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A Summarization of Sukkot Traditions

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The festival of *Sukkot* or Tabernacles (also commonly called Booths) begins on 15 Tishri and is intended to commemorate the time that the Ancient Israelites spent in the wilderness after the Exodus. Images of the post-Exodus period, God wanting Israel to remember what happened in the desert, and perhaps most importantly the need for His people to physically be reminded of His desire to commune with them, are all themes that are seen throughout one's observance. The Feast of Tabernacles was considered to be so important in the Torah, that God gave it the distinction of being one of the three times of ingathering, along with Passover and *Shavuot* (Leviticus 23:39-43).

The first probable reference to the festival of *Sukkot* appears in Exodus 23:16, when the Exodus generation is told that "the Feast of the Ingathering [is] at the end of the year when you gather in *the fruit of* your labors from the field" (NASU). *Sukkot* is closely connected to the agricultural year throughout the Torah (Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:34-36, 39-43; Numbers 29:12-38; Deuteronomy 16:13-15), and consequently there are strong connections made between agricultural produce and its traditional festivities. In the Tanach we also see that *Sukkot* is the season when the Temple of Solomon was consecrated, adding to its significance among the *moedim*, and the theme of God wanting to dwell with His people. Note that at this dedication, Solomon decreed,

"[C]oncerning the foreigner who is not from Your people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Your great name's sake and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm, when they come and pray toward this house, then hear from heaven, from Your dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to You, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know

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Your name, and fear You as *do* Your people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Your name" (2 Chronicles 6:32-33, NASU).

Solomon prayed that the fame of the Temple he built for the Lord would spread abroad and that foreigners would come to a knowledge of Him and know Him as their God. As a festival of ingathering, *Sukkot* has a broad-sweeping theme as God not just wanting to dwell with Israel—but also with the whole Earth.

The Feast of Tabernacles is specified in the Torah as lasting "seven days" (Leviticus 23:34), even though in the Diaspora it is often observed in eight days. The first day of *Sukkot* is to be a High Sabbath (Leviticus 23:35). In traditional Judaism, on the seventh day of *Sukkot*, special *Hoshanah Rabbah* celebrations are conducted, and on the day after the seventh day of *Sukkot* a separate holiday known as *Shemini Atzeret*, the Eighth Day Assembly, occurs. Finally, the commemoration of *Simchat Torah* has been added over the centuries, as the yearly Torah cycle ends, and a new cycle of Torah reading begins. While the counting of the days can be confusing for those in the Diaspora (most of us), please be aware that the Jewish community at large also notices a blurring as well, and it is best to consult one's congregational leader or rabbi for proper *halachic* instruction on how one's local assembly is to observe these events.

The Significance of Sukkot

There are varied perspectives surrounding the significance of *Sukkot* from both inside and outside of the Bible. The stated reason in the Torah for remembering *Sukkot* is, "You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, 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. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:42-43, NASU). Similar to how the Lord wants His people to remember the judgments upon Egypt with Passover, now He wants them to remember the period that immediately followed, and the communion with them that He desires.

Of course, for anyone who reads Scripture and considers the time period that immediately followed the Exodus, thoughts of complaint and rebellion against God, the worship of the golden calf and smashing of the Ten Commandments, and the forty years of (unnecessary) wandering certainly come to mind. Yet the Lord did commune with His people during this time. To a degree, while most *Sukkot* festivities are filled with joy and adoration of the Holy One, such joy must be tempered with a sobriety when one considers that the Ancient Israelites—by-and-large—did not experience the communion with Him in the wilderness *that they should have*.

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Many commentators consider *Sukkot* to have been the most important day of Israel's religious calendar.¹ While conservative scholars do sincerely connect the commemoration of *Sukkot* to the Ancient Israelites' trek in the wilderness, building temporary booths for themselves, the higher criticism of the 1800s has led to some other thoughts regarding its establishment. More modern-day theologians connect the celebration of *Sukkot* as a time to commemorate the enthronement of Israel's kings after the New Year, per some activities in the Ancient Near East.² Furthermore, critical scholars sometimes advocate that the celebration of *Sukkot* was adapted from Canaanite festivals—not the Biblical Exodus.³ Notably, this liberal way of looking at the origins of *Sukkot* may affect how it can be widely overlooked in some sectors of Judaism today, when compared to the more prominent Fall holidays of *Yom Teruah/Rosh HaShanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

We actually see the festival of *Sukkot* referred to in the Apostolic Scriptures (John 7), when Yeshua the Messiah is seen appearing in Jerusalem on the seventh day of the festival. He makes reference to a customary water drawing ceremony that occurred at the Temple complex, using it to make references to the mission given to Him by the Father:

"Now on the last day, the great *day* of the feast, Yeshua stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37-38, NASU).

While some commentators are quick to dismiss it as a reference to *Sukkot*, Yeshua's Transfiguration before Peter, James, and John, and the appearing of Moses and Elijah, is met with a quick response:

"Peter said to Yeshua, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah'" (Mark 9:5, NASU).

While this probably did not occur at *Sukkot*, the theme of Tabernacles and with God's people communing with Him with His Divine presence manifest can clearly be seen. Yeshua was shown before these three disciples in all of His glory. Two of the most important figures in Israel's history were present to confirm how important this was.

The festival of *Sukkot* also has important prophetic ramifications. Zechariah prophesies that in the eschaton all the peoples of the world will acknowledge the God of Israel and celebrate *Sukkot*:

¹ Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 227.

² Ernst Kutsch, "Sukkot," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

³ Eisenberg, 227.

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“Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. And it will be that whichever of the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain on them” (Zechariah 14:16-17, NASU).

The major theme seen through *Sukkot* is God wanting us to dwell with Him and rejoice for what He has done for us—by delivering us from evil and promising us a new future in eternity. We have the opportunity to remember this once a year during the Feast of Tabernacles, as we reflect on the past history of God’s deliverance as seen in Scripture—and the promises of new deliverances in the future. This is a timeless message that all of God’s people today need to recapture.

The Construction of the Sukkah

The main feature of the celebration of *Sukkot* is undeniably the construction of one’s own temporary tabernacle, or *sukkah*. In Leviticus 23:42 God commands, “You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths” (NASU). The Hebrew word *sukkah* is derived from the root *sokek*. “The basic meaning of the root is that of blocking, or stopping up something. . . . This important root is productive in both a physical and figurative sense, particularly with the idea of ‘covering.’ In the former sense, it was frequently used in the building activities relative to the sacred places of worship. . . . In a figurative sense, it pictures God’s protection for the one who comes to him for refuge” (*TWOT*).⁴ Consequently, these are the same thoughts that one should be considering when spending time with God in his or her *sukkah*.

These tabernacles or booths likely originated from various temporary shelters employed in the Ancient Near East, employed by workers in the fields during the Fall harvest season. A *sukkah* is constructed by building a three-sided frame and room—effectively a “booth”—where leaves or straw (of plants that cannot be used for food) are placed overhead. Traditionally as one places leaves or straw over the roof, there should be more shade than open space, and hopefully sufficient enough covering to prevent rain from breaking through. Likewise, the *sukkah* should be placed outside under an open sky.

It is customary to decorate one’s *sukkah* with fruit, as the Talmud indicates,

“[If] one covered a *sukkah* [correctly], according to the law, and then decorated it with fine cloth and tapestries, and hung on it nuts, almonds, peaches, pomegranates, bunches of grapes, [containers of]

⁴ R.D. Patterson, “*sakak*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:623-624.

wine, oil and fine grain and wreaths of sheaves of corn — it is forbidden to eat any of these things until the conclusion of the final festival day [of the seven day] festival. But if [prior to the festival] one made a stipulation concerning these things, [that he will eat of them during the festival], everything depends upon his stipulation, [and he may eat this food during the festival itself]" (b.*Beitzah* 30b).⁵

Perhaps the most common custom that is followed today in the Jewish community is that Jewish families will eat their meals in their *sukkah*. It does need to be noted, though, that because of the challenges of modern-day life, for the most part Jews who have booths at their homes often only eat supper in their *sukkahs*. Likewise, modern Rabbinic tradition allows that people do not sleep in the *sukkah*, provided that the weather is bad, often meaning too cold or too hot. Those who are unable to build a *sukkah* at their homes, frequently will have the benefit of a *sukkah* accessible at their local synagogue.⁶

Jewish tradition also exempts travelers from having to build a *sukkah*, and newly married couples are permitted to not have to eat or drink in a *sukkah*, lest they sleep in the *sukkah* when they should be enjoying their honeymoon period together. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the *sukkah* is considered to be as though it were one's primary home, but physically should be adjacent to one's actual home or synagogue.

While it has become quite common in the independent Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement to observe a large *Sukkot* gathering at campgrounds or some rural location, often away from one's congregational facilities, this custom has no basis in historical Judaism or current Jewish tradition.

Varied Jewish Customs to Know for Sukkot

An important command of *Sukkot* is to take the *arabah minim* or the four species, offering them before the Lord during one's time of commemoration. Leviticus 23:40 indicates, "And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days" (RSV). The four species that one is to take are traditionally considered to be,

1. The *etrog* fruit, a special citrus
2. *Hadasim* or myrtle twigs
3. A *lulav* or branch from a palm
4. *Aravot* or willows

⁵ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

⁶ Louis Jacobs, "Sukkot," in *EJ*.

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When the Jewish exiles returning from Babylon (Nehemiah 8:17) finally remembered the Feast of Tabernacles, we see that “they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, ‘Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of *other* leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written” (Nehemiah 8:15, NASU), in accordance with the command in Leviticus.

There were some interpretational differences in Ancient Judaism between the Sadducees and Pharisees regarding Leviticus 23:40 and how one is to cover the *sukkah* and/or take the four species. The Sadducees interpreted the verse as a single command, where one was to offer the four species on the first day of *Sukkot*, then rejoice throughout the seven days. The Pharisees, however, took Leviticus 23:40 as two separate commands. Namely, on the first day of *Sukkot* one is to start offering the four species before the Lord, and then offer the four species before the Lord each day of *Sukkot* as a part of one’s rejoicing (m.*Sukkah* 3:13).

When offering the four species, it is customary for one to offer praise before the Lord employing the following Scriptures from Psalm 118, as one points to the east (toward Jerusalem):

- “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Psalm 118:1, NASU).
- “O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O LORD, we beseech You, do send prosperity!” (Psalm 118:25, NASU).
- “O LORD, do save, we beseech You; O LORD, we beseech You, do send prosperity!” (Psalm 118:25, NASU).
- “Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good; for His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Psalm 118:29, NASU).

Many in the Jewish community today believe that each person observing *Sukkot* should offer up his or her own four species.

There are also many different interpretations as to what the four species might represent, ranging from them signifying various parts of the human body that affect our relationship with God, the four kingdoms that oppressed the Jewish people (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome), or the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

In the Second Temple period, a special water libation ceremony called *Simchat Beit ha-Sho’evah* (rejoicing of the house of water drawing) was practiced. This ceremony, referred to by Yeshua in the Gospels (John 7), was based on a Pharisaic interpretation of Isaiah 12:3, “Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation” (NASU), and was codified in the Mishnah:

“*The water libation*: How so? A golden flask, holding three *logs* in volume, did one fill with water from Siloam. [When] they reached the Water

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Gate, they blow a sustained, a quavering, and a sustained blast on the *shofar*. [The priest] went up on the ramp [at the south] and turned to his left [southwest]. . . R. Judah says, 'A *log* [of water] would one pour out as the water libation all eight days'" (m.*Sukkah* 4:9).⁷

The First Century historian Josephus notes that this custom was rejected by the Sadducees, and the violent reaction of the people who sided with the Pharisees:

"As to Alexander, his own people were seditious against him; for at a festival which was then celebrated, when he stood upon the altar, and was going to sacrifice, the nation rose upon him, and pelted him with citrons [which they then had in their hands, because] the law of the Jews, required that at the feast of tabernacles, everyone should have branches of the palm tree and citron tree; which thing we have elsewhere related. They also reviled him, as derived from a captive, and so unworthy of his dignity and of sacrificing" (*Antiquities of the Jews* 13.372; cf. b.*Sukkah* 48b).⁸

The seventh day of *Sukkot* is traditionally known as *Hoshanah Rabbah*, which is to be a great day for praying and rejoicing before the Lord. In many observant Jewish circles, *Hoshanah Rabbah* is considered to be the best day for studying the Book of Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah. Customarily, it is believed that *Hoshanah Rabbah* concludes the Fall high holy days, and the Divine books are closed for another year.

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Specified in Numbers 29:35 is a special day that comes immediately after the last day of *Sukkot*:

"On the eighth day you shall have a solemn assembly; you shall do no laborious work" (NASU).

As the Hebrew *b'yom ha'shmini atzeret* specifies, this Eighth Day assembly is to be a High Sabbath. According to Rabbinical injunction, *Shemini Atzeret* should be considered its own separate holiday. While closely attached to the theme of *Sukkot*, *Shemini Atzeret* asks us to "proclaim another day holy" (NLT), and spend yet another sacred time in the presence of our God.

Customarily on *Shemini Atzeret*, the observant are often encouraged to read through the Book of Ecclesiastes. Reading Qohelet's somber words of Earthly wisdom are designed to focus the righteous on living piously after the previous seven days of rejoicing, which could have resulted in some frivolity.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 288.

⁸ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 360.

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Sometimes, reading Ecclesiastes is performed during the weekly Sabbath in the middle of *Sukkot*.

In Israel, another commemoration is remembered on the same day as *Shemini Atzeret*, *Simchat Torah* or Joy of the Torah. In the Diaspora, however, *Simchat Torah* is usually observed the day after *Shemini Atzeret*. The hallmark of *Simchat Torah* is the completion of the yearly Torah cycle, with a special reading of the last two chapters of the Torah, Deuteronomy 33-34. It is widely noted that the last letter of Deuteronomy, *lamed*, and the first letter of Genesis, *bet*, form the Hebrew word *lev* or "heart."⁹ God's Instruction contained in the Torah is to not only bring joy to our hearts, but also teach our hearts the proper and right way to live.

⁹ Heb. from Deuteronomy 34:12 and Genesis 1:1 is *kol-Yisrael*. . . *b'reisheet*.