

Sukkot

Sukkot, the **Feast of Tabernacles**, is a week-long feast during which the Jewish community builds temporary shelters (*sukkot* means "booths" in Hebrew) to remind each generation that our forefathers lived as nomads, wandering in the desert for forty years (Lev. 23:42-43).



The Bible also refers to this holiday as the Feast of Ingathering, which celebrates the final reaping of the crops at the end of the harvest (Ex. 23:16). Throughout the holiday it is customary to wave the **Lulav** and **Etrog**, or the four species (date palm, myrtle, willow, citron), representing thankfulness and joy for the present harvest, along with hope for winter rains to ensure an abundant harvest the following spring (Lev 23:40). The waving of the Lulav and Etrog also represents God's pervasive presence.

In the first century, the priests used to take a pitcher of water from the pool of Siloam and pour it out on the altar, following an elaborate processional up the hill to the Temple Mount. This ceremony occurred every day of the festival, with the most extravagant procession on the final day. The pouring of the water expressed Israel's hope for future rains to produce an abundant harvest. According to the Talmud, this tradition is derived from Isaiah 12:3, "with joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation."

On the last day of Sukkot, possibly at the time of this final procession, Jesus stood in the midst of the people and declared, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37-38). When He said this, some declared, "This is the Messiah" (John 7:41).

Anticipation for the arrival of the Messiah reaches its height during Sukkot. The prophet Zechariah speaks of a time when God will fight and defend His people when the nations gather against Israel (Zech. 14:1-9). After God establishes peace, all the nations will then travel to Jerusalem to worship God during Sukkot (Zech. 14:16). God promises to withhold rain from those countries that do not honor Him in Jerusalem (14:17-19). Sukkot thus looks forward to the day when God will establish His Kingdom and all nations will join together to worship Him.

Sukkot also looks forward to the day when God will dwell in the midst of His people. When John introduced Jesus as the Messiah, he said, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The word "dwelt" can also be translated "took up temporary residence."

When Jesus revealed His glory to Peter, James and John on the top of a mountain, Peter asked to build three temporary dwellings (*sukkot*), one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah (Matt. 17:1-13). Peter's desire to build temporary dwellings is an allusion to Sukkot and represents a request for

Jesus to establish His Messianic Kingdom. Later, while Jesus rode into Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, crowds gathered placing palm branches along the road, proclaiming, "Lord save us," and "Blessed is the King of Israel," a direct Messianic title. The crowds used palm branches as an allusion to Sukkot, expressing their hope for the coming Messianic Kingdom.

The Feast of Tabernacles animates our hope in the return of our Messiah and the establishment of His Messianic Kingdom.

Sukkot FAQ

What does Sukkot mean?

Sukkot is the plural form of the Hebrew word *sukkah*, which means a temporary dwelling such as a tent, booth, or hut. English translations of the Bible typically refer to the holiday as the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths. The *sukkah* represents the temporary dwellings in which the Israelites lived while wandering in the desert after the Lord brought them out of Egypt.

Where does Sukkot appear in the Bible?

The Torah refers to the feast of Sukkot on a number of occasions. It first describes it as the Feast of Ingathering (*Hag Ha'Asif*), when the nation of Israel celebrated the conclusion of the harvest (Ex. 23:16; 34:22). God designates the feast as one of the three pilgrimage festivals when Israelites must travel to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday in the Temple (Deut. 16:16). These early biblical references demonstrate the close association between the holiday and the fall harvest in the agrarian setting of ancient Israel.

Later, the Torah refers to the holiday as the Feast of Tabernacles, Hag Sukkot (Lev. 23:33; Deut. 16:13; Ezra 3:4). The same section of Scripture also describes it simply as the Feast of the Lord (Lev. 23:39). In this passage, God instructs Israel to celebrate the feast for seven days, beginning on the 15th day of the seventh month. Although Tishri (the month of Sukkot) is the first month in the modern Jewish calendar, it corresponds to the seventh month in the biblical calendar. The same passage adds an additional eighth day to the festival as a closing assembly (Lev. 23:36). Judaism refers to this holiday as *Shemini Atzeret*, which means "the assembly of the eighth."

During the celebration of the festival, the nation presented certain offerings to God. The book of Numbers gives a detailed description of the Temple sacrifices for each of the eight days of the holiday (Num. 29:12-39).

God also instructs Israel to gather a sample from four species of trees to use as part of the Temple celebration during the holiday (Lev. 23:40). Later Jewish tradition identifies these species as the *etrog* (a citron), *lulav* (closed date palm frond), *hadas* (myrtle branch) and *aravah* (willow branch). Nowadays, the three types of branches (date palm, myrtle and willow) are

bound together and referred to by the name of the date palm frond (*lulav*). Throughout Sukkot, Jewish communities wave the three species along with the *etrog* (citron) in a special ceremony, which can occur in the synagogue, in the *sukkah*, or in the home.

The Bible also alludes to the holiday as the "feast of the seventh month" or by the simple designation of "feast" (Judges 21:19; 1 Kings 8:2, 65; 2 Chron. 5:3, 7:8; Ezek. 45:25; Neh. 8:14).

In the New Testament, John 7 describes Jesus' celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem.

When does Sukkot occur?

Sukkot begins on Sunday the 15th day of the Jewish month of Tishri. Since the Jewish day begins at sundown, the holiday commences on sundown at the conclusion of the 14th day and continues for seven days until sundown following the 21st day in the Jewish month Tishri. The addition of Shemini Atzeret, the assembly of the eighth, on the 22nd of Tishri makes Sukkot an eight-day festival. In Israel, Simchat Torah occurs on the same day as Shemini Atzeret, but outside of Israel, Simchat Torah is a separate celebration, making the holiday nine days.

In 2013, Sukkot begins at sundown on Wednesday, September 18 and continues until the evening of Wednesday, September 25 (including Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah).

What does Sukkot celebrate?

The initial Scriptures concerning Sukkot suggest that the holiday began as a celebration for the ingathering of the harvest. The water libation ritual that took place in biblical times anticipated the start of the rainy season, asking God to sustain the nation with an abundant harvest the following spring.

The *sukkah*, the temporary structure built for the holiday, reminds Jewish people of how our ancestors lived in temporary dwellings while they journeyed through the desert to the land of Israel.

The waving of the *lulav* and *etrog*, the four species, reminds us of how God is everywhere. Every day during the holiday, Jewish people wave the four species in six directions – east, west, north, south, up, down.

Finally, the adjoining holiday Simchat Torah celebrates the Torah. During this day, the Jewish community dances with the Torah in the synagogue. Over the course of each year, the Jewish community reads through the entire Torah (the first five books of the Bible) in weekly portions. Simchat Torah completes and begins the cycle of the readings, meaning that the last reading in Deuteronomy is followed by the reading of the beginning of Genesis. The cyclical nature of the reading suggests the Torah, the teaching of the Lord, has neither beginning nor end.

How did ancient Israel observe Sukkot?

During the days of the Temple, the nation of Israel offered special sacrifices to the Lord on each day of Sukkot (Num. 29:12-39). Since Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals, pilgrims from around the Middle East traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast.

It was also a significant agricultural celebration, commemorating the completion of the harvest. In the first century, the priests gathered a pitcher of water from the pool of Shiloach (Siloam) and poured it out on the altar following an elaborate and joyous processional up the hill to the Temple Mount. This ceremony occurred every day of the festival, with the most extravagant processional performed on the final day.

The pouring out of the water expressed Israel's hope for future rains to produce an abundant harvest. According to the Talmud, this tradition derived from Isaiah 12:3, "***with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.***"

On the last day of Sukkot, possibly at the time of this processional, Jesus stood in the midst of the Temple and declared, "***If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water***" (John 7:37-38). When He said this, some declared, "This is the Messiah" (John 7:41).

As is the practice today, Jewish people constructed temporary dwellings, known as *sukkot*, to dwell in during the festival. They also participated in the waving of the four species at the Temple.

What are the modern traditions of Sukkot?

The main Sukkot tradition is to build a temporary structure, known as a *sukkah*. The *sukkah* can be made of different materials, although there are Jewish traditions regulating its construction to show the transient nature of the building. Each *sukkah* must have at least two walls, because the inhabitants must "dwell" in the structure for a week (Lev. 23:42). Tradition defines "dwelling" as eating the daily meals in the *sukkah*, but it is also common to sleep in the *sukkah* in climates and circumstances where it is possible to do so.

The top of the *sukkah* is covered with a natural material, such as palm fronds. The roof should allow the inhabitants to view the stars from within the *sukkah*, in order to remember the Israelites' journey through the desert. It is customary to welcome guests into the *sukkah* to join in the celebration. Welcoming of guests recalls Abraham's hospitality when he welcomed guests into his tent.

During Sukkot, Jewish people also wave the four species the *lulav* and *etrog* (Lev. 23:40).

Why do we still celebrate Old Testament Holy Days like Sukkot?

Believers in Messiah Jesus have freedom to celebrate these Holy Days or not to celebrate them. Each of the appointed festivals in Leviticus 23 points to Jesus' first and second comings, so celebration of these Holy Days is a great way to draw attention to Him.

According to Zechariah, when the Messiah establishes His Kingdom, all nations will travel to Jerusalem to worship the Lord on Sukkot (Zech. 14). Since Sukkot looks forward to the arrival of the Messiah, celebration of Sukkot is a great way to share with the Jewish community how Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, has already arrived – and how He has promised to return to establish His eternal Kingdom in Jerusalem.

Does Sukkot have any prophetic significance?

The prophet Zechariah speaks of a time when God will fight and defend His people when the nations gather against Israel (Zech. 14:1-9). After God establishes peace, all the nations will then travel to Jerusalem to worship God during Sukkot (Zech. 14:16). God promises to withhold rain from those countries that do not honor Him in Jerusalem (14:17-19). Sukkot looks forward to the day when God will establish His Kingdom and all nations will join together to worship Him.

Peter likely alludes to this holiday when Jesus appears in His full glory next to Moses and Elijah on top of the mountain (Matt. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36). He asks Jesus if it would be appropriate to build three tents – this is essentially a request for Jesus to inaugurate His Kingdom.

When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem during the week before Passover, crowds gathered to welcome Him by placing palm branches along the road, proclaiming, "Lord save us," and "Blessed is the King of Israel," a direct Messianic title. The crowds used palm branches as an allusion to Sukkot, expressing their hope for the coming Messianic Kingdom.

Sukkot looks forward to the day when God will once again dwell in the midst of His people as Messiah did. When John introduces Jesus as the Messiah, he says, "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). The Feast of Tabernacles thus looks forward to the return of our Messiah and the establishment of His Messianic Kingdom.

Mediations on the Feast of Tabernacles

Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles, lasts for seven days and is part of the High Holy Days season that begins with Rosh Hashanah (New Year). Like many Jewish feasts, Sukkot has a dual significance. The first is agricultural, as the tabernacles or booths remind us of how the farm laborers lived as they worked to bring in the harvest. That's why this holiday is also called the Festival of Ingathering.

The second meaning of Sukkot is historical, as the holiday commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel wandered in the desert. In honor of the holiday's historical significance, we are commanded to dwell in temporary shelters (called *sukkot* in Hebrew) as our

ancestors did. Today, the commandment to "dwell" in a *sukkah* can be fulfilled by simply eating all of one's meals there; however, if the weather, climate, and one's health permit, one should live in the *sukkah* as much as possible, including sleeping in it.

We also find the Feast of Tabernacles mentioned in connection with the life and ministry of Yeshua (Jesus). On the last and greatest day of this feast, during the ceremony of the pouring of the water in the Temple, Yeshua stood up and boldly proclaimed to the celebrants, *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water"* (John 7:37-38)

There is yet another significance of Sukkot - the temporary shelters remind us that we are not to think of ourselves as completely "at home" in this world. For centuries, the Jewish people needed no reminding that they had no permanent dwelling place in this world. Even now, with the reality of the State of Israel, we realize that as long as there is hatred, strife and other evidence of sin, humanity remains exiled from God until our final restoration. We look forward to the fulfillment of the prophetic promise to all of those who have placed their faith in Yeshua - *"For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land"* (Ezekiel 36:24).