



Sukkot

Sukkot, a Hebrew word meaning "booths" or "huts," refers to the Jewish festival of giving thanks for the fall harvest, as well as the commemoration of the forty years of Jewish wandering in the desert after Sinai. Sukkot is celebrated five days after Yom Kippur on the 15th of Tishrei and is marked by several distinct traditions. One tradition, which takes the commandment to "dwell in booths" literally, is to build a sukkah, a booth or hut. A sukkah is often erected by Jews during this festival, and it is common practice for some to eat and even live in these temporary dwellings during Sukkot. Read more about the history and customs of Sukkot.



Sukkot History

Sukkot begins five days after Yom Kippur. It is observed for seven days by Israelis and many Reform Jews, and for eight days by other Jews living outside. The eighth day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, is traditionally a separate festival in its own right. In Reform congregations, which generally observe one day of holidays, rather than two, Shemini Atzeret is observed concurrently with Simchat Torah, the festival of "rejoicing in the Torah."

Like many societies, the ancient Hebrews had a variety of agricultural festivals. Sukkot likely has its roots in one of these ceremonial expressions of thank for a good crop. By biblical times, Sukkot had evolved into a celebration of the summer fruit harvest: "At the end of the year, when you gather in your produce from the fields" (Exodus 23:16).

Initially, the holiday that became Sukkot had no fixed date and was observed whenever the harvest had been completed, depending on climatic conditions. Torah times, however, the Book of Leviticus (23:24) declared: "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, there shall be a Feast of Tabernacles to God for seven days." The date, then was standardized.

Sukkot later became one of the three Jewish Pilgrimage Festivals (Shalosh R'galim). As on Passover and Shavuot, the people would bring a portion of the harvest's first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. There, it would be offered as a sacrifice to God by the High Priest. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, Sukkot became a synagogue and home celebration, marked by unique rituals and symbols. As was the case with other agricultural celebrations, the holiday is invested with strong historical significance. Just as Passover is tied to the Exodus from Egypt and Shavuot is associated with the giving of the Torah, Sukkot came to reflect the experience of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. The 40 years of wandering in the desert prior to entering the Land of Israel is captured, symbolically, in the frail sukkah.

The Book of Leviticus (23:42–43) portrays God as commanding: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days...that your generations may know that I made the Children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt." This passage is the biblical basis for building a sukkah.

There are two additional symbols associated with Sukkot that are historically based—the lulav and the etrog. Lulav is a Hebrew word meaning "palm branch" and refers to a unique ceremonial object associated with Sukkot. Lulav also is a generic term that describes a three-sectioned holder with a single palm branch in the center, two willow branches on the left, and three myrtle branches on the right. Erog is a Hebrew word meaning "citron," and refers to the special lemon-like fruit used together with the lulav in the Sukkot ritual.

As part of the biblical celebration of Sukkot, Leviticus 23:40 commands: "On the first day, you shall take the fruit of a goodly tree [literally etrog], palm branches, myrtle boughs, and willows, and rejoice before Adonai. With this passage, we know that the use of the lulav and etrog originated in biblical times. Over time, the combination of citron, palm, myrtle, and willow also became known as the arbaah minim (four species).

In Israel, Sukkot marks the beginning of the rainy season, which lasts until Passover. In Israel and among Jews in the Reform Movement, the holiday of Simchat Torah (rejoicing with the Torah) is celebrated on the eighth day after Sukkot begins and serves as a post-biblical festival created to honor the Torah.

