

Chag Hasukot

"Sitting in the sukah with its filmy walls and fragile roof, through which we see the stars twinkle, we appreciate better all we possess and You, Lord we thank. What we possess is what we are. It is gratitude, humility and sensibility. What our real being reveals."

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer Z"L

Sukkot - the time of our rejoicing

The Holiday of Sukkot is counted among the "She-loshah regalim" (the three pilgrimage festivals) together with Shavu'ot and Pesach. On these holidays, when the Bet Hammikdash was still standing, the people went up to Yerushalayim to celebrate and rejoice.

The Holiday of Sukkot has two central mitzvot, namely: to dwell in the sukkah during the days of the holiday and to bless the four species.

Dwelling in the sukkah is a very special and singular mitzvah which is fulfilled through the simple action of entering our bodies in the hut built to represent the precarious dwellings of our ancestors during their march across the desert. Many different aspects of this mitzvah can be mentioned.

On one hand we express our recognition to the Almighty for having protected us throughout the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. According to the Rabbis of the Talmud, God protected the people with "clouds of glory" that prevented the scorching desert sun from bothering them and the gelid cold of night to punish them. This is the aspect of the mitzvah that embodies faith.

On the other hand, the sukkah reflects the hardships that great part of humanity faces living in precarious dwellings. Few days after experiencing hunger through the fasting of Yom Kippur, we experience the lack of a proper roof by dwelling in an unsafe hut. This is the social aspect of this mitzvah.

But the hut has also been a symbol of Jewish life in the Diaspora. In the same way that the sukkah is a transient and unsafe dwelling place, ready to collapse under the rain or a strong wind, life outside of Israel, in the Exile, is a very unsafe life exposed to the different social and political changes in the countries of our dispersion. This is the national and Zionist aspect of sukkot.

Sukkot also means that during an entire week we must abandon our comforts to dwell in a hut with a roof of branches, leaves, and vegetation. During the entire year we live inside four walls of concrete, often without any natural light, and sometimes very distant from any contact with nature or with life outdoors. On Sukkot we relate with the natural world, with vegetation, trees and plants, and with the rest of the rural environment. In this fashion, sukkot also has an ecological aspect to it.

We see then the many aspects of Sukkot as a Holiday that encompasses faith, social commitment, national and Zionist feeling and ecological identity. But even thus, Sukkot is not exhausted with these descriptions but also can be enriched with other

aspects. This holiday is related also to the topic of "water". According to the Rabbis, during this holiday is the time when the entire world is judged concerning the blessings of water and irrigation for the coming year. In our days, even with all the technical developments and scientific progress achieved by humankind, a time of drought can bring profound calamities to a society, as will an excess of rainfall that will lead to flooding.

Sukkot is also a celebration with universal character. In Temple times, during this holiday, 70 offerings were offered corresponding to the 70 nations that made up the world.

The book of Ecclesiastes, attributed by tradition to King Salomon, is read during Sukkot. The sukkah represents, with its frailty, the transient nature of material possessions, which is emphasized by a book that reminds us the vanity and meaninglessness of material pleasures, which we often pursue desperately.

The other mitzvah associated with Sukkot is to take in our hands four species (etrog, lulav, hadas, and 'aravot) which are agitated in the direction of the four cardinal points, expressing our faith in the divine blessing encompassing all the corners of the world.

With the exception of the etrog, all the other species seem to lack something while at the same time possessing something that the others lack. To bless the four species, we need to have them all in our hands, leading us to understand that we all need of all and that we cannot fare all on our own in this society. Solidarity among people, both in the community scene as in society as a whole, must be a present aspect since no one can really survive in an autonomous way that completely disregards others. Each of the pilgrimage festivals has its own proper name, and this is the case for Sukkot. One of names for this festival is "Zeman Simchateinu", the time of our rejoicing.

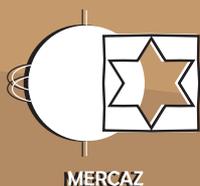
May this renewing year be also a year to fill us with happiness and rejoicing, blessings, and celebration.

Moa'dim lesimcha,

Rabbi Efraim Rosenzweig

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(translated by Rabbi Juan Mejía, Southwest coordinator for Bechol Lashon)



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