

SUKKOT: THE FESTIVAL OF BOOTHS

@ St. Mary's Episcopal Church with Harlem Havruta

What is Sukkot?

Beginning five days after Yom Kippur, comes the festival of Sukkot. Sukkot is named after the booths or huts (sukkot in Hebrew) in wherein Jews slept, ate, and welcomed guests during this week-long celebration. According to rabbinic tradition, these flimsy booths represent the huts in which the Israelites dwelt during their 40 years of wandering in the desert after escaping from slavery in Egypt. The festival of Sukkot is one of the three great pilgrimage festivals (*chaggim*) of the Jewish year.

Sukkot History

The origins of Sukkot are found in an ancient autumnal harvest festival. Indeed it is often referred to as *hag ha-asif*, "The Harvest Festival." Much of the imagery and ritual of the holiday revolves around rejoicing and thanking God for the completed harvest. The sukkah represents the huts that farmers would live in during the last hectic period of harvest before the coming of the winter rains. As is the case with other festivals whose origins may not have been Jewish, the Bible reinterpreted the festival to imbue it with a specific Jewish meaning. In this manner, Sukkot came to commemorate the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert after the revelation at Mount Sinai, with the huts representing the temporary shelters that the Israelites lived in during those 40 years.

Sukkot at Home

Many of the most popular rituals of Sukkot are practiced in the home. As soon after the conclusion of Yom Kippur as possible, often on the same evening, one is enjoined to begin building the *sukkah*, or hut, that is the central symbol of the holiday. The sukkah is a flimsy structure with at least three sides, whose roof is made out of thatch or branches, which provides some shade and protection from the sun, but also allows the stars to be seen at night. It is traditional to decorate the sukkah and to spend as much time in it as possible. Weather permitting, meals are eaten in the sukkah, and the hardier among us may also elect to sleep in the sukkah. In a welcoming ceremony called *ushpizin*, ancestors are symbolically invited to partake in the meals with us. And in commemoration of the bounty of the Holy Land, we hold and shake four species of plants (*arba minim*), consisting of palm, myrtle, and willow (*lulav*), together with citron (*etrog*).

Sukkot in the Bible

“You shall celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in the results of your work from the field.”

Exodus 23:16

“Mark on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the yield of your land, you shall observe the festival of the Lord to last seven days: a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day.”

Leviticus 23:39

“After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days. You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the parent/less, and the widow in your community. ”

Deuteronomy 16: 13-14

“And that they should proclaim and publish in all their cities and in Jerusalem saying: ‘Go out to the mountain and bring olive branches, and branches of the wild olive and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees to make booths as it is written. So the people went out, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the open space of the Water Gate, and in the open space of the Gate of Ephraim. And all the congregation of those who had returned from captivity made booths, and dwelt in the booths, for since the days of Joshua, son of Nun, to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was great rejoicing.”

Nechemiah 8:14-17

*Thanks to the St. Mary's community of West Harlem for hosting our seventh Sukkah in a row in 2023. People ask, “Why put up a Sukkah here when there is a bigger one over there?” Why not! Like Harlem Havruta on Facebook.
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