

Pumpkin Spice Lattes – Parashat HaAzinu (Pre-Sukkot)

Those who know me well will tell you that I have a mild obsession with the Starbucks Pumpkin Spice Latte! I know that it's over-priced and more calories than the average person really needs in a day; I've read all the haters who will argue that there's not even any real pumpkin in this ersatz confection – it's all some random blend of cinnamon and clove, ginger, vanilla, nutmeg, and allspice with the word "pumpkin" thrown in purely for marketing purposes. I've seen the crazy extremes to which the pumpkin fad has gone with sausages and M&M's and even dog-food and deodorant all coming up pumpkin these days. And yet, I can't quite help myself. I find anything pumpkin spiced utterly irresistible!

It turns out that I am not alone. The Pumpkin Spiced Latte has its own Twitter account with over 120,000 followers and a fan club called the Orange Sleeve Society for hardcore aficionados; the anniversary of the day that Starbucks first introduced its now infamous latte to the world even has its own name: Pumpkinox which is celebrated on August 27. According to Nielson, total sales of pumpkin-flavored food and other goods sold in supermarkets and convenience stores are up almost 80% since 2011 to say nothing of all the fast-food restaurants and cafes pushing their pumpkin-spiced wares. In fact, Forbes magazine estimates that the pumpkin-spice economy brings in over \$500 million per year in just the U.S. alone.¹ It may be all one big marketing ploy, but it's a wildly successful one at that!

So what gives pumpkin spice its allure? Sure, it's tasty, but so are hazelnut and mocha and all kinds of other flavors that don't have quite the same kind of cult following. Some argue that pumpkin spice is

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2015/11/10/the-pumpkin-spice-economy-how-starbucks-lattes-fueled-a-500-million-craze/#bdcb83aded4c>

nostalgic, calling to mind crackling fires and cozy sweaters and leaves just beginning to turn color. And some say it's social conformity, that we're bombarded by the advertising industry with so many images of people enjoying pumpkin spiced products that we feel some amount of peer pressure to join in. But the most intriguing explanation for pumpkin-mania, in my opinion, is the idea of its seasonality - that because we know we can only get these products for a limited time, they become more precious to us. Like gingerbread and peppermint in the winter, pumpkin is a quickly-vanishing commodity which serves to increase its appeal. It's the time-limited nature of this drink that also makes it the perfect beverage for the holiday of Sukkot!

“Basukkot teshvu shivat yamim – You shall dwell in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall dwell in booths,” says Leviticus 23:42, one of the Biblical verses that serves as the basis of our celebration of this fall holiday. The temporary dwellings in which we live during the festival serve to remind us of the clouds of glory that protected the Israelites during their period of desert wandering, the Divine presence sheltering us from on High. Sukkot also has both an agricultural and a historical connection, with the booths of this holiday reminding us of the huts we used while working in the fields at harvest time and of those which we inhabited immediately after escape from Egypt. Living in temporary, fragile structures open to the vagaries of nature helps us to feel the presence of God who was with our ancestors so many hundreds of years ago and who continues to be with us still today. Sukkot is a holiday about feeling God's shelter and care.

In addition to Sukkot being about Divine protection, the holiday is also one very much focused on themes of gratitude and appreciation. “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 again proclaims (Leviticus 23:29). Sukkot coincides with the time of the fall harvest in ancient Israel, and as our ancestors sat with full store-houses and full stomachs feasting on the bounties of the season it was an appropriate time to acknowledge that not only through their hard work and agricultural prowess alone did they gain these gifts of food but rather through the beneficence of God. Some say that certain laws of the sukkah, like the fact that its roof must be made of organic material or that it can’t be more than 30 feet tall or that it must be a temporary structure completed anew each year rather than something permanent, are actually designed to have us feel ever more strongly our dependence upon God – the roof can’t be too sturdy nor the space too grand nor the building itself too durable. Rather, we are meant to realize how beholden we are to the Divine and thus feel a sense of gratitude for all of our many blessings.

There is yet another way that the ritual of dwelling in sukkot cultivates a sense of appreciation, and this one is related to the feverish popularity of the pumpkin spice latte. Things that are seasonal, that don’t come around all that often, become more precious by their scarcity; things that exist always and forever are easy to overlook and take for granted. *V’samachta b’chagecha* – we are told regarding Sukkot – we should rejoice on this holiday (Deuteronomy 16:14)! In fact, the commandment to be joyful is given two separate times regarding Sukkot, once in connection to Shavuot, and not at all concerning Pesach making Sukkot, arguably, the happiest of all the Pilgrimage Festivals. Some of the joy of Sukkot comes from its placement on the Jewish calendar, following the High Holidays with their serious themes of repentance and judgment, and ushering in a period of calm and release. And some of the joy of this holiday comes from what was previously mentioned, the relief of seeing a successful harvest and sitting with an abundance of good food to eat. But some of the joy of Sukkot, I believe, comes from its novelty – that just once a year, for this week only, we leave the comfort of our homes to dine al fresco and

experience the simple joy of outdoor living. Just once a year, for this week only, we gather with friends and family and decorate our huts just so; we cook special foods, and smell the sweet fragrance of the *etrog* and sing Hallel each morning and beckon the *ushpizin* – our sacred Sukkot guests. Just once a year, for this week only, we give up what is permanent to revel in what is temporary. We may not have a Twitter feed counting down the days or a designated fan club for the holiday, but we look forward to Sukkot's arrival each fall nonetheless!

Sukkot, of course, begins tomorrow evening and there are so many different ways in which to participate in the joy of this season! Join us for Yom Tov or weekday services over the holiday. Borrow one of our lulav and etrog sets if you don't have one of your own and practice the *mitzvah* of shaking the four species. Bring over lunch or dinner and sit in BHBE's lovely sukkah just off of the Sanctuary. Think about hosting your regular meeting or learning or other gathering in the sukkah this week for a lovely change of pace. Give food or money to a hunger-related charity in honor of the festival's harvest themes or donate instead to an organization supporting refugees or the homeless or any other group of people for whom living without a permanent place of residence is not a whimsical once per year adventure but rather a crushing reality of daily life. Cultivate gratitude or happiness or feeling the gift of God's protection, as these are the themes of this sacred season.

Pumpinox 2018 may have already passed a few weeks ago, but the time of seasonality – with all its joy and blessings – is upon us just now! Wishing you an early Chag Sameach – a very happy Sukkot!

Shabbat Shalom.

