

Festival of Sukkot—Prophetic Significance

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The Festival of Ingathering

- The Bible refers to the Feast of Tabernacles by two names: *Chag HaAsif* (the Festival of Ingathering or Harvest Festival) and *Chag HaSukkot* (Festival of Booths).ⁱ

Festival of Booths

- The word *sukkah* means a “shaded booth.”ⁱⁱ
- A *sukkah* is a temporary shelter made with a leafy covering of natural materials (called *schach*).ⁱⁱⁱ
- The rabbis explain, the holiday is to be celebrated with materials that are typically left on a threshing floor or in a winepress, such as straw, stalks, and reeds.^{iv}
- This requirement is derived from the verse: “*You shall prepare for you the festival of Sukkot for seven days as you gather from your threshing floor and from your winepress.*” (Deuteronomy 16:13).
- “*His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*” (Matthew 3:12).
- “*I have trodden the winepress alone, And from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden them in My anger, And trampled them in My fury; Their blood is sprinkled upon My garments, And I have stained all My robes*” (Isaiah 63:3).

Future Promises

- Along with Passover and Shavuot, Sukkot is one of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three annual pilgrimages, when every male Jew was to be in Jerusalem.
- Of all the Jewish holidays, Sukkot is the only one whose date does not seem to commemorate a historic event.

- Also, nowhere in the entire narrative of the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent travels through the wilderness for 40 years is there any mention of the children of Israel residing in booths.
- *“And He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Matthew 17:2-4).*

God’s Protection and Provision

- In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer gives the following^v explanation to the *sukkah*: These booths are a reference to the miraculous Clouds of Glory, which protected the Israelites throughout their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness.^{vi}
- They not only protected them from above, but surrounded them on all sides as well.
- They protected the people from the harsh elements, flattened mountains before them, killed snakes and scorpions in their path, kept their clothing and sandals clean, and guided them through the desert.
- And here is the great paradox: The *sukkah* is my safe-haven, yet it has an open roof and is vulnerable to all the elements. Anyone or anything can enter. As I peek at the vast overlay of blue and white above, I feel safe.^{vii}
- *“And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain” (Isaiah 4:6).*

Marriage of Heaven and Earth

- The song Moses taught the Jews on the last day of his life spans all of Jewish history, from the very beginning when “He found them in a desert land,” all the way to the future redemption when the nations will praise God, “For He will... appease His land [and] His people.”^{viii}
- The song is read on Shabbat in close proximity to the holidays of Yom Kippur and Sukkot.
- On Yom Kippur we reach to the heavens, we connect to the core of our soul and feel unified with God. But just as we reach the climax of the holiness of Yom Kippur, we transition to preparation for the holiday of Sukkot, when we celebrate the physical bounty with which we have been blessed.
- In the opening phrase, Moses calls for heaven and earth to bear witness:
- Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak! And let the earth hear the words of my mouth.^{ix}

- Because Jewish law requires legal matters to be established on the basis of two witnesses, Moses called upon both heaven and earth to bear witness that he indeed had conveyed this song to the people.
- Therefore, the purpose of Israel—the objective of all history—is the marriage of heaven and earth.

The Most Joyous Holiday

- Sukkot is a joyous holiday—so joyous that the sages called it simply *Chag*, Hebrew for “Festival.”
- In our liturgy, we call it *Zeman Simchatenu*, “The Time of Our Rejoicing.”
- Even today, when there is no Temple, it is customary to hold nightly celebrations that include singing and dancing (and even live music during the intermediate days of the holiday).
- This holiday is so joyous that in Talmudic times, when someone said the word *chag* (holiday) without specifying which one, you could know that they were referring to Sukkot.

Living Water

- *“One of the main aspects of the holiday of Sukkot (Tabernacles) is the ceremony surrounding the commandment to pour water on the altar—the water libation—which lasted the entire night. During this event, which mainly took place in the Women’s Court, the Levites played and worshiped on many instruments. Men, women and children participated in the immense joy of this libation. Special elevated balconies were constructed to enable the righteous women of Israel to watch the wise men of the Sanhedrin as they danced. At dawn, the assembly proceeded with melody and song to the spring of Shiloach, at the foot of the walls of Jerusalem. One priest carried with him a special golden decanter and filled it with the sparkling spring water. Then the congregation ascended again to the Temple, led by the priest who bore the golden vessel. Arriving at the Temple, he brought the decanter up to the altar, and poured the water into the silver cup at its corner.”^x*
- *“The sages of Israel testify to the celebrations of the water libation from the days of the Second Temple, describing the great joy of the ceremony: Whoever has not seen the celebration of the water libation [during the festival of Sukkot] has never experienced the feeling of true joy—great lamps of gold were hoisted, with four golden bowls at the top of each lamp. Four young priests-in-training would climb to the top, carrying immense oil jugs with which they would fill the bowls. Once lighted, there was not a courtyard in all of Jerusalem that did not glow with the light that emanated from the celebration in the Temple courtyard. As the people sang, the righteous and pious men would dance before*

them while juggling flaming torches. The levites, standing on the fifteen steps that descend from the Court of Israel to the Women's Court, played on lyres, harps, trumpets and many other instruments. Two priests who blew silver trumpets stood at the top of the stairs on either side of the entrance to the great gate of the Court. All this was done to honor the commandment of the water libation."^{xi}

Peace and Unity

- The sages associate the mitzvah of sukkah with the concept of peace and unity. Thus, in our prayers the sukkah is called "Your sukkah of peace," and the sages of the Talmud state that "all Israel are fit to dwell in one sukkah."^{xii}
- Thus, when the entire Jewish nation dwells in a single sukkah, the unity expressed is one that transcends all differences and distinctions between them.^{xiii}
- The Talmud tells us that when Messiah comes, the Jewish nation will in fact sit together for a festive meal in one single sukkah^{xiv}—may it be speedily in our days.
- *"And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16).*
- *"Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).*
- Amen!

ⁱ Posner, Menachem. *What is Sukkot?* Chabad.org.

ⁱⁱ Shurpin, Yehuda. *What's the Reason for the Sukkah?* Chabad.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shurpin Yehuda. *Why Is the Sukkah Covered With Plant Material (Schach)?* Chabad.org.

^{iv} Talmud, Sukkah 12a.

^v See Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 625:1 and many others, who cite only this reason. Indeed, there are laws and customs regarding the building of the sukkah that are specifically based on this reason.

^{vi} Talmud, Sukkah 11b.

^{vii} Wolfers-Rapaport, Karen. *7 Paradoxes About the Sukkah That Help Us Break Through Illusions.* Chabad.org.

^{viii} Feldman, Menachem. *Heaven & Earth.* Chabad.org.

^{ix} Deuteronomy 32:1.

^x Based on Mishna, Tractate Sukkah, Chapter 5.

^{xi} Ibid. Mishna, Tractate Sukkah, Chapter 5.

^{xii} Talmud, Sukkah 27b.

^{xiii} See Likkutei Sichot, vol. 19, p. 359.

^{xiv} See Talmud, Bava Batra 75a.