

# Sukkot: Joy and Compassion Bring Peace

If you are a bit new to Sukkot, often translated as the Festival of Booths, the week-long holiday we're in, let me just share that it's a bit weird.

We go outside and build temporary huts called Sukkot, which have open roofs just as the weather gets colder and harsher.

We hold this harvest festival filled with joy and merriment, just as people in Israel were really nervous about rain.

It doesn't rain for the warmer six months of the year there, so you can imagine how ancient farmers stressed as they approached this time of year.

Would it rain?



And then we gather and shake these four plants - branches of palm, willow, and myrtle and this special fruit called an etrog or citron (basically, a \$50 imported lemon). We wave these around, praying for help with a hopeful eye to the rainy season. We march around the synagogue encircling the community as they did in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times.

While on Shabbat, we don't do this, please, take my word for it, it's pretty strange.

Tomorrow, we have another folklorish custom where we beat our willow branches - ending the season of repentance. The leaves represent our sins, our errors, so when we beat the leaves off, it's as if our misdeeds have truly fallen away.

And Sukkot also contains the reading from the book of Ecclesiastes, which states that life is futile - not exactly the most upbeat message.

So, this is a strange holiday.

But it is a joyful one - unlike the biblical texts for other festivals, we are told to be happy - "*V'samahta b'hageikha v'hayeeta af samei'ah* - you shall rejoice in this festival and just be happy."

It feels a little like that Bobby McFerrin song, but I'm not sure if that's one folks remember.

But Sukkot has a fair amount of worrying. (This anxiety is also a tradition that I, along with many others, have inherited.)

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I want to explore how this holiday evolved and how it can have deep meaning for us today.

First, the layers of history.

The roots of this festival lie in many cultures that have harvest festivals that last for a week. Some of them had ancient rituals to encourage rain, emphasizing the need for water.



We also know that many farmers would build harvest huts, so they did not have to go back and forth to their homes when they were harvesting.

That explains the beginnings of the two rituals of lulav and building the Sukkah.



From those origins, the Hebrew Bible, also ties this ritual to the story of the Exodus, understanding the sukkot as the temporary huts the Israelites built on their 40-year journey through the wilderness from their experience of slavery in Egypt until they reached freedom in the promised land of Israel.

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But there are other hidden messages that are embedded in this holiday.

The first one is compassion.

Today's Torah reading has barely any mention of the holiday; four words: "*v'hag ha-asif t'kufat hashanah* - [you shall observe] the Feast of the Ingathering at the year's end." (Ex.34:22)

But the bulk of our reading is actually about Moses and God on the top of Mount Sinai after the breaking of the First Tablets, which Moses broke after the incident of the Golden Calf.

The key passage contains a description about God: "*El Raḥum v'ḥanun, erekh apayim v'rav ḥesed, ve'emet notzeir ḥesed la'alafim* - God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation." (Ex. 34:6)

We are supposed to emulate the Divine - so the tradition is emphasizing these behaviors of compassion towards others. And this fits in with harvesting - the corners of the fields were to be left for the poor, and 10 percent of one's produce is set aside for the poor, produce that had fallen was also meant for those who were hungry. So this season goes hand in hand with bringing kindness to those who are most vulnerable. Shmuel ben Meir, a 12th Century French scholar, highlights this aspect of Sukkot.

We also find graciousness in the tradition of inviting guests to our sukkah. The suggested guest list starts with Abraham and Sarah - our spiritual ancestors who are welcomed into this fragile space along with our contemporary family and friends and others who may not have their own sukkah.

Thus, the joy of the festival leads us to compassion.

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But there is another dimension.

After eating a meal, we recite a prayer of gratitude for the food.

Towards the end of this prayer, there is a short line for Sukkot that states:  
“*Haraḥaman hoo yakim lanu et sukkat David hanofelet* - may the Compassionate One raise up David’s fallen Sukkah.”

As a youngster, I always took this personally - like there was something wrong with my sukkah - but of course, it has nothing to do with me. But it does connect to King David. It means that David’s line, his dynasty, is broken.

I understand this to be about what David symbolizes: that a descendant of his would usher in a time of peace, of universal peace.

That leads us to the third layer of this festival.

Sukkot was seen as a time for all people to come together in a *Sukkat Shalom* - a great Sukkah of Peace. This comes from the *haftarot* - the prophetic readings for this festival that speak to a time of universal transformation, a new age in human history.

On the first day of Sukkot, we read from the prophet Zachariah who states that all the nations will go up to Jerusalem in this universal celebration.

The mystical tradition imagines this as a massive sukkah to house everyone, along with meat and fish served from huge mythological creatures.

This echoes the sacrifices that the Torah instructs us to bring to Jerusalem on Sukkot.

70 in all.

The rabbis explained this number represented the 70 nations of the world. Sukkot brings together all of the nations, all of the people of the world.

Isaiah sums this notion up when he quotes God as saying:

“כִּי בֵּיתִי בֵּית־תְּפִלָּה יִקְרָא לְכָל־הָעַמִּים -

For My House shall be called ‘a house of prayer for all peoples.’” (Isaiah 56:7)

Jerusalem and its Temple are ideally not just a holy space for the Jewish people, but also point to a greater, more important goal: universal harmony.

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So this unique and bizarre festival takes us on a journey of values. We are joyful and grateful at the time of harvest and plenty. But we do not just simply enjoy it for ourselves; we turn outwards towards others, approaching them with generosity and compassion.

And then that circle of kindness expands even more - to encompass the entire world.

The fallen sukkah of David which can be seen as the very brokenness of the world can be healed when all people come together - whether literally in Jerusalem or metaphorically.

This is the deeper meaning of Sukkot and how we should live our lives in general.

Joy leads to compassion which brings peace.