



# A Sukkot Primer

Rabbi Avi Baumol

Office of the Chief Rabbi of Poland

## **Table of Contents**

<i>Forward</i> .....	<i>Error! Bookmark not defined.</i>
<i>A Sukkot Primer</i> .....	<b>4</b>
<i>The Sukkah: Introduction</i> .....	<b>5</b>
<i>Practical Aspects to Building the Sukkah</i> .....	<b>7</b>
<i>The Four Species: Introduction</i> .....	<b>9</b>
<i>Eged (Binding)</i> .....	<b>10</b>
<i>Practical Aspects to the Four Species</i> .....	<b>11</b>
<i>Sukkot: General Laws</i> .....	<b>13</b>
<i>Ushpizin</i> .....	<b>13</b>
<i>Sukkot Prayers</i> .....	<b>13</b>
<i>Hallel</i> .....	<b>15</b>
<i>Hoshanot/Hoshana Raba</i> .....	<b>16</b>
<i>The Eighth Day/ Shemini Atzeret</i> .....	<b>17</b>
<i>Shemini Atzeret Practical Laws</i> .....	<b>19</b>
<i>Yomtov Shenit (Second day of Yomtov)</i> .....	<b>19</b>
<i>Simchat Torah</i> .....	<b>20</b>
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	<b>21</b>

## Forward

This is the second installment of ‘A Judaism Primer’—a series of short books on essential topics in Jewish law. At the request of the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, I have embarked on a mission to provide the Jewish community of Poland with contemporary explanations of fundamental aspects of Jewish life. I began with a booklet on the High Holidays and I now present the primer on Sukkot, the first of the Shloshet HaRegalim (the Three Festivals). In addition to booklets on the holidays, upcoming topics will include laws of Berachot (blessings), Shabbat, Kashrut, as well as the Jewish lifecycle.

After the Holocaust and fifty years of Communist control, the notion that Jewish life could survive in Poland appeared doubtful. Over the past decades, however, there has been, under the leadership of Rabbi Shudrich, a resurgence of Jewish awareness and a revival of Jewish identity. Synagogues, community centers, kosher restaurants, and museums are once again populated with Polish Jews in cities such as Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz, Wroclaw and others. Along with the classes that I have been giving in Krakow for the last 7 years, these primers are an attempt to address the needs of Jews who for some are discovering their roots for the very first time.

Many thanks to my Polish translator, Justyna Konieczny, a wonderful non-Jewish Pole who volunteers at the JCC of Krakow and my editor Olga Adamowska, a young Jewish Pole who herself rediscovered her Jewish roots and is now an important active member of Jewish life in Krakow. The picture on the cover of this book is of me and Jonathan Ornstein, the Executive Director of the JCC of Krakow, a friend, colleague and builder of Jewish life in Krakow, in front of the JCC Sukkah.

It is my hope that Jewish life continues to thrive and all who are searching for their Jewish roots are able to return and feel more comfortable in the Jewish community through gained knowledge of Jewish law and lore.

Avi Baumol, Tishrei 5781

## A Sukkot Primer

Major holidays run on one of two planes—either they are based on an historical event, like Pesach, or they are based on the agricultural cycle, such as Shavuot. That leaves us with Sukkot—is it based on history or based on agriculture? The answer is both!

Pesach is heavily focused on the experience of Exodus from Egypt. Without the event there would be no holiday; without Egypt there is no Exodus! The holiday takes place exclusively outside of Israel and therefore has no connection to its land. Thus, Pesach is about an event in history and our commandment to celebrate that moment annually throughout our lives. The mitzvot of the holiday—the sacrifice, the Matza and perhaps the maror—are all connected to the drama of the existence in Egypt, the slavery and the redemption.

Shavuot, on the other hand, has no (biblical) historical dimension. It is described as a completely agricultural festival, devoid of any specific event. In fact, the description of the holiday to the Israelites in the desert is prefaced by the statement, ‘when you arrive to the land that I am going to give to you and you will harvest...’. It is a holiday which is commanded in the desert but it only manifests once they arrive in the Promised Land and once they begin to work the land. The mitzvah of the holiday relates directly to the wheat of which they were commanded to harvest—the two loaves. Without the land of Israel and the working of the land there is no holiday of Shavuot.

And what of Sukkot? Both!

On the one hand the mitzvah of the Sukkah is clearly history-oriented as explained in the Torah which states, ‘sit in the sukkot for seven days so that generations will know that I shielded you in sukkot when taking you out of Egypt’. While it does not celebrate a single event, rather an ongoing protection of the Israelites, it nevertheless focuses not on an agricultural motif, rather on an event. Thus, the Sukkah reminds us of the historical Sukkah, the close relationship of God with His people during that transitional time between Exodus and Canaan!

On the other hand, the Torah spends a lot of time telling us that the holiday is an agricultural one:

‘But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you gather the fruit of the land you should celebrate a holiday seven days, on the first day a Sabbatical and on the eighth day a Sabbatical. And you will take for yourselves on the first day a fruit of a hadar tree, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook and you shall rejoice before God seven days’.



The holiday is marked by the agricultural motif, the ingathering, and one is commanded to use nature to celebrate.

As opposed to the two other holidays, Sukkot seems to blend both the agricultural and the historical motif together. This makes it a rather unique holiday and should be understood on both planes<sup>1</sup>.

The twofold aspect to the holiday manifests directly into the two fundamental mitzvot of the day. When asking people what is the main mitzvah of the holiday, half would respond sitting in the Sukkah (the historical dimension), while half would respond the taking of the four species (the agricultural celebration)!

Let's analyze both of these mitzvot and try to arrive at a coherent position.

## The Sukkah: Introduction

<sup>2</sup>The Talmud in Masechet Sukkah 11b has a debate concerning the origin of the Sukkah. When the Torah said 'So that the generations will know that I placed (literally seated) the children of Israel when I took them out of Egypt, I am the Lord, Your God', according to Rabbi Eliezer the reference was not to physical booths but God's clouds of glory which protected the Israelites from harm and guided them through their travels. Rabbi Akiva, however, takes a literal view, saying the booths were actual dwellings in which the Israelites lived during their time in the desert, shielding them from sun and rain.

Both of these together provide us with a more complex understanding of the fulfilment of the mitzvah of Sukkah. On the one hand the mitzvah includes very real walls and a roof which shelter us from harm; in fact, if too much sun shines through, the Sukkah is invalid. Also, if the walls of the Sukkah are weak, making them vulnerable to the conditions of the outside, the Sukkah is invalid. Additionally, if the roof is compromised by holes which are wider than 22 cm then the place below the space is invalid. In fact, even the way in which you build a Sukkah must be similar to the way a normal home would be built. If one builds the roof first and then the walls the Sukkah is invalid (according to many) because it goes against how a normal house would be built.

All of these factors point to a set of laws which attempt to commemorate the very real experience of shelter at a time of need. Real walls, real roof and all the trimmings of how one can truly feel protected from harm's way.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Ovadia Seforno (Italy, 16<sup>th</sup> century) suggests in his commentary on verse 39 which begins with the word 'ach' which seems to make it different from the other holidays. He suggests three reasons why Sukkot is unique: 1. The mere fact it has an '8<sup>th</sup>', something not typical for other Jewish holidays. 2. One must move one's dwelling during this day. 3. Shaking the four species.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the laws are taken from Rabbi Elazar Melamed's work, Peninei Halacha which can be accessed in Hebrew at this site: <https://ph.yhb.org.il/13-01-04/>

While much of the focus of the rules of building a Sukkah points towards a very real composition, other laws relate to a different perspective entirely. The first law about a Sukkah is that it must be a temporary dwelling—a permanent structure is invalid! Now why would a ‘better made booth’ be invalid?

Additionally, there is a law called ‘taase velo min haasui’ meaning one has to make the Sukkah as opposed to having something already partially built. For this reason, a pergola, a permanent deck with built-in slats presents a major problem for the fulfilment of the mitzvah of Sukkah. Many authorities consider such a structure invalid, though some do permit it. The best way to deal with this is to remove a portion of the slats before the holiday and return them immediately with the intention of the mitzvah of Sukkah.

Another peculiar law relates to the covering of the Sukkah—it may not be made from properly fashioned materials: it cannot be made of plastic, of concrete, in fact, of anything man-made! The covering must only be made from organic materials untouched by human beings. Also, though legally, technically, it may be kosher, nevertheless if the covering is so tight that one cannot see the stars, it is not considered to be ideally valid. Why does Jewish law attempt to torpedo the best type of man-made structure to celebrate this holiday? Why not build a ‘super Sukkah’?

I believe the answer stems from the second dimension of the nature of Sukkah—Rabbi Eliezer’s—that we are not simply commemorating a physical structure housing Israelites thousands of years ago. Rather, the clouds of glory represent the very essence of our reliance on God, whether it was His intervention in the desert shielding them from the elements, or whether it was the metaphysical feelings of being in God’s presence, or having the pillar of cloud by day showing them the way.

For this reason, the Sukkah is designed deliberately to be built as a temporary/somewhat vulnerable/highly organic structure. We build it temporary, able to be erected and dismantled in a quick manner, a constant reminder to have trust in God more than in ourselves. Each year anew we must engage in building this fleeting dwelling which will last only one week but during that time it will remind us of our own fleeting existence and our necessity to put our faith in God. Thus, a partially built structure that we uncover once a year is not good enough—we need to engage in this humbling experience every year, regardless of what we did last year.

The most obvious expression of this idea is the obligation to cover the Sukkah in schach. A word which has the same etiology of Sukkah, I believe it is meant to convey the organic nature of this mitzvah. The cover, the roof, the thing which most reflects the shelter, cannot be man-made because it must remind us constantly of the clouds of glory, of the metaphysical bond between God and Israel. For schach to be kosher it has to fulfil three requirements: 1. It must be from that which grows (tzomeach). 2. It must be removed from its original

habitat—cut off from its source. 3. It may not be processed by human beings, rather remain spiritually pure.

The composition of schach only bolsters our understanding of the philosophy of the Sukkah. When we realize that the schach must be tethered to the earth and yet cut off to use for our purposes, and that it is strictly forbidden to be processed by humans we understand the intense nature of the Sukkah as it a beautiful blend of man's creation and God's design of nature and the world in which we live.

## Practical Aspects to Building the Sukkah

Here is a checklist of things needed to build a kosher Sukkah:

1. It is customary to begin right after Yom Kippur in order to connect one mitzvah to another.
2. First construct the walls and then the schach on top.
3. One should when placing the schach vocalize—'this is for the mitzvah of sitting in the Sukkah'.
4. The minimum size (height) of a Sukka is 56 cm (22 inches) and the maximum height is nine meters (just under 30 feet).
5. A Sukkah need not have four walls (though that is optimal), two walls and an adjoining third one which can be minimum 56 cm wide in order to be kosher. The three walls must be contiguous.
6. Schach is generally bamboo sticks or cut trees and sometimes mats that have been tied together, but also thin pieces of wood, branches and the like. However, pieces of wooden chairs or tables and the like even if they are broken off are not kosher. Also, the schach may not smell bad or be rotten, it adversely affects the experience of the day.
7. The schach should cover the majority of the surface of the roof but ideally there should be enough space to see the stars at night.
8. The frame of the Sukkah can be made of any material but it is a general custom to put wooden planks on the frame and then to place the schach on top of them. If that is not possible the Sukkah is still kosher.
9. Walls of the Sukkah can be made of stone, wood, plastic, glass or even netting—all types are permitted. The minimum height of the walls is 80 cm (31 inches) but they must be connected to the earth.
10. One can actually use string to make the wall as long as each string is less than 22 cm (8 inches) from the other.
11. Some people use canvas walls, the general rule is that as long as they can withstand a common wind, they are kosher.
12. A Sukkah may not be built under anything, including trees and roofs. It must allow one to look up straight to the stars.
13. 'A bent wall'—if one of the walls being used is the side of the house and it has a protrusion that goes into the roof which is not kosher, the rabbis see this as a 'bent wall' and as long as the wall does not cover more than 1.8 meters (just under 6 feet) of the Sukkah the Sukkah is still kosher.



14. Minimum height of walls of the Sukkah are only up to 80cm. Therefore, one may make walls that start from the ground and go up only 80 cm and then have a space all the way up to the schach.
15. It is a mitzvah to sit under the schach of the Sukka, thus, one may not put a sheet over the schach to protect it from the rain or to add shade. However, one may have it covered all the while that one doesn't sit in the Sukkah. If it is removed, then the Sukkah is kosher again.
16. Sukkah decorations are permitted to hang from the schach including fruit and paper art etc., on condition that they are hung within 30 cm of the schach for if they are hung lower, they interfere with sitting under the schach itself.
17. The 'mitztaer' (one who is uncomfortable in the Sukkah) is exempt from sitting and eating in the Sukkah. Therefore, if it rains, or it is too hot or too cold, they are exempt from the Sukkah. A sick person is exempt from Sukkah. The halacha is that if it is raining outside on the first night of Sukkot one should wait an hour or two for it to subside in order to eat in the Sukka. If it is still raining one should make kiddush and eat a small amount of bread in the Sukka but then return to the home and finish the meal.
18. The main mitzvah is to eat in the Sukkah on the first day of Sukkot. Therefore, one should make all efforts to eat the evening and day meals in the Sukkah on the first day (first two days if you live outside of Israel). On the remaining days of Sukkot there is a prohibition to eat a full meal outside of the Sukkah, but if one chooses to only snack they are not obligated to eat in the Sukkah. The definition of a meal is bread or mezonot (things made with flour), therefore, technically one may eat some meat, fish, cheese and drinks outside of the Sukkah, however if one intends to eat all of that as a meal which would satisfy then there is an obligation to eat in the Sukkah.
19. On the first night of Sukkot one recites two blessings. The first is the same blessing recited every time one eats a meal in the Sukkah:
 

"Baruch ata Ado-nai Elohejnu Melech haolam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu leishev baSukka".

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לישב בסוכה

"Blessed are you God, king of the universe, who sanctified us with His commandments to dwell in the Sukkah".

The second blessing is Shehechianu, which we recite at every new occasion or festival in the course of the year.
20. The general Ashkenazic custom is to first make the blessing on the food and then make the blessing of 'leishev baSukkah'. The blessing is good for one 'sitting', when one enters and eats and stays around the Sukka. If however, one leaves for a while and comes back in a new blessing is recited.
21. The mitzvah is not only to eat in the Sukkah but also to sleep in the Sukkah, as well as work, talk, relax—treating the Sukkah likes one's own home. However, if one has a leak in one's home and the rain comes through to their rooms, they will naturally find a different dwelling. The

same applies for Sukkahs—if the conditions are such that it is too hot, cold, wet, dangerous, one is exempt. However, if those conditions are not met then the obligation still applies. In fact, Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis Poland 16<sup>th</sup> century) writes in a responsum (29) that in Krakow it is not so cold as to exempt oneself. Blankets and sheets solve the problem. There is however an exemption for a husband and wife to not sleep in the Sukka; rather they should stay in their own rooms for privacy. While the Rema maintains there is an obligation even in Krakow, many rabbis exempted Jews living in colder countries to not sleep in the Sukka, while in warmer countries the obligation still stands, and many Jews do in fact sleep in their Sukkahs every night of Sukkot.

22. The Talmud records that those who are traveling involved in a mitzvah are exempt from sitting in the Sukkah based on the principle 'haosek bemitzvah patur min hamitzvah' (one who is involved with one mitzvah is exempt from fulfilling another). Therefore, someone going to visit a sick person in the hospital is exempt from sitting in the Sukkah because of the added burden of going and finding a Sukkah to sit in. However, if it is not an added burden there is no exemption. Also, one who must travel for business and cannot find a Sukka is exempted.
23. If one chooses to go on a family trip where there is no Sukkah, while there is a lenient position that they are exempt from Sukkah, the majority of authorities say they are obligated to find a Sukkah and eat in one. (One can even construct a small Sukkah using the door and side of the car if need be!). Either they should find a Sukkah or make sure not to have a hearty meal rather snacks throughout the day.

Sitting in the Sukkah is a fulfillment of the mitzvah from the Torah and a fulfillment of re-experiencing the close relationship that God forged with His nation thousands of years ago and continues to have throughout history. Every chance to sit in the Sukkah enhances our *simchat Yomtov* (joy of the holiday) and reminds us of God's protection, shelter, love and guidance throughout our lives.

## The Four Species: Introduction

As we mentioned in the introduction, the mitzvot of Sukkot reflect the two different motifs of the holiday—the historical and the agricultural. The Sukkah expresses the historical dimension as we said and now the four species focus entirely on the agricultural motif. The Torah records the mitzvah in Leviticus 23:40:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הַדָּר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵגֶרֶף עֵץ-עֲבֹת וְעֵרְבֵי-גִּחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים: וַחֲגַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג לַה' שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּשִׂגְהָ חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי תִּחְגְּוּ אֹתוֹ

On the first day you shall take the fruit of a beautiful tree, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. You shall observe it as a festival of the LORD for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages.

The biblical directive is to take four different representations of nature and celebrate with them before God. One way to interpret the four species is in their relation to the botanical world<sup>3</sup>—the lulav represents the trees, the dominant force in the garden; the etrog represents the beauty of the fruit of the tree, the hadasim represent the foliage and abundance in nature; while the aravot which are referred to as ‘arvei nachal’—willows of the stream, bespeak the importance of the source of life--water.

To celebrate before God with many aspects of nature, Torah asks from us to take nature itself and use it in prayer, in festivity, in rejoicing. Holding all the species as one, the individual unites all aspects of nature and stresses the uniformity in God’s creation and the gift that He bestowed which fuels the world, provides the earth with shade from the sun, and sustenance for its inhabitants.

Sukkot is the pinnacle of the agricultural cycle, as testified by the Torah:

תג הספֹת תעשֶׂה לךֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאֶסְפֹּךָ מִגֶּרְנֶךָ וּמִיקְבֹּךָ:

After the ingathering from your threshing floor and your vat, you shall hold the Feast of Booths for seven days.

At the time of ingathering, when all who work the land take pride in seeing the actual fruits of their labor, Torah reminds us from where all the bounty comes. Torah inculcates the message that wealth is as a result of a partnership between God, land and man and only when the three synergize is their cause to celebrate. What better way to celebrate than to take the symbol of each component—Man and nature-- and give glory to God who created it all!

## Eged (Binding)

One of the interesting laws about the four species is that they must be used together; if taken without each of the other then the entire mitzvah is invalid. There is some power in the group that is voided when choosing one or several over another. Our sages see in this a valuable metaphor in the way we function in society as a community. They attribute a character value to each species:

Etrog—fragrance and taste

---

<sup>3</sup> This idea is based on an article by Rav Yair Kahn and can be accessed here: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/fruit-and-flower>

Lulav—taste but no fragrance  
Hadasim—fragrance but no taste  
Aravot—no fragrance and no taste

And then they apply this interpretation to the human social experience:

Tzaddik—like Etrog, one who possesses Torah and is involved in good deeds  
Benoni—like Lulav, one who possesses Torah but is not involved in good deeds  
Benoni (2)—like hadasim, one who is involved in good deeds but not Torah  
Rasha—like aravot, who neither possesses Torah, nor is involved in good deeds

Their message is that just as it is essential for all of the four species to be used together so too a community must include all members of society. The midrash had a specific agenda and it is a ubiquitous message for unity and Jewish cohesiveness. However, perhaps there is another aspect to this requirement to bind together all of the various parts of nature.

Each species represents a different dimension of the natural order: the trees are the forests and grand expanse of nature; the fruit represent all that is readily edible, an immediate gift from God; the foliage speak of the vegetation which covers the earth, with grass, bushes, vegetables and the like; and the water of course represents the vital component which makes our world what it is, giving life. When one rejoices on Sukkot one might want to focus only on one dimension—the fruit—that which one enjoys immediately, that which translates into abundance and wealth. Yet, nature is much more complex, much more integrated. Without one aspect of these species the system looks completely different.

Perhaps our sages, gleaning from the Torah's words which include all the four species in one verse, were intimating that on this agricultural highpoint of the year it is crucial that our connection to and appreciation of nature is more cohesive, more complex and more profound. Bind together all aspects of nature and recognize them as the gift from God which they are—then use all of nature's treasures to thank the One who bestowed this incredible system on us while at the same time recognizing the great responsibility it is to be the custodian of nature in this world.

## Practical Aspects to the Four Species

1. The mitzvah of taking the four species from the Torah is only for the first day of Sukkot, however after the destruction of the Temple Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai instituted the taking of the species for all seven days.
2. 'Taking' means technically holding and shaking all of the species together. The general custom is once the blessing is recited one shakes the four species in every direction, as if to acknowledge God with nature in all directions.

3. The blessing one recites is:  
 “Baruch ata Ado-nai eloheinu Melech haolam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu al netilat lulav”  
 “Blessed are you God king of the universe who sanctified us with His commandments to take the Lulav”.
4. For the first time performing the mitzvah one also recites ‘shehechianu’.
5. The ‘lulav and etrog’ (called that despite the fact that it refers to all four species) are also used during morning prayers, specifically during the Hallel and the Hoshanot prayers.
6. Thus, the general custom is for one to first make the blessing every morning, preferably in the Sukkah and to shake the lulav there, afterwards to use them during prayers.
7. The Torah in describing the fruit to be taken calls it a ‘beautiful fruit’. The rabbis learn from this verse the importance of beautifying mitzvot; as a result, the laws of finding the perfect blemish-less etrog as well as all of the other species are delineated in the halacha.
8. The first rule of the four species is to identify exactly which species they are: for example, the etrog is not a lemon and the hadas must be a myrtle while the aravot must be from the willow tree not the poplar. All these specifications teach us to search for the exact ideal species as understood by the Sages.
9. Additionally, if the specific fruit or plant dries up or changes its status from the original look it is invalid. The etrog in particular has a high dimension of requirements for beauty such that people spend hours and a lot of money in trying to find the ideal etrog.
10. An important consideration with regard to the etrog relates to the pittom—the small stick at the top of the etrog. Some etrogim have them ingrown, while others have them on the outside. If the outside pittom falls off the etrog is invalid.
11. If the Lulav is broken such that it is no longer straight it is invalid.
12. If any of the species--Lulav, Etrog, Hadasim, Aravot--dries up to the point of pieces breaking off, the entire group is invalid.
13. The Aravot are the most vulnerable of the four species. The two aravot to be taken with the lulav must not dry up and they do so pretty quickly, it is recommended to enclose them in a moist towel when not in use.
14. One law regarding the four species is that they must belong to the person shaking them. The Torah specifically stipulates that each individual takes their own set. Thus, a stolen set is invalid, a borrowed set as well. In order to use someone else’s set one must ‘acquire’ it by picking it up with the intention of owning it and then after using it one may return it to the original owner by ‘selling’ it.
15. The lulav and etrog are to be set up such that they are all tied together—egged—and the way it is done is usually by using a holder which fastens the 3 hadasim (on the right) and 2 aravot (on the left) of the lulav and holding the etrog firmly with them. When they are all together the shaking of the lulav commences.



## Sukkot: General Laws

Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. In ancient times Israelites would make the journey to Jerusalem to celebrate near the Temple and behold the miracles of God's presence. On the first day of Sukkot special prayers are recited for Yomtov, including a special shemoneh esreh, Hallel, a special Torah reading, hoshanot and a special Musaf shemoneh esreh. Each morning prayer of Sukkot is accompanied by the lulav and etrog. There are even communities where musical instruments are brought out and the entire service is sung with dancing and rejoicing.

The first night and day of Sukkot (two outside of Israel) are Yomtov and all of the laws of the festivals apply. They are mostly the same as the laws of Shabbat though on Yomtov it is permitted to cook food and to carry in public spaces for the sake of the chag. The mitzvah is to sit in the Sukkah and eat two meals on the first day with kiddush, blessings in the Sukkah, songs and good company. There is a custom to invite guests to join the festivities. This year, in the midst of the global Corona pandemic, the Sukkah might be the safest way to spend a meal together with family and friends<sup>4</sup>.

## Ushpizin

There is a Kabbalistic inspired custom called 'Ushpizin', which in Aramaic means guests. But these guests invited are not mere men and women but the souls of the great (male) leaders of Israel throughout the ages<sup>5</sup>. The Zohar (a Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah) on Emor 103a explains that on the seven nights of Sukkot, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David, leave the Garden of Eden to partake in the Sukkot of Israel. Thus, each day there is a formula to recite to invite the holy soul into one's Sukkah. Modern traditions add a corresponding group of female guests—ushpizot--in the form of the great Biblical female leaders: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Esther.

## Sukkot Prayers

As said, on the first day (two days) of Sukkot we add prayers to our regular services. The shemoneh esreh is special for the festivals, although it is the same format for each of the three festivals, with only a choice to insert the name of the specific day. The formula is similar to Shabbat:

---

<sup>4</sup> Especially in light of the law we learned about a Sukkah not needing to be fully covered and the walls needing only to reach 80 cm. see section on Practical Laws about Building the Sukkah, note 13.

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth understanding see: <https://www.aish.com/h/su/dits/48965711.html>

## Shabbat and Festivals

### 1-3 Introduction

- 1 Patriarchs
- 2 Divine Might
- 3 Kedusha

### 4 The Holiness of the Day

- 4 The Holiness of the Day

### 5-7 Conclusion

- 5 Temple Service
- 6 Thanksgiving
- 7 Peace

The fourth blessing of the holiness of the day on festivals consists of the following unique paragraphs:

אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים אהבת אותנו ורצית בנו ורוממתנו מכל הלשונות וקדשתנו במצותיך וקרבתנו מלפניו לעבודתך  
ושמך הגדול והקדוש עלינו קראת :

You have chosen us from all the Nations. You loved us and desired us.  
You raised us from among all languages and sanctified us with your mitzvot. You brought us closer to you our King. To serve your great and holy Name you called us.

נתת לנו ה' אלהינו באהבה לשבת שבתות למנוחה ומועדים לשמחה חגים וזמנים לששון את יום  
לפסח - חג המצות הזה זמן חרותנו :  
לשבועות - חג השבועות הזה זמן מתן תורתנו :  
סוכות - חג הסוכות הזה זמן שמחתנו :  
לשמ"ע ולש"ת - השמיני חג העצרת הזה זמן שמחתנו :  
מקרא קדש זכר ליציאת מצרים :

And the Lord our God gave us with love, (on Shabbat, add 'Shabatot for rest') festivals to rejoice, holidays and designated times to rejoice:  
(On Shabbat first say) This day of Shabbat and...

For Pesach: The holiday of Matzot, our time of freedom

For Shavuot: The holiday of Shavuot, our receiving of the Torah

For Sukkot: The holiday of Sukkot, our time of joy

For Shemini Atzeret/Simchat Torah: The holiday of Shemini Atzeret, our time of joy.

...as a gathering of holiness, in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt.

An additional two paragraphs speak of the unique relationship between God and His nation, and our desire for God to remember us for good, mercy and salvation during these special times. We also ask that God sanctify us in His commandments, give us a portion in His Torah, satisfy us with His bounty, make us rejoice in His salvation and purify our hearts to serve Him with truth.

The conclusion of the section offers the special blessing for Yomtov (and Shabbat if it Yomtov and Shabbat are on the same day, like this year):

Blessed are you God who sanctifies (the Shabbat,) Israel and the special times of the year.

## Hallel

One of the special prayers of the festivals (as well as Rosh Chodesh, Chanuka and Israeli day of Independence and Jerusalem Day) is a collection of psalms 113-118 which praise God for His salvation throughout history. Often the Hallel psalms are sung together, sometimes with musical accompaniment (when not on Shabbat or Yomtov). This obligation might stem from a Talmudic position that the prophets instituted the recitation of Hallel at the time of the exodus and at any time a Jew is relieved from a dangerous situation.

We recite Hallel every day of Sukkot to praise God for His consistent protection, spiritual and physical. We also shake the lulav and etrog at different intervals of the Hallel—when we recite the verse: הודו לה' כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ:  
'Thank God for He is good; His kindness is everlasting'.

During this verse we shake the lulav and etrog in every direction, using nature to thank God.

There is one more time we shake the four species, and this time it is not an expression of joy and thanksgiving, but a prayer and fervent hope that God continues to watch over and protect us. It is during the last portion of psalm 118: אָנָּה ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא:אָנָּה ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא

'Please o Lord save us, please o Lord make us succeed'

The Hallel begins and concludes with a blessing, as it is an obligation to recite it<sup>6</sup> at specific times in our Jewish calendar.

Another prayer which will be discussed in the following paragraph in detail is called 'Hoshanot'. The Ark is opened and a Sefer Torah is removed and brought to the bima to be held by one of the members of the congregation. All other members take their lulav and etrog and make a circle around the bima and recite the special hoshana for that day. Each day begins with an introductory prayer:

הוֹשֵׁעַ נָּא לְמַעַן בּוֹרְאֵנוּ הוֹשֵׁעַ נָּא      הוֹשֵׁעַ נָּא לְמַעַן אֱלֹהֵינוּ הוֹשֵׁעַ נָּא

Hoshana, For Your sake, our God, please save; Hoshana, for Your sake, our Creator, please save!

---

<sup>6</sup> There is a debate as to what level of obligation this is, see this article by Rabbi Moshe Taragin: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/source-and-reason-hallel>

הושע נא למענה גואלנו הושע נא

הושע נא למענה דורשנו הושע נא

Hoshana, For Your sake, our Redeemer, please save; Hoshana, for Your sake, our Seeker, please save!

## Hoshanot/Hoshana Raba

During services a special tradition goes all the way back to the times of the Temple. The Mishna in Sukkah (4:5) describes the mitzvah of 'arava' as follows:

There was a place below Jerusalem called Moza. They went down there and gathered tall branches of aravot (willows) and then they came and stood them up at the sides of the altar, and their tops were bent over the altar. They then sounded a teki'ah [long blast], a teru'ah [staccato blast] and again a teki'ah. Every day they went round the altar once, saying, "O Lord, save us, O Lord, make us prosper" ([Psalms 118](#)): Rabbi Judah says: "Ani vaho, save us." On that (the 7<sup>th</sup>) day they went round the altar seven times.

What is the significance of a ceremony to surround the altar one time and on the seventh day, to surround it seven times? Rabbi Melamed in his compendium, Peninei Halacha, suggests a biblical association—Joshua in Jericho. In order to conquer Jericho in the most miraculous, divine way, the Israelites had a ceremony of circling the city each day, breaking down the wall in a metaphysical way, and on the final day, a sevenfold circle eventually breaking down the wall in a very physical way.

On a more metaphorical level we can apply the notion of breaking down spiritual barriers between us and God to the experience of Sukkot in the Temple. There is another dimension to the holiday of Sukkot as we read in the following Mishna in Rosh Hashana (1:2)

At four times in the year the world is judged: On Pesah in respect to the produce. On Shavuot in respect to the fruit of the tree. On Rosh Hashanah all the people of the world pass before Him like a division of soldier, as it says, "He who fashions the hearts of them all, who discerns all their doings" ([Psalms 33:15](#)). And on Sukkot they are judged in respect to rain.

Returning to the agricultural theme, after the Sukkot holiday ends the rainy season begins and the crops of the new year are measured by the amount of rain which falls. Thus, although Yom Kippur is generally considered the last day of judgment and everything seems signed and sealed at the end of the day, in rabbinic tradition the judgment still continues until the final day of Sukkot—called Hoshana Raba (day of great salvation).

It is natural, then, that on the seventh day of Sukkot, not one but seven cycles are made around the altar, in an effort to procure a positive judgment from

God on the impending rainy season. The circling with the species of nature (the same species we used to celebrate God's bounty) comes to a culmination with seven circles, symbolically breaking down any walls between God and His chosen people.

There is also a tradition that we stay up all night and learn Torah on Hoshana Raba in order to sweeten the judgment and merit God's bounty at the end of the holiday. The seventh day, then, represents a certain element of closure to the agricultural holiday of Sukkot, and the rabbis instituted different ways to reflect the significance of this day as a fitting conclusion to the holiday of Sukkot, where we sit in the Sukkah celebrating God's protection of His people throughout history as well as an intensified agricultural motif with the Hoshana Raba (day of the great, sevenfold, Hoshanot) service taking place. At the end of the seventh day Sukkot comes to a close...or does it?

## The Eighth Day/ Shemini Atzeret

At the end of the section of the Torah which deals with the laws of Sukkot we find a strange additional element—an eighth day:

שְׁבַע יָמִים תִּקְרְיבוּ אֶשָׁה לַה' בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם אֶשָׁה לַה' עֲצֵרֶת הוּא כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

Seven days you shall bring offerings by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall observe a sacred occasion and bring an offering by fire to the LORD; it is an 'atzeret' (a solemn gathering): you shall not work at your occupations. (Vayikra 23:39)

A second verse is found in the book of Numbers:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי עֲצֵרֶת תִּהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

On the eighth day you shall hold an 'atzeret' (a solemn gathering); you shall not work at your occupations. (29:35)

What is the nature of this additional day? What is the meaning of the word 'atzeret' which describes the uniqueness of the day? The word 'atzeret' appears seven times in the Torah and each time it seems to imply a gathering, even a serious one—sometimes joyous, sometimes rebellious<sup>7</sup>. However, a second meaning of this word appears in medieval commentators which defines it not as a gathering but as a conclusion or ceasing.

The Torah chooses to add on an additional holiday but appends it as an eighth day to the holiday of Sukkot. This left the rabbis perplexed; is it a new holiday

---

<sup>7</sup> An excellent article on this word as well as the word ushpizin can be found here written by my friend David Curwin: [https://www.academia.edu/40357500/WHATS\\_IN\\_A\\_WORD\\_Ushpizin\\_Atzeret](https://www.academia.edu/40357500/WHATS_IN_A_WORD_Ushpizin_Atzeret).



or a continuation of the festival of Sukkot? Here too, their answer was complex—they said it is a little of both! On the one hand as it is the eighth day we cannot ignore its connection to the first seven, on the other hand the rabbis called it ‘a festival on its own’.

We do NOT sit in the Sukkah on the eighth day or shake the lulav and etrog (in fact it is prohibited to do so!); we make a special blessing of ‘shehechianu’ implying that it is a new holiday; its name is different, it is no longer called ‘Sukkot’; different sacrifices are offered on this holiday; we make a new Kiddush and light candles again. All this points to an independent festival called ‘Shemini Atzeret’.

At the same time, if God wanted a new festival, why not choose any other day in the calendar? Why is it the ‘eighth day’? There is a famous midrash (rabbinic parable) which attempts to explain the special eighth day phenomenon:

“It is compared to a king who invited his sons for a special weeklong party. Once the day arrives to depart the king said, ‘my sons, please stay one more day as it is difficult for me to see you go’.” So too, with Shemini Atzeret, after so many holidays in the month of Tishrei, it was difficult for God to see His children depart so an additional holiday was instituted. Based on this midrash the word ‘atzeret’ means assembly, gathering and God desired for the gathering to continue one more day.

There is another way to see the addition of this day and that is based on the second definition of the word—conclusion. A great proof for this can be found in the laws of Pesach in the book of Devarim 16:8:

אֶשֶׁת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מַצּוֹת וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עֲצַרְתָּ לָּהּ אֶלְהִיָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה:

After eating unleavened bread six days, on the seventh day an ‘atzeret’ (conclusionary celebration) for God: you shall do no work.

When the final day comes as a way to reflect the summation of the experience of Pesach, the word atzeret is chosen and an additional festival is created to finish the week. Perhaps this is the same with regard to ‘Shemini atzeret’. The festival of Sukkot consists of competing central themes either historical or agricultural. And throughout the holiday these themes interact, compete and occupy our consciousness. Perhaps the Torah suggests one final day with neither of the two dominant themes—in fact, no actual symbols or mitzvot on this day; rather, a day to appreciate the institution of festivals without having to attribute hyper-meaning to its origin. Thus, this holiday celebrates the closeness we feel to God when we experience festivals without any additional elements associated with it.

## Shemini Atzeret Practical Laws

Since there are no special symbols or mitzvot for Shemini Atzeret as we learned, then the holiday in theory possesses no unique dimension to it other than observing the laws of Yomtov. We pray special Yomtov prayers, during the day we recite Hallel and the special Musaf and we have special Yomtov meals. There is one special prayer that we recite during services and that is called 'tefilat hageshem' (the prayer for rain).

As we learned, the world is judged on the amount of rain during this period and therefore it is customary to recite a special petition to God to make it rain. During the Musaf service we add a few paragraphs on the importance of rain and the recognition that God's judgment is critical in the success of the next agricultural year. Therefore, the tone of the prayer is very serious and it reminds us of the high holiday prayers. The custom is even for the chazan to wear a kittel (white coat) that we normally wear on Yom Kippur. From that prayer on we add the phrase 'mashiv haruach umorid hageshem' (God makes the wind blow and the rain fall) to our daily prayers.

Are there any other significant changes in the prayers on this eighth day holiday? It depends where you live!

There is a major difference in holidays of the Jewish calendar between Israel and the galut (exile—everywhere outside of the land of Israel). With the destruction of the second Temple (70 ce) and the exile into mainly Babylonia, the Jews living there became a strong vibrant community for close to a thousand years, even the center of Jewish intellectual life. The Talmud Bavli became the major force of Jewish law and Jewish life thrived. However, it was always considered 'galut' and Jews never forgot the divine prophecy to return and rebuild in the Holy Land.

## Yomtov Sheni (Second day of Yomtov)

One of the main differences between Jewish life in Israel and outside it relates to the observance of a second day of Yomtov. The reason is connected to the observance of the new moon which was determined only in the land of Israel with two witnesses testifying to the advent of the new moon. Once the court accepted the testimony, the mini holiday of Rosh Chodesh was declared (and on Tishrei, Rosh Hashana was declared). From that designation came the dates of the holidays—the 6<sup>th</sup> of the month (Shavuot), 10<sup>th</sup> of the month (Yom Kippur), or, in the case of Sukkot and Pesach, the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. The news of the new moon was relayed by messengers who would travel throughout the land and the border lands to keep all festivals on an agreed-upon date.

However, once the Jews were exiled to far-reaching lands and the rabbinic court in Israel could not always send messengers in time to every location, the Jews in the exile lands celebrated two days of Yomtov just in case they were off by a day. After several hundred years when the determining of the new moon changed from a physical moon sighting to a mathematical calculation, the tradition of keeping two days outside of Israel (and two days of Rosh Hashana even in Israel) stuck because the rabbis cautioned Jews to ‘keep hold of traditions of our forefathers’.

Usually the second day of Yomtov is exactly like the first, so, a second day of hearing the shofar, sitting in the Sukkah or having a Passover seder. But on the holiday of Shemini Atzeret, the second day outside of Israel became a different day entirely! Simchat Torah! In Israel the eighth day of Sukkot is a holiday which encompasses both the day of Shemini Atzeret as well as Simchat Torah; however, outside of Israel—the Eighth day is Shemini Atzeret while the ninth day is Simchat Torah.

## Simchat Torah

Jews for thousands of years have been reading a portion of the Torah every Shabbat, called a parsha. There are 54 parshas in the Torah and around 52 weeks in a year. The rabbis arranged it that at the end of Sukkot, on the day which is Shemini Atzeret (day 8 in Israel) or Simchat Torah (day 9 outside of Israel) the Jewish community would conclude the Torah and begin it anew. This is the essence of the rabbinic holiday Simchat Torah.

The festivities begin in the evening prayer with special dancing with the Torahs called ‘hakafot’, taking place after the evening shemoneh esreh. All the Torahs are removed from the Ark and the custom is to dance around the bima at least seven different revolutions (hakafa). Each round the Torahs are passed to another person to recite a special prayer acknowledging God and thanking Him for the Torah we are celebrating. While the dancing is split between men and women in certain modern orthodox communities, women also dance with the Torah.

After all of the seven hakafot are completed, the custom is to read a portion of the end of the Torah. In the morning the dancing is repeated with even more intensity and afterwards the Torah is completed by reading many times so that every (male) person in the sanctuary receives an aliya (being called up to the Torah). Upon completion of the Torah, a new Torah is brought out and the first chapter of Bereishit is read with great excitement and joy.

Simchat Torah is a day in which all children are included in every aspect of the festivities as the transmission of the values of Torah, and the desire to learn the Torah is inculcated into the next generation. For this reason, every

opportunity should be taken to include all the children, including handing out sweets and dancing all together<sup>8</sup>.

## Conclusion

Simchat Torah, whether it is in Israel on the last day (the 8<sup>th</sup>) or outside of Israel on the last day (9<sup>th</sup>), is a unique conclusion to the Sukkot festival as well as the Yamim Noraim (days of awe) in general. On the last holiday that we celebrate for many months and before the rainy season begins, Jews gather to dance, to rejoice, to sing and to revel in the Torah which has been the source of inspiration, continuity and spirit for thousands of years. A fitting way to truly say goodbye to the closeness we feel to God during the holidays is to dance with a Torah, sing out in praise of the life it teaches us to live and learn from its message of endings and beginnings, to take that next step on our journey—our own 'bereishit', for a new, healthy, happy and meaningful year.

---

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent article on the uniqueness of Simchat Torah see: <https://thelehrhaus.com/holidays/the-inverted-halakhah-of-simhat-torah/>