

The Sukkah

The Sukkah is a temporary structure, referred to as a booth, in which we are supposed to sleep and eat our meals during the week of the Sukkot harvest festival. It is constructed of four walls and covered with a roof of tree branches or other material that allows you to see the stars. If you don't have already existing walls, the sides of a house or fence may be used. It is constructed before the beginning of Sukkot, but not usually before Yom Kippur. It is used for the first time on the eve of Sukkot, 15 Tishrei (Leviticus 23:39), which begins at sundown 17 October 2005.

Today, the Sukkah is used mostly for sleeping and eating. There is a special obligation to eat in the Sukkah the first night of Sukkot. Even if it is raining, kiddush is recited over wine and the blessing is said over bread. We are encouraged to study, read, and entertain guests in the Sukkah, but only if it can be done with a reasonable degree of comfort.

Exemptions: There are rabbinic exemptions from the obligation of dwelling in the Sukkah. If sitting inside the Sukkah causes physical discomfort such as being bothered by the wind, flies or bees, or if it is raining heavily, you are excused. Obviously if you are elderly or sick, or if you are a mother with young children, you do not have to eat every meal in the Sukkah.

Also, if you are traveling or away from home on business, you do not have to find a Sukkah in which to eat. But, if you have an opportunity to eat in someone's Sukkah, you should take advantage. Interestingly, a bride, groom or wedding party are exempt from the traditional seven day-long celebration, since sleeping and eating in a Sukkah is not the most comfortable.

Materials: There are rabbinic rules regarding a Sukkah's minimum size, maximum height, and wall dimensions. The minimum height of the walls should be approximately three feet. The Sukkah must be at least twenty-six inches long and twenty-six inches wide. The walls may not be higher than thirty feet.

Almost any kind of materials may be used to make the walls. You can use cinder blocks, scrap lumber, old doors, bamboo shades, canvas or nylon sheeting attached to a frame of wood or metal piping with nails or grommets and rope. But the one aspect of the Sukkah that makes it kosher, is its skhakh, or roof.

S'khakh: The skhakh must also be of a temporary nature. It must be made of organic material, something grown from the ground. Branches, specifically evergreens, and bamboo poles are the most commonly used materials.

There must be enough S'khakh so there is more shade than sun in the Sukkah, but not so much that you can't see the stars at night. The S'khakh must also be spaced evenly with no gaps wider than eleven-and-a-half inches. In addition, boards or beams wider than sixteen inches may not be used since they are similar to those used for a house roof or ceiling.

Decorations: It is a mitzvah, a religious obligation, for every Torah observer to build a Sukkah. The Talmud suggests hanging "handmade carpets and tapestries, nuts, almonds, peaches, pomegranates, branches of grape, vines, decanters of oil, fine meal, wreaths of ears of corn" (Betza 30b). However, today, standard decorations include hanging paper chains, or using crepe paper, fruits, real or plastic, Indian corn, gourds, as well as new year's cards and pictures of Jerusalem. You can decorate any way you wish.

Ushpizin: There is a custom of inviting Ushpizin, symbolic guests, each day to the Sukkah. The guests include Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and David. Recently, some people

have invited the matriarchs and other important women of the Bible as well. One list includes Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, Leah, Miriam, Abigail and Esther.

Another connection between the Ushpizin and Sukkot is that all the original Ushpizin were wanderers or in exile.

Abraham left his father's house to go to Canaan; all three patriarchs wandered in the land of Canaan and suffered at the hands of local rulers; Jacob fled to his uncle Laban; Joseph turned up in Egypt after being sold by his brothers; Moses fled from a life of privilege in Egypt to Midian after killing an Egyptian officer and later, with his brother Aaron, wandered in the desert for forty years; and David fled from King Saul, who, suffering from a temporary mental illness, was trying to kill him.

Greetings: Gut Yom Tov (Yiddish) and hag samei'akh (Hebrew), both meaning happy holiday are appropriate greetings on Sukkot.

Hospitality: Sukkot is a holiday with some of the best opportunities for inviting guests. In some communities, people go from Sukkah to Sukkah making kiddush, looking at each other's decorations, sampling goodies, a special favorite among children. Sometimes this custom is called a Sukkah Hop. Like the Passover seder, in which we are encouraged to invite the needy, Sukkot is a great opportunity to invite those who may never have had the experience of being in a Sukkah.

Candlelighting: All Jewish holidays are ushered in with the lighting and blessing of candles the night before.

The first Blessing:

Barukh Atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melekh Haolam, asher kishanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu lehadlik ner shel (Shabbat v'shel) yom tov.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the (Sabbath and) festival lights.

The second Blessing: Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, Melekh Haolam, shehekheyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higgiyanu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this season.

Kiddush: Seated or standing, the special festival kiddush is recited followed by the blessings recited every time we eat a meal in the Sukkah. The text for this kiddush can be found in any siddur.

Blessing Said Before Sitting in the Sukkah: Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu, Melekh haolam, asher kidshanu bn'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu leisheiv basukkah.

Blessed are you, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to dwell in the Sukkah.

Blessing Said For Washing Hands: A blessing is said for washing hands in remembrance of the temple service which required cleanliness.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al netilat yadayim.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding washing the hands.

For Bread:

Baruch Ata Adonai, Elohaynu Melekh Haolam, hamotzi lekhem min ha'aretz.

Blessed are You Lord our G-d, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Foods: There aren't specific foods linked to Sukkot. Since most meals are carried from the kitchen and served in the Sukkah, it is common to eat a lot of casseroles, hearty soups, and stuffed cabbages.

The Four Species: The other important mitzvah associated with Sukkot is having the arba minim, the four species, also known the lulav and etrog, the palm branch and citron.

On the first day you shall take the product of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d seven days. (Leviticus 23:40)

The oral tradition as recounted in the Talmud identifies the "product of goodly trees" as the etrog; the "branches of palm trees" as the lulav; the "boughs of leafy trees" as hadasim, or myrtle; the "willows of the brook" as aravot, or willows.

The Arba Minim, or the four species, represent the abundant, agricultural nature of Sukkot. Just as the farmer gathers his crops, we are also instructed to gather four kinds of growing things and use them to praise and rejoice with G-d.

While the temple existed, the four species were used each day of Sukkot. Outside the temple, they were only used on the first day. When the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the rabbis said the people should use the Arba Minim every day of the holiday as a remembrance of the temple. The custom has continued to this day.

Using the Four Species: The basic rabbinic commandment of the four species consists of holding them in your hand and shaking them. This is done two times during the synagogue service, once during the prayer, hallel, and once during the prayer, hoshanot.

The four species are made up of a long palm branch that has a holder made of palm leaves. On the left side of the holder are two willows, or aravot, and on the right side are three hadasim, or myrtle leaves.

The lulav picked up by your right hand with the spine toward you, and the etrog, or citron, is held in the left hand with pittam, or tip, pointing down, so it is closer to your heart. Hold the etrog and lulav together and recite the blessings:

First Blessing: Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam asher kishanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al netilat lulav.

Blessed are You Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning the taking of a palm branch.

Second Blessing: Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Haolam, shehekheyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higgiyanu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this season.

Next, turn the etrog so the pittam faces up, and keeping your hands close together so the lulav and etrog are touching, wave them in six directions: east, south, west, north, above, and below. A warning: a broken pittam, renders the etrog passul, unkosher for use.

The blessings can be performed at home or once you reach the synagogue, but it is custom for it to be done in a Sukkah.

Interpretations: On a deeper level, the four species are often compared to four types of Jews. The etrog has taste and smell, so it stands of people who possess both learning and good deeds. The palm tree has taste but no smell, so it stands for those with learning, but no good deeds. The myrtle has smell but no taste, so it stands for people who have good deeds but no learning. The willow, has neither taste nor smell, and it stands for those without learning and without good deeds.

Another view sees the lulav as one person. The lulav represents the spine of a person; the myrtle the eyes; the willow the mouth; and the etrog the heart. Through them, we express our desire to praise and worship G-d with our entire being.

Another theory is that the lulav and etrog symbolize roots, such as land and living, fruit and fertility, while the Sukkah is a symbol for the temporary, exile and wandering.

Storage: The four species, which are plants, will require a little bit of care throughout the holiday. One idea is keeping the hadasim and aravot (in the holder) in the refrigerator wrapped in a damp or moistened paper towel. The lulav and etrog itself will not dry out. It is, however, very important, to take proper care of the etrog. The etrog can become halachically unusable, or pasul, if its pittam, the little stem, falls off or breaks.

To prevent that from happening, it has become custom to store the etrog in a special decorative box, the majority of which containing velvet or a soft lining. If you do not already have a specially designated box, keep your etrog wrapped in its original packaging material, usually a corrugated box.

Hallel: During Sukkot, Hallel, psalms of praise, are recited every day after the morning amidah, silent devotional. During certain verses, the lulav and etrog is shaken. When it is time, you point the lulav in front of you, to the east, and shake it three times. Then you repeat the same motion three times to the right, which is south; over the shoulder, which is west; left, which is north; then above you; and last, below.

Hoshanot: Hoshanot are hymns recited everyday during the morning service, except on Shabbat. They are called hoshanot since they each begin with the words, hosha na, meaning save us. Hoshanot, which are chanted while walking around in a procession, are a reminder of a similar procession which took place during the temple. Hoshanot are actually medieval poems and prayers composed by the eighth century rabbi, Elazar Hakallir. They consist of 22 verses or stanzas which ask for G-d's deliverance

Hol Ha-Moed: Only Passover and Sukkot have Hol Ha-Moed, intermediate days, that separate the first and last days of the holiday. Hol Ha-Moed lasts five days, but carry no biblical prohibitions against work or travel unless one of the days falls out on the Shabbat. However, the intermediate days, are still regarded as special, but people can go back to work. In more traditional circles, some people only do work they feel is essential.

In Israel: In Israel, the first day is yom tov, a festival. The second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth days are Hol ha-Moed, a semi-festival, where work is permitted. The seventh day is Hosanna Raba. The eighth day is celebrated as both Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah.

In the Diaspora: In the Diaspora, The first and second days are considered Yom Tov, festivals which carry prohibitions against work and travel. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth days are Hol ha-Moed, the semi-festival. The seventh day is Hoshana Raba. The eighth day is Shemini Atzeret, and the ninth is Simhat Torah.

The reason that Jews in the Diaspora keep an extra day of Yom Tov is because before calendars

were established, months was announced by the sighting of a new moon. The sighting had to be ratified by an expert court in Jerusalem. Those who lived near Jerusalem received the news in time to make preparations for the holiday. Those living far away, where information did not travel quickly or accurately, established extra festival days, to be sure the correct day was observed. The custom was so universal, that even after a calendar was established, and technology was available, Jews living outside Israel still observed an extra day.

During Hol Ha-Moed, the intermediary days, we continue to eat all of our meals in the Sukkah, and we continue the practice of blessing the lulav and etrog each day. In the synagogue, the complete Hallel is recited daily and the Torah reading consists of four aliyot, honors given men when called up to the Torah reading, which describe the daily sacrifices for Sukkot.

Shabbat Hol Ha-Moed: On Shabbat there are seven aliyot and the Torah reading is from Exodus 33:12-34:36. The Haftorah is from Ezekiel 31:18-39:16, which talks about the climactic war of the final days, which expresses another messianic theme of Sukkot.

Kohelet: Kohelet or Ecclesiastes, is one of five biblical scrolls, or megilot, that are assigned to five different holidays. Kohelet, which is read on Shabbat Hol Ha-Moed Sukkot, is attributed to King Solomon, who also wrote the Song of Songs.

The most obvious connection between Kohelet and Sukkot is their common lack of permanence. Kohelet is a treatise on what brings permanent joy. In contrast to the more sensual Song of Songs, which was written at an earlier point in King Solomon's life, the book of Kohelet was written after the king experienced of life's pleasures. Solomon concludes with the message, "The end of the matter, all having been heard, fear G-d and keep His commandments; for this applies to all mankind."

Simhat Bet Ha-Sho'eivah: This ceremony has all but disappeared except among certain sects of Hasidim who mark this ancient temple ritual with singing and dancing. If you are fortunate to be in Israel during the holiday of Sukkot, take time to experience this holiday in Safed, a northern city with ancient, mystical roots. There, Chassidim in traditional dress dance through cobbled streets, singing and dancing. It is an experience you will not likely see anywhere else except maybe in certain parts of New York where groups of Chasidim still live.

Translated as "the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing," this ancient water libation ceremony took place every day in the temple except for the first day of yom tov and on Shabbat.

The Talmud in Sukkah 51a-b describes it in detail, including a portrait of our sages juggling lighted torches and performing somersaults as part of the celebration. The Talmud says, "He who has not the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life."

Hoshana Rabbah: Translated as the Great Hoshana, this seventh day of Sukkot should have been its own festival, but isn't because of the festival day, Shemini Azeret, which follows. Its two most important rituals include circling the synagogue seven times, instead of once, and beating the willows, or aravot.

The custom of beating the aravot stems from a temple ritual where the willows were struck against the ground near the altar. The custom symbolized a casting away of sins and is the reason that Hoshana Rabbah is still known as the final day of judgment, the last moment forgiveness can be attained. Today, the custom, where performed, involves beating willows against the ground. No blessing is recited, as some beat the willows five times and some shake the willows before striking them.

This ritual, which is a rabbinic commandment, was meant to supersede the laws of Shabbat.

Rabbis in the fourth century of the Christian Era set the calendar so that Hoshana Rabbah would never fall on Shabbat, though Yom Kippur, the most important fast day, could. According to most, Hoshana Rabbah marks the conclusion of the High Holiday period in which judgments can still be changed.

One well known custom is staying up the night of Hoshana Rabbah to recite and study a text called tikkun leil hoshana rabbah. It is believed that at midnight the gates of heaven open to receive prayers.

Shemini Azeret: Immediately following the last day of Sukkot (Hoshana Rabbah), is Shemini Azeret, the eighth day of Sukkot.

On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering; you shall not work at your occupations. Numbers 29:35

The rabbis interpreted this to mean that G-d asks all those who made a pilgrimage for Sukkot to stay longer, which is a translation for azeret, from the root to hold back.

Shemini Azeret is a full festival day, including candle lighting and kiddush. Work is prohibited. The lulav and etrog are not used although kiddush is recited in the Sukkah, both evening and morning.

In the synagogue, during the musaf service following shacharit, the prayer for rain, tefillat geshem, is recited. Shemini Azeret is also marked by the recital of yizkor, the memorial prayer for the dead.

Simchat Torah: The celebration of Simchat Torah revolves around the completing and beginning again of the cycle of Torah readings. The completion is marked by seven hakafot, circling, similar in form to those of hoshanot during Sukkot.

The celebration begins with ma'ariv, the evening prayer. A series of verses praising G-d are sung with the congregation chanting responsively.

Children are especially encouraged to participate in the simchah, the joy, of the evening. It is custom to hand out flags with apples on top, a symbolic reminder of the tribal flags under which the Israelites marched in the desert.

The morning service has its own amidah, silent recitation, and Hallel, psalm of praise. Every male in the shul is invited to the bimah for an aliyah, the blessing before Torah reading. After everyone has received his aliyah, there is one last aliyah for children. Called kol ha-ne'arim, Hebrew for all the boys, every little boy not yet bar-mitzvah, is called to the Torah. A talit is spread over their heads like a canopy and the child says the blessings along with an accompanying adult.

Modified from http://www.everythingjewish.com/Sukkot/sukkot_laws.htm

See also http://hebrew4christians.com/Holidays/Fall_Holidays/Sukkot/sukkot.html