gum, gourds

In our family making and eating carmel covered apples is a Sukkot tradition. I would be happy to share my "recipe" with anybody who asks!

## Simchat Torah

There is actually a fair amount of confusion around the relationship between Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Although they fall one week apart, and are often talked about in the same breath, Simchat Torah is entirely independent of Sukkot. To further complicate matters, you may have heard of Shemini Atzeret as well. It also is not related to Sukkot in any way, other than proximity on the calendar.

### **Why is there misunderstanding about the relationship between Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah?**

In Israel, as indicated in the Bible, Sukkot is celebrated for seven days. The first day is observed as a holy day, on which one is to abstain from all work/creation.

In the diaspora, including the US, for observant Jews, the first two days are holy days. Reform Jews generally follow the Israeli custom. The next five days are considered half-holidays. The day after the seventh day of Sukkot (often mistakenly thought of as the eighth day of Sukkot, hence the confusion) is called Shemini Atzeret. While it is independent of Sukkot, and none of the ceremonies or observances of Sukkot apply, it is considered a holy day, on which no work shall be done. In Talmudic times, diaspora communities added a second day to Shemini Atzeret, which became known as Simchat Torah, the festival of rejoicing in our Torah.

### **Why is Simchat Torah celebrated?**

Simchat Torah means “rejoicing in the Torah.” It was first celebrated Talmudic times, when it was customary in Babylonia to read the entire Torah in a one year cycle. The Talmud refers to this day not as Simchat Torah, but as the second day of Shemini Atzeret. In fact, it is only in observant communities in the diaspora, that Simchat Torah is celebrated as a full holiday. In Israel, and in the reform community, it is celebrated as a part of Shemini Atzeret.

### **How and when is Simchat Torah celebrated?**

All Jewish holidays, including Shabbat, begin in the evening. (You will notice if you read Genesis carefully that it says at the end of every day “and there was evening and there was morning, the second day”). The frenzy and merriment surrounding Simchat Torah, similarly, is focused primarily in the evening and is often continued the next day, during regular morning services.

Simchat Torah is celebrated with a lot of merriment. The last portion of the Torah is read, and is immediately followed by the reading of the very first chapter in the Torah. This is to emphasize the importance of constantly learning and studying. In synagogues all over the world, congregants make many processions (hakafot, circlings) in and often, around the synagogue, singing and dancing to honor the Torah. If there is usually formality in the synagogue, it is abandoned on Simchat Torah. Synagogues develop their own unique reputations for being “good” places to celebrate Simchat Torah. All such celebrations, follow Chasidic custom in which Jews lose themselves in ecstatic fervor. It is interesting to note that in the former Soviet Union, when practicing of Judaism, or other religions, was a very serious crime, Jews risked their lives to celebrate Simchat Torah.

Here is a partial list of references if you wish to do further reading on your own:

1. The Encyclopedia Judaica; look under Sukkot, Lulav, Etrog
2. Building Jewish Life Sukkot and Simchat Torah, by Joel Lurie Grishaver
3. A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice by Isaac Klein
4. Head Start on Holidays, Jewish programs for preschoolers and parents by Roberta Louis Goodman and Andye Honigman Zell
5. Jewish Family Celebrations, the Sabbath, Festivals and Ceremonies by Arlene Rossen Cardozo
6. The First Jewish Catalogue, compiled and edited by Richard Siegel, Michael and Sharon Strassfeld

## חג שמחה

Happy Sukkot and Happy Simchat Torah

I hope you came and celebrated with us, this year.

Amy Sands