

## ***Chag HaSukkot, a messianic perspective***

*Including: Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabbah, Sh'mini Atzeret & Simchat Torah.*

***“And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of goodly trees” (Leviticus 23:40)***



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### **1. Introduction**

*The last of the major holidays in the Jewish calendar. Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles, is the fall harvest festival; it begins on the 15th of Tishri and lasts eight days (seven in Israel). Meals are eaten in a sukkah, a booth with a roof of thatch, to recall the shelters of the Jews when they wandered in the wilderness.*

#### **The last day of Sukkot is called Hoshana Rabah.**

The day immediately following Sukkot is also a Yom Tov, called Sh'mini Atzeret (lit: the 8th day of assembly). Outside of Israel, this Yom Tov also extends two days; the second day is named Simchat Torah. This is when we finish reading the final portion of the Torah and begin a new cycle. From the joy of our treasured Torah, we dance around the synagogue, holding the Torah scrolls.

On Sukkot, we bind all the branches together - 2 willows on the left, one palm branch in the center, 3 myrtles on the right. We hold this bundle in our right hand, and then lift them together with the Etrog. We then shake them all together, 3 times in each direction: front, right, back, left, up and down (Sefardim and Chassidim have a different custom for the order). This mitzvah should be performed each of the 7 days of Sukkot, during the daytime.

The Talmud says that in the days of the Messiah, all Jews will dwell together in one Sukkah. Perhaps this is the reason why on Sukkot we take the four species -- Etrog, Lulav, myrtle and willow -- bind them close together, and wave them in all directions. We declare that all Jews are part of the same unit.

*The holiday of Sukkot is characterized by the unique commandment of dwelling in Sukkot- temporary, hut like dwellings, as the Torah says in Leviticus “Vayikra” (23: 42-43 ) “In booths you are to dwell for seven days ...so that your generations will know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I took them from the land of Egypt....”*

*The Sages in the Talmud tractate of Sukkah (11b) disagree as to what the “booths” that the Israelites dwelt in refer to. Rabi Eliezer says that these booths are a reference to the miraculous “Ananai HaKavod,” the “Clouds of Glory,” with which God surrounded the Israelites throughout their forty year sojourn in the desert after having left Egypt. These clouds protected the Israelites from the elements and the hot desert floor, kept the Jews' clothing clean, and guided the nation of Israel through the desert. Rabi Akiva maintains, however, that these “booths” refer to the actual booths or huts that the Israelites built while in the desert to serve as their dwellings.*

*In the Mishnah, the Rabbis said, “Anyone who has not seen the Simcha of the Beit Hashoeivah (the celebration of the water libations during the Sukkot holiday), has never seen a simcha in his lifetime.”*

### **2. Names**

**Sukkot** is a seven day holiday. It begins on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Tishrei. The actual name Sukkot actually refers to the booths, or temporary dwellings, that we are commanded to live in during the holiday.

**Chag**, this is perhaps the most significant name. It simply means holiday, in light of the facts that it comes closely on the heels of our most solemn season (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) and we are commanded to rejoice before the Lord. Adding that the word Chag shares the same Hebrew root for the word ‘dance’ it is only logical that we dance on this holiday with all our hearts.

Additionally, there is an agricultural significance, as the verse above indicates. The other name for the holiday, **Chag Ha'asif**, the Festival of the Ingathering, refers to the autumn harvest in the Land of Israel.

Sukkot is one of the most joyous festivals in the Jewish calendar, and, as such, it marks a drastic transition from the solemn days that precede the holiday. Indeed, Sukkot is often called **Z'man Simchateinu** - "The Season of Our Rejoicing."

Outside of Israel, the first two days of Sukkot are celebrated as a festival (Yom Tov), and the following five days are called intermediate days (**Chol Hamo'ed**), the last of which is called **Hoshanah Rabbah**. The seventh day is Hoshanah Rabbah (The Great Hoshanah). The name is taken from the word hoshanah ("please, save") frequently said in the prayers of the day, and reminiscent of the Temple service. Prayers for sustenance are recited and five aravot (willow branches) are beaten on the ground. The messianic meanings of this is quite clear. We cannot save ourselves, please save us, but who can save us since the tabernacle of David is fallen down, only the Lord himself.

In post Talmudic times, this day has become a "supplement" of Yom Kippur since God's decrees for the coming year are finalized on this day. So, some have the custom of spending the night of Hoshanah Rabbah in prayer and study.

In the synagogue seven circuits (hakaffot) are conducted around the Bimah (raised platform from where the scrolls are read out) with **the lulav and etrog** in hand as these prayers are chanted.

Immediately following Sukkot (22nd and 23rd Tishrei) is the holiday of Shemini Atzeret ("the Eighth day of Solemn Assembly") and Simchat Torah (the Day of Celebrating the Torah). In a certain way, **Shemini Atzeret** is an extension of the seven days of Sukkot. Shemini Atzeret was regarded by the rabbis as a festival in its own right. Included in the special prayers is the Prayer for Rain.



In Israel, only the first day of Sukkot is celebrated as a festival, and Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are combined into one festival day, making a total of eight festive days in all. In the Diaspora, however, there is a total of nine days of Sukkot.

The last day of the holiday period is **Simchat Torah** (which in Israel coincides with Shemini Atzeret). On this day, the annual reading of the Sefer Torah in the synagogue is concluded.

- A new cycle of Torah reading is begun as soon as the old cycle is concluded.
- The person called up for the last portion of the Torah is called the Chatan Torah - Bridegroom of the Torah; likewise, the person called up for beginning of the new cycle is called the Chatan Bereshit - Bridegroom of Bereshit, after the Hebrew name of the first Book of the Torah.
- During the evening and morning prayers of the festival, all the Torah scrolls are taken out the ark, amidst much pomp and ceremony. The scrolls are carried in procession while songs of praise are sung, followed by much dancing.

#### **Prophetic Significance:**

- According to the prophet Zechariah, the Feast of Tabernacles foretells of the Messianic (millennial) kingdom.

*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 Tabernacles. (Zech 14:16).*

#### **The Jewish Practice & Observance**

During the 2nd Temple period (515 B.C. to 70 C.E.), the Jewish observance of this feast focused on the

The Psalms of Ascent were chanted when religious Jews went up to Jerusalem.

### 3. The Festival offering

The Messianic interpretation of the offering is that Messiah

**The four species are:**

*The Children of Israel are commanded (Leviticus 23:40) to take the Four Species: “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, the branches of date palms, twigs of a plaited tree, and brook willows....”*

<b>Lulav</b>	<b>Palm branch</b> (Date)	<i>Edible, but has no smell. This represents the person with wisdom, but without good deeds.</i>
<b>Etrog</b>	<b>Citron</b> (Fruit of the goodly tree)	<i>Good taste and a good fragrance. It represents a person with both wisdom (Biblical learning) and good deeds.</i>
<b>Hadas</b>	<b>Myrtle</b> (Twigs of a plaited tree)	<i>Fragrance, but is inedible. It represents a person who has good deeds, but lacks wisdom.</i>
<b>Arava</b>	<b>Willow</b>	<i>Neither taste nor smell. It represents a person with neither good deeds nor Biblical learning.</i>

**Biblical references:**

<b>Scripture</b>	<b>Main meaning / Understanding of this passage</b>
Lev 23	General introduction to the feast
Deuteronomy 16	“You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God, seven days, in the place the Lord will choose; for the Lord, your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy”
Deuteronomy 31	Connection with the ‘year of release’
2 Chronicles 8	King Solomon observes the feast
Ezra 3	Renewal of the covenant including the reading of the Law
Zechariah 14	Millennial celebration
John 7	I am the fulfilment of Sukkot I am the living Water I am the Light of the World

**Some Non biblical references**

Josephus. Jew. Wars,	Targum Onkelos ( to Num. 28:26)
Josephus. Antiq.	Sukkah (a part of the Talmud dedicated to the festival of Sukkot).

## Hebrew Terms:

- **Tishrei** - The first Jewish month of the year. (September/October)
- **Simchat bet Hasho'eva** - (Water Celebration) Joyful and exuberant festivals, during the time of the Temple. The ceremonies, including the lighting of torches, prayer and performances, started at the end of the first day of Sukkot and were repeated every day.
- **Water Libation Ceremony** - (Water Celebration) A ceremony performed in the Holy Temple, which was an expression of hope for a year of sufficient rainfall. Young priests travelled from a local pool to the Temple, playing musical instruments and singing songs. Using a golden pitcher, they drew fresh water from the pool, and presented it to the serving high priest. The priest poured the water from bowls held high, which looked similar to rain drops.
- **Beating the Willow** - (at the water celebration) A Temple custom where the willow was beaten on the ground until all the leaves fell. The falling leaves sounded like rainwater. Since the willow absorbs a lot of water, but doesn't provide fruit, it's considered somewhat wasteful of water. Beating the willow was a reminder of the importance of using the water supply carefully. On the last day of Sukkot, the willows of the "Lulav" are beaten on the floor of the synagogue.
- **Hakaffot** - Hebrew for encirclements. We also use this term to refer to the bride's circling the groom seven times in modern weddings.
- **Ush-pi-zin** Aramaic for Guest. The source for the concept of the Ushpizin is the Zohar: "When a person sits in his Sukkah the Shechinah (God's Divine Presence) spreads its wings (metaphor) over it from above and then Abraham together with the other five righteous (Yitzchak [Isaac], Yaakov [Jacob], Yosef [Joseph], Moshe [Moses] and Aharon [Aaron]) and King David dwell together with him."

The Siddur (prayer book) refers to Sukkot as "Z'man Simchateinu," "the season of our joy."

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