



Light of Torah

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Sukkot

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 festivities (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, and the festival of ingathering.*

While the Sukkot festival is not until October in 2012, this week's Torah portion presents an opportunity to explore its biblical basis and some interpretations by Jewish commentators over the centuries. In particular we will explore the Torah requirement that during the seven days of Sukkot the people are to move out of their solid dwellings and into makeshift dwellings. As we shall see, the religious meaning of Sukkot resonates with important themes in Christian spirituality. It is enriching and stretching to visit these themes through the lens of Jewish biblical interpretation.

"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" (Lev. 23:34,42-43, NRSV).

While it is true that the Festival of Booths (Sukkot) originated in harvest celebrations, Jewish commentators note that the Torah passage above reveals the more important religious reason for the festival. But what spiritual gain is to be found in living 'in booths for seven days'? Let's hear four opinions on this passage from traditional Jewish interpreters:¹

Rashbam:² Sukkot laws 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:³ A chief reason for this command is to focus 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."

Arama:⁴ By commanding the practice that for seven days each year one enters 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. Interestingly, Rashbam seems to call for a humble attitude in the face of the ownership of material luxuries. But Arama suggests a counter-cultural protest: we should not aspire to such luxuries!

Malbim:⁵ 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. •

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1992); Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (NY, 1985).

1. Quotations from Leibowitz, 468-471
2. Rashbam: Rabbi Samuel ben Meir 12th century France. Grandson of Rashi.
3. Classic education text of 13th c.
4. Isaac ben Moses Arama: 15th c. Spain
5. Malbim: 19th c. Russian-Jewish scholar.