

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Sukkot

by J.K. McKee posted 13 October, 2008 www.messianicapologetics.net

How do I celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles? My Messianic fellowship is going away to a large gathering of thousands of people and I cannot get off work.

One of the instructions regarding *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles is, “Seven days you shall celebrate a feast to the LORD your God in the place which the LORD chooses” (Deuteronomy 16:15a). Few would disagree that this place or *maqom* (מָקוֹם) is Jerusalem. (It is not some rural campground in North America or elsewhere.) The Feast of Tabernacles is a holiday where it was originally commanded, “Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses” (Deuteronomy 16:16a), as *Sukkot* was originally one of the three pilgrimage festivals along with Passover and *Shavuot*.

The purpose of commemorating the Feast of Tabernacles was so that the Israelites could remember the journeys of their ancestors in the wilderness—delivered by God from Egypt. Leviticus 23:43 specifies that it was codified, “so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt.” But far be it from the Feast of Tabernacles being some kind of rural festival; being brought to Jerusalem to celebrate *Sukkot* makes it a very cosmopolitan festival. It is a picture of the ultimate tabernacled or dwelling in eternity between God and the redeemed, specified in Revelation 21:3: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.” This will occur in the city of New Jerusalem. The cosmopolitan aspect of *Sukkot* is emphasized in the mainline Jewish observance and traditions of the festival.

While many observant Jews, and even Messianics, make the effort to go to Jerusalem during the festival of *Sukkot*, most are not able to do so because of economic constraints. Instead, the local synagogue and one’s home become the focal points of one’s remembrance. Jewish synagogues often erect some kind of *sukkah* (סֻכָּה) on the congregation’s property, often with an event or series of events throughout the week where the synagogue members can fellowship and commemorate. Congregational members will likewise be encouraged to erect a three-sided *sukkah* in their backyards, or if they have an apartment, on their outer patio or terrace. The *sukkah* will be a place where many people eat their meals, and even where a few people will sleep. For the most part, Messianic Jewish observance of *Sukkot* is not that unlike the Synagogue, with the congregation and one’s home being the main places of remembrance.

Since the mid-to-late 1990s, though, it has become quite en vogue—at least in some sectors of the independent Messianic community—to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles at a rural campground, often with thousands of other people. Families will often put aside money and actually spend the week of *Sukkot* as their yearly vacation. At these various *Sukkot* functions, there will often be a variety of teachings and Messianic workshops on Torah observance, Messianic lifestyle issues, a marketplace for sales, etc. People with minutely small congregations and fellowships find these functions as the only time that they can really interact with Messianics on any kind of large scale. Being present in the company of hundreds of other Messianics for a week of *Sukkot* commemoration and teaching is perceived to be the yearly highlight of their Messianic faith experience.

This latter style of observing the Feast of Tabernacles, while perhaps fulfilling a need for some people, has actually developed a few issues that congregational leaders and teachers need

to be aware of for their local ministry. Many congregational leaders who have larger fellowships may witness a small “exodus” of various families and people to these large *Sukkot* gatherings—away from the focus of their local congregational body and plans. Likewise, the sheer size of many of these large *Sukkot* gatherings at rural campgrounds, means that properly monitoring things becomes impossible, and there can inevitably be some kind of an incident among the attendees. As a ministry which has monitored this over the past decade, we do know of several large Feast of Tabernacles gatherings where the testimony to the local Christian community is not that people are being changed by the Lord and receiving a greater portion of His Holy Spirit. Attendees often return to their home congregations from these functions having heard various sensationalistic teachings (usually about end-time predictions), complicating what the local leader must teach on with a new Torah cycle preparing to begin.

The Feast of Tabernacles is a wonderful time for us to consider our Heavenly Father’s desire to commune with us in a very real way. None of us should forget the Apostle John’s teaching about Yeshua’s Incarnation: “the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us” (John 1:14a, YLT). As a ministry, we encourage *Sukkot* to be a time of both family and congregational bonding. It is a time where Messianic fellowships can minister to the local community by having a *sukkah* on their congregational property, and where families can have a *sukkah* in their backyards. Just as the Lord invites us to dwell with Him, so can we invite our friends, neighbors, and colleagues to dwell with us during the week. *Sukkot* is a time when we remember the rural conditions of the Ancient Israelites in a very cosmopolitan way.

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