

SUKKOT

1. What is the meaning of Sukkot?

Sukkot, a Hebrew word meaning “booths” or “huts,” refers to the annual Jewish festival giving thanks for a bountiful fall harvest and commemorating the forty years of Jewish wandering in the desert after Sinai.

2. How did Sukkot originate?

Sukkot probably began as a ceremonial expression of thanks to God for a good crop. By Biblical times, Sukkot had developed into the celebration of the summer fruit harvest. As on Pesach and Shavuot, the people would bring a portion of their harvests' first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. There it would be offered as a sacrifice to God by the high priest. The holiday that became Sukkot initially had no fixed date and was observed whenever the harvest had been completed, depending on climactic conditions. By Torah times, however, the Book of Leviticus (23:34) declared: “On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, there shall be a Feast of Tabernacles to the Lord for seven days.” The date, then, was standardized.

3. What does the Sukkah symbolize?

The *Sukkah* symbolizes the frail huts in which the Israelites lived during their forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus of Egypt. It also serves to remind Jews of the Biblical account of how God protected them, provided for their needs in the wilderness and, by implication, still watches over us today.

4. How do you build a Sukkah?

Jewish law is quite explicit in outlining the structural and decorative design of the traditional *Sukkah*. It is to have at least three walls with a superstructure, while the fourth may be left open. The walls may be constructed of any material, generally, canvas, wood, or metal. The roof is to be temporary, covered with loose branches from trees or anything which grows out of the ground. According to tradition, this roof covering, *sechach*, should give shade and yet allow those in the *Sukkah* to see the stars at night. There is no prescribed size for the *Sukkah*, as long as it accommodates at least one person. It is common to decorate it by hanging fruit from the *sechach*, putting posters on the walls, even laying carpet on the floor.

5. What are the special rituals for the Sukkah?

Tradition calls for the family to enter the *Sukkah*, recite the *Motzi* prayer over the meal to be eaten and then add a special blessing: *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam asher kideshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu leishev basukah*. “Blessed are You, O God, Ruler of the world, who has made us holy through *mitzvot* and commanded us to dwell in the *Sukkah*.”

Another custom of Sukkot involves extending hospitality, especially to the needy. Many Jews invite guests outside of their families to join them for a holiday meal.

SIMCHAT TORAH

1. What is the meaning of Simchat Torah?

Simchat Torah is Hebrew for “rejoicing in the law” and refers to the celebration each year when Jews read the concluding section of the Book of Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Torah) and start with Genesis once again. Simchat Torah celebrates the continuing commitment of the Jews to the study of Torah.

2. How do we celebrate Simchat Torah?

Simchat Torah is a joyous celebration. The Torah scrolls are taken from the ark and carried by congregants around the synagogue seven times. Those not carrying Torahs will often wave brightly colored flags and sing Hebrew songs. One member of the congregation opens the Torah and reads the last section of the Book of Deuteronomy. A second person then opens another Torah scroll and reads the opening section of Genesis, *Bereshit*, in Hebrew. It is considered a great honor to have a part in this important ritual.

3. Why do we carry flags on Simchat Torah?

The origin of this custom is unclear. Some scholars hold that the marching with flags recaptures the history of the ancient twelve tribes of Israel, when each tribe had its own banner. Other scholars believe that this practice originated in the Middle Ages, borrowing from certain Christian customs.

4. Are there any other special customs associated with Simchat Torah?

In most Orthodox and Conservative synagogues and in some Reform congregations, all children who have not yet reached the age of Bar or Bat Mitzvah are called to the Torah to receive a special blessing from the Rabbi. In Reform temples, Simchat Torah is also a time when children just entering religious school are called to the *bimah* and blessed in the beautiful ceremony of consecration.

The symbolic message of these customs and of Simchat Torah speaks to every Jew in every generation. The Torah is the possession of the Jewish people. It is our heritage, our history, our very life. Its teachings have served as a bond, linking Jews, young and old, over many generations, over time and space, in every land where we have lived. And the words that we utter as we end the reading of the Torah and begin again each year are the powerful words that have inspired us throughout history: *Chazak, chazak, venitchazak*. “Be strong, be strong, and let us be of good courage,” building a living Judaism through study, action and commitment.

This information was modified from:

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