

Sabbath of Sukkot October 7, 2017

דִּבֶּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּחֻמְשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׂבִיעִי הַזֶּה חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת שִׁבְעַת יָמִים לַיהוָה

Leviticus 23:34 *Say to the Israelite people: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month there shall be the Feast of Booths to Adonai, for seven days.*



Now that Yom Kippur is over and the Jewish people are on the other side of the ten days of repentance inscribed in the Book of Life, they can breathe a sigh of relief. Or can they? Just five days after the end of Yom Kippur, Jews are commanded in this week's portion to dwell in unstable, outdoor booths. We remember that in the agricultural society of ancient Israel, this was the way of the world. Living off the land and giving thanks to G-d at harvest times was paramount to survival. Jewish tradition is layered on the idea that dwelling in these temporary booths for an entire week will enable each generation to remember how Israelites lived as they wandered through the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

The holiday of Sukkot is the ultimate reminder that "survival" does not mean that the difficult journey is over and uncertain times at an end. Israelites managed their escape from slavery in Egypt only to face many a challenge in the wilderness. Life is fragile; "home" might be a temporary dwelling on shaky ground. What does it mean for the Jewish people to on one hand succeed and overcome the solemnity of the "life and death" themes of the High Holidays, only to be immediately reminded that life and livelihood are uncertain as they dwell in temporary booths?

The history of modern Israel is a symbol of this dichotomous feeling. Since establishing statehood in 1948, citizens of Israel have often lived on shaky ground. Despite the incredible success of individuals as well as the country as a whole, the struggle for solidity, security, and a sense of permanence is ongoing. Through the years, Israel has faced hostile neighbors and internal strife in social, cultural, and political realms.

The 13th-century author of *Sefer HaZohar* (The Book of Splendor) wrote, that "When you sit in the sukkah, the 'canopy of faith,' the *Shechinah*, (Divine Presence), spreads Her wings over you ... and *ushpizin* (righteous guests) join you as well. Every day of the festival you can celebrate together with these honored guests..."

Jewish tradition says to invite the patriarchs of Judaism: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David into our *sukkot* (booths). Some contemporary families have added the *ushpizot* (female guests): Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Avigail, Hannah, Huldah, and Esther. And, many people reflecting on those traditional individuals will invite guests beyond the ancient patriarchs and matriarchs.

As Jewish communities inside and outside Israel observe the days of Sukkot - eating, socializing, and even sleeping in their booths, who might they invite as their spiritual guests? Who among those has ceaselessly worked to overcome the challenges in building and maintaining the State of Israel, knowing that the realization of the Jewish homeland is still in the making?

Perhaps early state-builders should be invited in: Theodore Herzl, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, Manya Shochet, David Ben-Gurion, Rachel Bluwstein, and Moshe Shertok. Or perhaps it would be those who have maintained Israel post 1948: Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, and Yoni Netanyahu. Or maybe invited guests should include a mix of these individuals who have contributed so much of their lives to building and maintaining the State of Israel.

Sukkot is an annual reminder that in Israel there is still work to be done. As Jews in communities around the world fold up and store their temporary booths, may they look toward the State of Israel with renewed commitment to the vision of a prosperous and just nation.

Discussion Questions:

How successful do you think experiencing the frailty of outdoor living in the *sukkah* is in building empathy and recognition that our Jewish existence, particularly in Israel, is never entirely on solid ground?

To what extent should significant holidays be the tool through which Jewish education and activism is taught and encouraged?

Additional Resources:

Rabbi Elianna Yolkut, "[When the Sukkah Fell Down: Fragility, Joy and the Ultimate Meaning of Sukkot](#),"
Ha'aretz, Sep 28, 2012

[Sukkot Posters](#) from the Zionist Archives

Sukkot page at the National Library of Israel:

http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/digitallibrary/gallery/yearly_cycle/sukkot/Pages/sukot.aspx

Sukkot sound archive at The National Library of Israel:

<http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/music/Compilations/holidays/Pages/Leket-Sukot.aspx>