

Sukkot 5787

On Yom Kippur, we had celebrated as a day of fasting and praying, our Holy Day of repentance and return (תשובה) - a return to better ourselves, to one another and to Adonai, our Creator. And five days later, we celebrated in the Sukkah, the hut with three walls, without a firm roof, but enabling our eyes to see the sky, the full moon and the stars. To fulfil the mitzvah of sitting in the Sukkah, celebrating, eating and drinking there, the first evening is the most important one! We were lucky that it was a dry and warm evening in Basel. We recalled that Adonai is the one who gives us shelter and has made us partners in the Covenant, along with our ancestors who were the first to traverse the desert after their liberation from Egyptian slavery. Our ancestors travelled with and dwelt in temporary shelters – trustfully (or struggling for trust, אמונה – then to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai and finally to reach the Promised Land – their experience as a prototype and a mission for Jews throughout the centuries, and so for us as well.

Sukkot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals in the Jewish calendar, followed by Pesach in spring, and Shavuot in the early summer. All three of them were rural harvest festivals, and their place of longing and celebrating was Yerushalayim!

For Sukkot, it is a mitzvah to eat in the Sukkah and to live in it, even to sleep in it, for seven days. It is no coincidence that the 6 days of Creation and the 7th day of Shabbat are included as a reference during the seven days of Sukkot.

Over the course of the centuries since biblical Judaism, more mitzvot (commandments) and minhagim (customs), have been added for Sukkot. Two of them are outstanding because of their beauty and symbolism:

1. The mitzvah to invite guests into the Sukkah, traditionally the seven Ushpizin (Aramaic for guests) of our covenantal history: first of all, Abraham whom we receive on erev Sukkot, followed during the next days by Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aharon and King David. In the 16th century, Kabbala attributed some exemplar traits to the seven Ushpizin: to Abraham חסד, love and kindness; to Isaac גבורה, strength; to Jacob תפארת, beauty, harmony, truth and balance between chesed and g'vurah; to Joseph יסוד, being grounded, connection, righteousness and channelling of energy; to Moses נצח, victory, eternity, perseverance, dominance and overcoming obstacles; Aharon הוד, splendour, glory, humbleness, gratefulness; David מלכות, kingship, sovereignty, manifestation in the physical world and absorption and reflection of light. And we are called to acquire and develop some of these attributes in ourselves as well.

In our Liberal-Reform Jewish tradition, the biblical women of our history are also our guests, Ushpizin, alongside the outstanding men of our tradition: Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Esther, Judith.... All of them, the seven Ushpizin and the women of the Torah admonish us to invite people in need of food, shelter and company into our Sukkah to share what we have with them.

2. The mitzvah of arba minim/waving the lulav – in the Sukkah and in the Sukkot services, especially for Shacharit while walking around the bimah, while the Hallel is sung. The lulav consists of the arba minim, the four species: the palm branch which gave the whole bundle its name: lulav, like its ‘backbone’, then willow (arawa), myrtle (hadassah), and the citron-like etrog. None may be missing, otherwise the mitzvah of waving the lulav would not be able to be fulfilled. In tradition, Midrash and Chassidut, the arba minim have always been considered to be a symbol of the Jewish people in all its diversity. The four species differ in taste and smell and by these symbolise different types of Jews and their studying and/or living Torah. The etrog, which is tasty and smells good, is the most integrated of the four species, as is the person who learns and knows Torah and puts it into practice. The four species are also interpreted as analogies of parts of our bodies: the lulav corresponding to our spine, the myrtle to our eyes, the willow to our lips and the etrog to our hearts. All these to remind us to stand tall and be courageous, to see others clearly, to speak with diligence and to keep our hearts open. The shaking of the lulav in the four directions, as well as before and behind us, allows us to spiritually draw in all of creation into our joyful celebration of Sukkot.

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