



## More on Sukkot

One of the commandments relating to Sukkot practices today, which is grounded in today's Torah portion, is that of "the four species":

*"On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days" (23:40).*

The 'four species' provide a metaphor: just as the farmer harvests the crops, so do Jewish communities today gather four kinds of natural foliage and use them in religious ritual to praise the Lord God, Creator and abundant provider.

### The number 4.

The number four can be associated with the growth cycle: think of the four winds, four directions, four seasons. In rabbinic tradition the four species are interpreted symbolically; e.g., (a) there four kinds of people in a community; (b) there are four body parts used to praise God: spine, eyes, mouth, heart; (c) the four species suggest four blessings—land, settledness, fruit and fertility—in contrast to the *sukkah* which suggests wandering, rootlessness, dryness and sand.

See: Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (NY, 1985).

### 'Majestic trees'

Some translations: 'goodly' trees (the meaning of the Hebrew *hadar* is uncertain). Traditionally the fruit of the tree is taken to be the etrog (citron). The etrog is shaped like a heart.

### 'Branches of palm trees'

The strong stem of the *lulav* (palm branch) suggests the human spine.

### 'Boughs of leafy trees'

Traditionally interpreted as *hasadim* (myrtle). The leaves are eye-shaped.

### 'Willows of the brook'

*Aravot* (willows) have mouth-shaped leaves.

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# Light of Torah

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## Why reflect on Torah?

Today's Torah reading takes us to the Jewish festival of *Sukkot*. The word *sukkot* is the plural of the Hebrew *sukkah* which means 'tent', 'booth' or portable dwelling. It refers to the makeshift accommodation of the Israelites in their desert journey, later to the simple huts constructed in the fields at harvest time, and today to the *sukkah* which many Jewish families build in their backyards as part of Sukkot celebrations (and where meals and prayers are shared).

Sukkot is a joyful festival reflecting its agricultural roots as a harvest festival and thanksgiving for God's providential care during the Israelites' wilderness journey. In biblical texts *Sukkot* is also referred to as:

- *The festival of booths*
- *The festival of tabernacles*
- *The festival of ingathering*

This week's Torah portion presents an opportunity to explore the biblical basis of the Sukkot festival and some interpretations by Jewish commentators over the centuries. As we shall see, the religious meaning of Sukkot resonates strongly with important themes in Christian spirituality today. It is enriching and stretching to visit these themes through the lens of Judaism.



Leviticus 21:1—24:23

*Emor: 'Say'*



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 21:1—24:23

This week's Torah portion includes a chapter devoted to the festivals: special times of the year which are set aside as belonging to God, and which continue to find expression in Jewish communities today.

Our focus here is the Festival of *Sukkot* ('booths', 'tabernacles', i.e., 'tents' or portable dwellings). The Torah requires that during the seven days of *Sukkot* the people are to move out of their solid dwellings and into makeshift dwellings. Read Leviticus chapter 23, then return to verses 33-44, with particular attention to verses: 42-43.

## Tasting Torah

*"There shall be a festival of booths to the LORD...You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens of Israel shall live in booths, so that your generation may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God"* (Leviticus 23:34,42-43).

While it is true that the Festival of Booths (*Sukkot*) originated in harvest celebrations marking the end of the agricultural season, Jewish commentators note that the Torah passage above reveals the more important religious reason for the festival. From your reading, how would you describe the religious essence of *Sukkot*? What spiritual gain is to be found by living 'in booths for seven days'? Read carefully, recalling what you already know of the Israelites' exodus journey.

## Touching Torah

Let's hear four opinions on this passage from traditional Jewish interpreters:<sup>1</sup>

**Rashbam:**<sup>2</sup> the *Sukkot* laws of the Torah exist *"so that people should not be guilty of pride in their well-stocked houses; lest they say, 'The might of our hand has gotten us this wealth.'"*

**Sefer ha-Hinukh:**<sup>3</sup> A chief reason for this command is to focus attention on the great miracles that God has done for our ancestors in the wilderness. By recalling these wonders, one shows proper attention and gratitude to God, recognizing it is the Lord *"who delights in being bountiful."*

## Depthing Torah

**Arama:**<sup>4</sup> By commanding the practice that for seven days each year we enter a tiny, sparsely furnished hut, *Sukkot* serves as a remarkable reminder...not to indulge in building imposing structures, impressing on us that the minimum is all that is needed during our stay in this earthly life which is but a temporary abode.

**Malbim:**<sup>5</sup> The term *sukkah* is to be regarded *"as teaching that the coming generations should not become over self-confident at the time of the [harvest] ingathering when they fill their houses with plenty and imagine that this world is the be-all and end-all of life."*

As we listen to these Jewish voices we should be wary of simply transposing them into a universal humanitarian key, but rather maintain their critical connection with the verse: *I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God"* (v.43). This is an indispensable part of the biblical story. At its heart, *Sukkot* is about identity: it calls a chosen people to remember *their origins: in the active, liberating movement of the LORD God in history*. This is why wealth and complacency are so dangerous. They lead to a forgetting of who one really is in the sight of God.

## Doing Torah

Discuss similarities and subtle differences of the sages' views. E.g., Rashbam seems to call for a humble attitude in the face of ownership of material luxuries. But Arama suggests a counter-cultural protest: we should not aspire to such luxuries! Continue to ponder this text, with particular attention to v.43.



## Faith & life

Compared to their Jewish counterparts, most Christians are at a disadvantage as they read this Torah text in that they have little or no direct experience of *Sukkot* as a festival celebrated today. If you have the opportunity, learn from a Jewish friend's experience of celebrating *Sukkot*. Jewish informational websites (e.g. [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com)) can also open Christian eyes to the joy and spiritual depths of Jewish *Sukkot* practices today.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992).  
Scripture: NRSV

1. See Leibowitz, 468-471
2. Rashbam: Rabbi Samuel ben Meir 12th c. France. Grandson of Rashi.
3. Sefer ha-Hinukh: a classic education text of the 13th century.
4. Isaac ben Moses Arama: Spanish Talmudic scholar (1420-1494).
5. Malbim: 19th c. Russian-Jewish scholar