



Sukkah: Living in Joy

The air is turning crisp and the days are growing shorter in Israel, as in most areas of the world. We say goodbye to the warmer days of summer and prepare for the colder days to come. As most people leave the great outdoors for the safety and comfort of their warm homes, it is precisely now that the Bible commands us to do the opposite and move outdoors into what basically amounts to as shacks.

The Bible commands us to “Live in temporary shelters for seven days.” We are directed to spend an entire week living in temporary huts, in Hebrew known as a *sukkah*, which is a stable but simple booth topped with a thatched roof.

This seven-day period is known as the holiday of *Sukkot*, literally “booths,” and also as the Feast of Tabernacles. During this observance, we recall how God sheltered His people in the desert after the Exodus.

Interestingly, the holiday of *Sukkot* is known as “the time of our joy,” as we read in Scriptures: “... and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (Leviticus 23:40). Certainly, this holiday is meaningful and an appropriate way to conclude the holiday season as we symbolically take God with us from the synagogue into our everyday lives where we eat, sleep, and live in His presence.

In this month’s Fellowship Study we will explore the secrets of the *sukkah* and explain how living in this rickety shelter can teach us about what it means to live in joy. We will discover what really brings a person happiness and what qualifies as mere illusions devoid of true joy. Living in the *sukkah*, we don’t have much in the way of “creature comforts,” but we have everything that matters: family, friends, a nurturing meal, the Word of God and the presence of God.

In our world of plenty, we often lose sight of what we truly desire and need. Perhaps there is no generation more in need of the teachings of the *sukkah* than our own.



“Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters.”

— LEVITICUS 23:42



The Joy of Unity

Like anything in Judaism, the *sukkah* comes with many customs and rules. For example, a *sukkah* has to have at least two-and-a-half walls, but preferably all four. A *sukkah* cannot be taller than 20 cubits (about 30 feet). But how wide can a *sukkah* be? The answer is: infinity.

In theory, a *sukkah* could go on forever! Theoretically, every person in the world could reside in one very large *sukkah*. And consequently, *Sukkot* is a holiday that celebrates unity and is all about inclusivity.

Sitting in the *sukkah* is likened to residing within God’s loving embrace. The walls that surround us are like the arms of God, sheltering, protecting, and loving us. What do we do while enjoying God’s embrace? We embrace each other. Inside the *sukkah* there is no TV and no outside distractions. It’s a space where all we have is each other. We enjoy and appreciate one another. In fact, the Jewish sages teach that *Sukkot*, which is known as “the time of our joy” is really about “the joy of time,” relishing the time to fully be with each other.

The theme of unity is echoed in the holiday’s other most prominent observance: the gathering of the four species, from four different kinds of trees: citron, date palm, myrtle, and willow. In Scripture, we are directed to “take branches from luxuriant trees—from palms, willows and other leafy trees—and rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days” (Leviticus 23:40). We bind the four elements together and bless them every day of the holiday.

The sages teach that each of the four species represents a different type of person. On *Sukkot*, we take them all together, signaling that we embrace all types of people. We also demonstrate that we are only complete when we are bound to our fellow human beings. Moreover, it is only when we have meaningful relationships with others that we can truly experience joy.

A person can have all the material objects in the world, but it is a miserable existence if it’s not shared with others. Indeed, one of the greatest sources of joy in life is the enjoyment of bonding with others. On *Sukkot* we derive great happiness from being together with other people. This simple message is one that often gets lost in the hustle and bustle of life, but one that can transform the way we live throughout the year and the amount of joy that we experience in our lives.



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How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

— PSALM 133:1

The Joy of Simplicity

The holiday of *Sukkot* is also known as the Festival of Ingathering. Similar to a harvest feast, this holiday marks the final gathering of crops that were grown throughout the past year. The season is autumn, the time when farmers bring in the final fruits of their hard labor. This time period is intricately connected with the purpose of the *sukkah*.

No matter how little or how much a person would reap in autumn, the *sukkah* served as a pointed reminder to all. When we live in the *sukkah*, we return to the basics of what we need; we get by with bare necessities and live the simple life. And we are happy.

We are so joyful because the daily clutter that accompanies us throughout our regular lives is gone. We are able to focus on what matters most — God, family, and friends. We have a decent roof over our heads and four walls that create a home where we can eat, sleep, and spend our time. We share meals with friends and study God’s Word. What more could we possibly need?

The sages teach that this is the message each farmer needed to learn and re-learn every year on *Sukkot*. For the farmer who harvested little, the message is that he need not be depressed because even a little is really a lot. Just as we can be joyful in our simple *sukkah* huts, anyone can be full of joy with a simple life even if it is not a luxurious one.

For the farmer who was given an abundant harvest, the lesson is that while it’s wonderful to be blessed with material blessings, they are not what brings happiness. All the physical abundance in the world cannot bring a person true and lasting happiness.

What bring us the most joy are the things that money cannot buy. In fact what brings us joy are not things at all — they are God, living a meaningful life, and the people in our lives. While we require basic material necessities to live in the world, they are merely a means to an end and not an end in themselves.

As we celebrate *Sukkot* every year, we also can benefit from these lessons. Whether we have a little or a lot, we have enough to live happy lives when we recognize what truly brings us joy.



“Celebrate the Festival of Harvest with the first fruits of the crops you sow in your field.”

“Celebrate the Festival of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.”

— EXODUS 23:16

The Joy of Divinity

Perhaps the most obvious meaning of the *sukkah* has to do with what is explicitly written in the Bible. God commands us to build the *sukkah* “so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt.”

When the children of Israel followed God through the desert for 40 years after the Exodus, there was great potential for danger. The desert is full of deadly snakes and scorpions and is infamous for its harsh climate. However, God sheltered His people with his Clouds of Glory and with individual booths, both of which are recalled with the *sukkah*, a veritable demonstration of God’s providence.

The very structure of the *sukkah* beckons us to look to God and find solace in His providence. The minimal requirement for the structure requires two walls and a third wall just a few inches high known as a “handbreadth” in Hebrew. The sages teach that these basic walls represent God’s arm and the *sukkah* is His embrace.

In Song of Solomon 2:6 we read: “his right arm embraces me.” God’s arm embraces us through the *sukkah*. The first wall is like God’s arm, the second wall like God’s forearm, and the third smaller wall is like God’s hand. Together they surround us with a hug. As we sit in our *sukkah* we feel God’s presence. There, in the outdoors, vulnerable to wind, rain, and heat, we feel the loving presence of our Creator who protected the Israelites in the desert and shelters us still today.

In addition, Jewish law requires the roof of the *sukkah* to be somewhat open so that it is possible to see the stars. All year long when we look up in our homes, we see the sturdy ceiling and roof as our source of protection. But in the *sukkah* when we look up and see the heavens, we know that our savior and protector is God.

While we may live in worry and anxiety during the year, wondering how we will get through our life’s challenges, on *Sukkot* we experience the profound joy that comes with knowing that God is running the show. While we are vulnerable and there are difficulties in our lives, there is comfort and joy in knowing that God can protect us in any situation and bring us through our challenges with love.



“Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

— LEVITICUS 23:42–43

Think About It...

1. **The *sukkah* represents God's shelter.** How has God served as your "shelter" in difficult times? In what ways have you discerned His providence at key junctures in your life?
2. **In what ways do your current lifestyle and daily schedule allow for quality time to spend with God in prayer, study, or simple silence?** How can we as a society encourage more space and time for spiritual pursuits?
3. **If you were to make a list, what are the things that you truly need and which are really luxuries?** Sometimes we confuse the two, but when we can tell the difference, we can relax and enjoy our lives more without getting caught up in things that don't really matter.
4. **Think of a time when you have experienced more freedom and joy in your life.** For example, maybe you took a trip and lived out of one room with just one suitcase of belongings. Or perhaps you had this experience as a young adult, in college or just starting life on your own. How does that experience differ from your current one? How can you incorporate elements of that lifestyle now?
5. **What brings you joy in life?** Think back to the most joyful moments in your life. What might you learn from those times about what can make you happy now?
6. **What are the greatest obstacles to having a joy-filled life right now?** What changes can you make so that you might enjoy your life more? What changes could you make in your attitude or perspective that might help you to focus on the things which truly bring joy?



Apply It

1. **Edit your life.** Go through the items in your home and consider donating or giving away items that you no longer use or need. Go through your schedule and eliminate any activities that don't serve your purpose or intentions.
2. **Make peace.** In the spirit of unity, choose peace in your relationships. We are all happier and better off when we have healthy relationships with the people around us. When possible, choose reconciliation.
3. **Make time for the important things.** Make sure your daily and weekly schedules include time set aside for God, family, friends, and acts of kindness. Try establishing daily or weekly rituals that automatically integrate the things you care about most into your busy lives.
4. **Spend some time in nature.** Just as sitting in a *sukkah* looking up at the stars makes us feel closer to God, so does going out into nature. Away from distractions and surrounded by the glory of God's creations, we can better connect to our Creator.
5. **Enjoy less, more often.** One of the lessons of *Sukkot* is that we don't need very much to be happy and that too much stuff can actually take away from our happiness. We do, however, need to make a concerted effort to notice, appreciate, and enjoy the blessings we do have.



Customs and Rituals Observed Today

Building a *sukkah* is an activity that can be both fun and meaningful. The Jewish custom is to begin building the *sukkah* immediately after the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*. There are many ways to build a *sukkah* ranging from work-intensive methods to easy-to-build kits that can be purchased in a store. Either way, there are some basic guidelines.

The walls of a *sukkah* must be strong enough to withstand a normal wind and at least two of the walls need to be at least 38 inches high. The *sukkah* only needs three walls, though four are preferable. It's permissible to use existing walls such as the side of a house or even a thick hedge of bushes.

The roof must be made from natural elements that have grown from the ground. Most people use either palm fronds or bamboo with wooden beams as support. The roof also must be thick enough to provide significant shade, but thin enough to let the stars shine through.

Once the *sukkah* is built, it is customary to decorate it as beautifully as possible, which displays our enthusiasm for this biblical commandment. Typical decorations tend to include hanging real or plastic fruit and other produce, echoing the theme of the harvest season. In addition, many people place pictures of Israel and Jerusalem on the *sukkah* walls as a reminder that *Sukkot* is one of the three holidays on which, during Temple times, people were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.



When the holiday begins, there is a custom for people to go “*sukkah* hopping.” This is especially popular among children, but many adults engage in a modified version. The purpose of *sukkah* hopping is to visit as many *sukkahs* as possible and eat inside them after reciting appropriate blessings over food. In this way, we expand our fulfillment of the commandment to reside in a *sukkah*, bring holiness to each *sukkah* visited, and enhance relationships between people — another theme of the holiday.

Another ritual that is observed during the seven nights of *Sukkot* is symbolically inviting one of the “Seven Shepherds” of Israel into our *sukkah* — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, or David. Each leader represents a different positive attribute — such as kindness, strength, or peacemaking — which we invite into our homes and integrate that characteristic into our lives.

So beloved is the *sukkah* to the Jewish people that many have the custom to kiss the walls upon entering it for the first time, and we recite a special prayer bidding farewell to the *sukkah* when the holiday concludes. As we take apart the walls of the *sukkah*, we already anticipate building them again in the next year.

