

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Sukkot



### Context

*As one of the three Temple oriented Pilgrim Festivals, Sukkot has traditionally been deeply connected to the Temple and to the produce of the land. This can seem strange when being marked by Jews in colder climes who have never grown much more than a pot of mint. Over the millennia since the destruction of the Temple and exile from the land, Sukkot has had many layers of meaning added, both to its celebration and its symbols. As Reform Jews we also continue to find and add to the purpose of Sukkot. These range from environmental lessons, finding ourselves increasingly exposed to climate change as we sit in our booths, to the need to respond to rising levels of homelessness and poverty. **Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild**, who served as a community rabbi in South London for 30 years and now serves Lev Chadash Milano, writes here about some of the many interpretations that can help us to unpack what can otherwise seem an odd set of customs!*

### Content

Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals mandated in the Bible, forming a particular cycle of harvest celebrations with Pesach and Shavuot, yet unlike them in the passage in Leviticus which details the festivals, Sukkot is given an extra dimension – it is not only an agricultural celebration but also one that reminds us of the foundational story of our people. “The fifteenth day of this seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruits of the land, you will keep the feast of the Eternal seven days ...And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the tree (hadar), branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick leaved trees, and willows of the brook and rejoice before the Eternal .. You shall dwell in booths seven days...that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...” Lev 23:34-43

This explicit link to the exodus, to the people’s vulnerability and dependence on God, brings a powerful richness to our celebration. Unlike the spring/summer celebrations of Pesach and Shavuot, with hope and new life bursting forth, the autumnal setting of Sukkot brings intimations of the dark, hard winter days ahead, the leafless trees, the sleeping earth, a quasi-death experience. Sukkot comes six months after Pesach, and it builds and develops the themes of that festival. Unlike the intense dramatic ‘high’ of the plagues and our leaving slavery in Egypt that Pesach provides, Sukkot marks the “ordinary and everyday” struggle to stay alive and safe. It reminds us that our freedoms are fragile, that even basic necessities are not automatically given to us, that life is made up of routine hard graft and of effortful striving. And in this quotidian mundane activity, God is also present, even if less obvious to us.

Sukkot is a festival of autumnal abundance in preparation for months of wintertime scarcity. But at the same time it draws our attention to our two most basic frailties, our need for water (for ourselves and our crops) and for shelter. The sukkah itself represents the fragility of our homes, with the “*s’chach*” (roof) open to the skies even as the abundant fruit is hanging from it, and the *arba’a minim* (four species) shaken as an almost magical ceremony to bring rain in the right season.

The four components, held together as they are shaken, are a fascinating concatenation of concepts. Biblically mandated, the palm, myrtle, willow and etrog can represent such a complexity of characteristics. One midrash suggests that together they represent the whole community, all of whom have value and are included in the ritual – the citron fruit, the etrog, has taste (Torah) and aroma (mitzvot); the palm has tasty fruit but no smell, (ie represents those who have Torah but no good deeds); the myrtle leaves smell wonderful but it has no fruit (mitzvot but no Torah), and the willow has neither taste nor smell (no Torah and no mitzvot). Every community has people with each of these categories. When we pray before God, each person is important.

Another view is that each one represents a different part of the land of Israel- so the palm tree which loves a

hot dry climate grows well in desert areas, the myrtle thrives in the cooler mountainous regions, the willows grow only near the streams and waterways that flow all year, and the etrog is most comfortable in the lower coastal areas and the valleys. Israel has a series of microclimates, each represented here.

Or one can understand the arba minim to represent our history from Egypt to settlement: so the lulav would represent wandering in the desert, the willow- crossing the Jordan, the myrtle our settling in the mountains and the etrog the establishment of orchards.

And there is also a midrash that the arba'a minim represents each human being – the palm being the spine, the myrtle the eyes, the willow the lips and the etrog the heart, and we come in supplication to God because we understand how fragile our existence truly is.

Whichever symbolism resonates, the core truth is the same. We are in this world together, our survival is not guaranteed, we need to work together and support each other even as we celebrate a plentiful harvest. We need to be aware of scarcity, that we can all be affected, that only by sharing and by working together can we create a more harmonious world.

Sukkot is given four names in the bible: “Chag ha’Asif”<sup>i</sup> – the festival of ingathering; “Chag ha’Sukkot”<sup>ii</sup> – the Festival of Booths; “He’Chag”<sup>iii</sup> - THE festival; and “Chag l’Adonai”<sup>iv</sup> the Festival of the Eternal. Of these, the third name – the festival par excellence – gives us most pause for thought, for it reminds us that Sukkot is the most important festival.

Why is this? The symbols of the festival remind us that EVERY person in our society is important; each one needs the dignity of their own home and the security of knowing that their basic needs will be met; (Talmud Berachot 57b tells us a home of one’s own increases self-esteem and dignity). They remind us that we are all journeying, that while we may have the illusion of a stable rooted existence, the world turns and our fortunes can turn with it. They remind us that we all have responsibility for the environment and for how we treat our world, that damage to our environment and changes to our climate affects us all. They remind us that we are dependent on factors that are beyond our control. Yet with all of this unsettling symbolism, the rabbis call this festival “z’man simchateinu”, the time of our rejoicing, based upon the verses in Leviticus. Why does Sukkot make us so happy, this festival of wandering and of fragility? I think because it reminds us of our human commonality and the power of human community. We are connected to God and we are connected to our land, we are connected to our foundational stories and to our historic experiences, but for any of this to truly matter, we must be connected to each other.

## Contemplation

*After Yom Kippur, a day spent focussed on the spiritual and interior worlds of the Jewish community, we immediately turn to building our sukkot. We return to the physical world, and to the job of being active in it. The gates of repentance are said to remain open until Hoshanna Rabbah – the 7th day of Sukkot.*

*This is an opportunity to prove that the changes hoped for through the highs and lows of Yom Kippur become real in the life we live day to day. It is also a chance to remind ourselves, whatever our concept (or lack thereof) of God is, that we are not in charge of everything in the world. We cannot control the weather, and no matter how much effort we put into our sukkah, we have no control over whether or not we will be able to eat in it. Sukkot challenges us to keep in balance both the opportunity to effect change, and the realisation that we cannot control everything. How will these help you make the coming year one of meaning and purpose?*

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 23:16; Exodus 34:22

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 23:34; Deuteronomy 16:13,16

<sup>iii</sup> Ezekiel 45, 25, 1 Kings 8, 2, Ezekiel 45, 25 and 2 Chronicles 7, 8

<sup>iv</sup> Leviticus 23:39