



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Sukkot

From the Days of Awe and the solemn tones of Yom Kippur, the Jewish calendar moves quickly into a seven day festival of joyful celebration: *Sukkot*. 'Sukkot' is the plural form of the Hebrew word *sukkah* which means 'tent, booth, temporary dwelling.' Let's look briefly at the meaning of this Jewish festival and what it can teach us Christians about living trustingly under the shelter of divine providence.

Temple times

"You shall observe the festival of ingathering, at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor" (Ex. 23:16, NRSV).

Sukkot appears in the book of Exodus as an agricultural feast linked to the harvest. Whether it be the final gathering of produce before the onset of winter, or the completion of the Days of Awe, this is a festival imbued with a sense of security, satisfaction and joy.

Sukkot is one of the pilgrimage festivals; i.e., in ancient times pilgrims from all over Israel would make their way up to the holy city of Jerusalem for the elaborate Temple rituals.

Today

"You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations 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. 23:42,43)

As well as its agricultural theme, Sukkot recalls the story of the Israelites' desert wanderings. As part of Sukkot festivities today, many Jewish households build a *sukkah* (a hut or temporary dwelling with four walls and a roof of branches). During Sukkot, members of the household eat their meals in the *sukkah*, and some sleep there as well. In this way they recall the nomadic lifestyle of their ancient ancestors and the constant care God showed the Israelites as they made their way to the promised land.

Torah

The Torah gives three main commandments relating to Sukkot: the Israelites are to [1] live in the *sukkah*, [2] gather together the four species (i.e., four kinds of plants mentioned in Lev. 23:40), [3] spend the festival rejoicing. All three continue to find expression in contemporary Sukkot customs, along with the recitation of prayers, synagogue services, reading the Book of Ecclesiastes, and inviting symbolic guests (e.g., Abraham, Moses, and other biblical wanderers) into the *sukkah*.

Above all, Sukkot is an attitude and practice of faith. By surrendering bricks and mortar for a *sukkah*, one's physical

space symbolizes a reaching for the security of God's hand. As one Jewish writer puts it, "Sukkot is a reminder not to become entombed in our homes, a reminder of a different kind of shelter made of openness and faith. It is a reminder of the long time ago when we followed the Lord into the desert, and painfully learned the meaning of trust."¹ Hospitality and giving shelter to the homeless are also important to the practices of Sukkot.

The meaning of Sukkot involves more than a humanitarian ideal of simple living. It maintains a critical connection with the verse: *'I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (Lev. 23:43).*

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 the trappings of wealth are so dangerous. They can lead to complacency, a forgetting of who one really is in the sight of God.

Faith & Life

Share a time when you felt vulnerable and highly dependent on God's care. In what way did this event/time shape your life? As Christians, how do we teach our children the important lessons and values expressed by the Jewish festival of Sukkot?

1. Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (NY, 1985), 147.