

The Feast of Tabernacles

The spiritual meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles is expressed in a number of types - the booth, the *ethrog* and *lulav*, the lighting of the lamps, the water-pouring ceremony, wearing of white garments, the 7-day Jewish wedding and the final eighth-day meal.

This was a harvest festival and a time of joy, one of three pilgrimage feasts Jewish males were required to attend, and was commanded to be observed in the Torah:

Deuteronomy 16:13-15 - "Thou shalt observe the feast of tabernacles seven days, after that thou hast gathered in thy corn and thy wine: And thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within thy gates. Seven days shalt thou keep a solemn feast unto the LORD thy God in the place which the LORD shall choose: because the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thine increase, and in all the works of thine hands, therefore thou shalt surely rejoice."

Leviticus 23:34, 36 - "Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the Lord. ...Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord: it is a solemn assembly; and ye shall do no servile work therein."

Leviticus 23:42-43 - "Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: 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: I am the LORD your God."

Psalm 27 is recited every day from the first of the month Elul until "Hoshana Rabbah," the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles.

The 13 occurrences of the divine name in the psalm are said to correspond to 13 channels of mercy that are "opened" during the penitential season, giving the psalm its power to "annul all harsh and evil decrees."

The Rabbis explain this psalm as referring to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Tabernacles: "The Lord is my light" - on Rosh Hashanah ... "And my salvation" - on Yom Kippur... "and afterwards [the psalm says]: 'He will shelter me in his Sukkah' "

The psalmist petitions God to "shelter me in his sukkah":

Psalm 27:5 - "For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion (*sukkah*): in the secret of his tabernacle (*ohel* - tent, dwelling place) shall he hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock."

One rabbi comments on this verse, "This means that God should providentially protect me against the evil inclination in this world, which is called a *sukkah*, since it is a

temporary dwelling — the seven days [of Sukkot] corresponding to the seventy years [of a normal lifespan]."

Throughout the scriptures, the booth, or *sukkah*, represents God's protection and sanctuary:

Psalm 91:4 - He shall cover (*sakkach* - the root of *sukkah*, meaning to cover, to weave together) thee with his feathers, and under his wings (*kanaph* - wing, skirt, corner of garment) shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.

THE BOOTH - "Blessed art thou oh Lord our God, who has blessed us with your commandments and has commanded us to dwell in the booth."

Israel was commanded to dwell in booths for seven days. The booth reflects the fragility, precariousness and impermanence of life in this world. This inadequate and temporary covering points us to our true eternal covering - God Himself.

According to the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, the *sukkah* was also built to show misfortune at a time of good fortune and to remind the rich of the poor. The rabbis add that like Israel's ancestors in the desert who dwelt in a *sukkah*, one's survival is contingent upon the grace of the Almighty. It also commemorates the first booth built by Abraham when he greeted the three angels (**Genesis 18**).

In the liturgy, the *Hashkeevaynu* prayer petitions God to "spread over us the shelter of Your peace." The prayer concludes with these words: "Praised are You, God, Who spreads a shelter of peace (*sukkat shalom*) over us, over all God's people Israel, and over Jerusalem."

During each of the seven days, a spiritual guest visits the *sukkah* - first Abraham, then Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David - the "shepherds of Israel."

One tradition says the *sukkah* should be between 10 and 20 handbreadths high, to accommodate the cherubim, whose wings were 10 handbreadths high. Another tradition adds this is because the Ark of the Covenant was nine-handbreadths high. Adding in the thickness of the Mercy Seat makes 10 handbreadths. Addition of the cherubim's wings makes 20 handbreadths. And it is written: "I will meet with you there and I will speak with you from above the Ark cover" (Exodus 25:22).

[There is a complicated argument among the rabbis about whether God would ever breach this 10-handbreadth distance to meet with Israel. The argument is resolved in Jesus, in whom God reached out to humankind and offered salvation and communion.]

<https://images.shulcloud.com/5296/uploads/High-Holidays/SukkotReflections.pdf>

Jewish Law maintains that "one who is uncomfortable is freed from the obligation of dwelling in a *sukkah*", which is defined as the wind or the flies making it impossible to

sleep in the sukkah or rain spoiling the soup you are about to eat in the sukkah (Orah Haim 640, 4). "Anyone who is freed from the commandment of *sukkah* (because he is uncomfortable) and still does not leave it, will not receive any reward; he is considered an idiot." Responded Rav Levi Yitzchak: "Indeed, anyone who can be dwelling within the Divine Rays of Splendor and still feel uncomfortable is truly an idiot!"

The Hebrew word for Tabernacles - "*sukkot*" - originally meant "woven" and applied to the branches woven together to make simple shelters for workers in the fields during harvest. Later the "*sukkah*" grew to symbolize Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, being sheltered only by God himself and his glory in the pillar of cloud.

Some rabbis imagined seven clouds, one on each side of the Israelite camp, one above, one below, and one—the Bible's "pillar of cloud"—going before them and blazing the path (Tosefta Sotah 4:2).

Even God was said to live in a *sukkah*:

"He made darkness his screen; dark thunderbolts, dense clouds of the sky were his *sukkah* round about him" (**Psalm 18:12**)

In the Temple, the altar was covered with a sukkah during the seven-day feast:

"There was a place at the foot of Jerusalem called Motza (there is suburb in Jerusalem's outskirts called Motza to this day). Each day of Sukkot, the people would descend there and cut down huge willow leaves. These branches were exceptionally long - their height reached 11 amot. The worshippers would place these branches all along the foundation of the altar, with their heads bent over the top" (Sukkah 4, 5).

Living in a booth is a lesson in humility. **Genesis 33:17** says when the patriarch Jacob returned to Canaan he built a house for himself, and *sukkot* for his cattle, for *sukkot* are only fit for animals.

Prayers from Yom Kippur prepared the congregation for the humility of living in the booth during Tabernacles:

One prayer echoing Ecclesiastes exclaimed:

"In truth You are their Creator and You understand their inclination, for they are but flesh and blood. The origin of man is dust, his end is dust. He earns his bread by exertion and is like a broken shard, like dry grass, a withered flower, like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that blows away and dust that scatters, like a dream that flies away."

And further in the liturgy of Yom Kippur

"What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our virtue? What is our help? What is our power? What is our might? what then shall we say in thy presence, O Lord, our God! and the God of our fathers? Are not the mightiest heroes as naught, before thee; men of renown as if they had not existed? wise men, as if they were without

knowledge? and the intelligent, as if void of understanding? For the majority of their actions is emptiness; and the days of their life but vanity in thy presence; even the pre-eminence of man over beast, is naught, for all is vanity.”

1 Chronicles 29:15 - “For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.”

Paul, in the New Testament, comments on the booth:

2 Corinthians 5:1 - “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle (*skēnos*, LXX Greek for booth) were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

The book of Ecclesiastes is read during the feast to impress on us that “all is vanity.” Each dying leaf represent one of our failed expectations or plans.

But the outcome of that humility is acceptance:

Ecclesiastes 9:7 - "Go your way, eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a glad heart, for God has already accepted your works."

The booth or *sukkah* also has prophetic significance:

Amos 9:11 - “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle (*sukkah*) of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.”

Acts 15:15-17 - “And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle (Greek *skene* - tent or tabernacles made of green boughs, or skins or other materials) of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.”

Isaiah 4:5-6 - “And the LORD will create upon every dwelling place of mount Zion, and upon her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire by night: for upon all the glory shall be a defence (*chuppah* - the wedding canopy). And there shall be a tabernacle (*sukkah*) for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain.” (Note this combines the booth and the wedding canopy, both symbols of Tabernacles)

The Talmud (BT Avoda Zara 3) relates that in the end of days, all the nations of the world will express a desire to repent, and G-d will judge them through the commandment of building a *sukkah*... He will give this single commandment to the entire world to fulfill.

Zechariah 14:16 - “And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles.”

Toward this end, sacrifices were offered for all the nations of the world during Tabernacles.

We're strangers and pilgrims in this world, which will eventually be burned up. That's why we will each take a branch from the booth and burn it, picturing the end of time, which will bring in a “new heaven and a new earth.”

Believers who see through the deteriorating “*sukkah*” of this world can then let go of it and enter the eternal Kingdom of Heaven.

THE ETHROG - The Talmud, in Genesis Rabbah XV 7, says the *ethrog* is identified as the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “It is said, ‘the tree was good for food.’ Which is the tree whose wood can be eaten as well as its fruit? It is the *ethrog*.”

We use the pomegranate as our *ethrog*, which was one of the rabbinical contenders for serving as the forbidden fruit of Eden. (Most Jews use the citron fruit).

The *ethrog*/pomegranate was said to contain 613 seeds, representing the 613 commandments in the Law that condemn us.

The *ethrog* fruit smells delightful and never rots. Rather, it slowly dries out as it ages. So there is a “component of eternity” hidden within it.

The *ethrog* includes two mysteries within its attractive exterior:

- As the symbol of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it reflects the temptation that causes humans since Adam and Eve to judge good and evil for themselves and thereby to try to control their own lives.

- Conversely, as a symbol of the Law's 613 commandments, it brings into sharp focus our complete failure to love and obey God.

How can we “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart” when our hearts are “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked?” (**Jeremiah 17:9**).

The *ethrog* embodies both the human predicament of sin, and its solution.

Everyone who does not keep the Law perfectly is cursed by it (**Deuteronomy 27:26**).

Paul says that “all have sinned” (**Romans 3:10, 23**), and in **Galatians 3:10-13** tells us that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”

In Hebrew, the initial letters in the phrase, "Let not the foot of pride overtake me" - (**Psalm 36:12**) - spell out the word "*ethrog*."

Christ said that "whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder." (**Matthew 21:44**)

"Falling on the stone" means repentance, showing our individual brokenness before God as we "reckon ourselves dead" with Christ on the cross. (**Romans 6:11**)

Expanding on the tradition of beating the *lulav* willow branches (see below), we've added our own spin and we picture that brokenness by throwing the *ethrog* fruit and smashing it.

To symbolize our desire to no longer judge good and evil for ourselves, and confessing our inability to keep God's Law, we throw a pomegranate against our little homemade "stone altar," giving us a tactile representation of release from the illusion of control over our own lives, our brokenness and acceptance of God's forgiveness of our failures and sin, and the rejection of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

THE LULAV - Leviticus 23:40 - "And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days."

In Talmudic tradition, the four plants or "species" are identified as:

- etrog (אתרוג) – the fruit of a citron tree (others say a pomegranate)
- lulav (לולב) – a ripe, green, closed frond from a date palm tree
- hadass (הדס) – boughs with leaves from the myrtle tree
- aravah (ערבה) – branches with leaves from the willow tree

The *ethrog* fruit is joined to these branches, and "waved" in six directions to signify God's sovereignty over the universe. The *ethrog* represents the human heart, and the other branches are the rest of the human body. The waving shows our willingness to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Striking the *lulav* on the stones of the Temple indicate whole-hearted humility, with everything in you.

The names of the plants - *Aravah* (willow), *Hadas* (myrtle), *Lulav* (date palm) and *Ethrog* represent the *Yud* and *Heh* and *Vav* and *Heh* of the four-letter Name of God, the Tetragrammaton.

The Mishna (Sukkah 3, 12) describes that in the time when the Holy Temple stood, the *lulav* was carried all week long only by those who worshipped in the Temple itself. However, outside the Temple - even for those in the holy city of Jerusalem proper - the *lulav* was only held on the first day; for the remainder of the week it was not used except in the Holy Temple. This is solely on account of the verse (**Leviticus 23:40**) which reads "... and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days." The great sages

understood that the place which is "before the Lord your God" is only the Holy Temple itself, the place of constant Divine revelation. The verse makes it clear that it is only there that an individual is required by the Biblical commandment to rejoice with "the four species" all week long; everywhere else is referred to by the words "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day."

- <http://www.templeinstitute.org/sukkot.htm>

Every day of Sukkot the altar was circled once, to the sounds of supplications for divine assistance; on *Hoshana Rabbah*, the seventh day, the altar was circled seven times.

After the Temple was destroyed, a fifth *lulav* branch - another willow - was added to represent the sukkah that was built over the altar. The priests in Temple times would beat this five-branched *lulav* against the stones of the Temple floor five times to signify repentance.

The number five symbolized the "tempering of the five measures of harshness."

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they ruined the five human senses. The Torah, which previously had been one unbroken whole, was broken up with the insertion of five vowel points to separate the consonants. The rabbis say we no longer know how to put all the combinations of letters and vowel points together correctly. Also, five measures of harshness came into the world, represented by God's name "Elohim" (the Name of harshness) which is mentioned five times in the story of Adam and Eve's sin (**Genesis 3:8-14**)

The Name "Elohim" is numerically 86. When 86 is multiplied by 5, it equals 430, indicating that it would take 430 years of Egyptian bondage to remove the five measures of strict justice from their "*nefesh*" (soul - which is also numerically 86), and sweeten the five Names "Elohim". This is why the Name "Elohim" is mentioned five times in the story about the Jewish people's suffering in Egypt (**Exodus 2:23-25**), hinting to us that the point of the suffering was intended to repair the damage that was done to their "*nefesh*" when they ruined their five senses. Egyptian bondage did not complete this task of cleansing their collective "*nefesh*" because the Jews were only actually enslaved for 86 years. Hashem had to take them out before the 430 years so that they would not sink to the fiftieth level of impurity which is beyond the point of return.

See <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Rabbi-Wagensberg-on-Parshas-Bo.html?soid=1104865020373&aid=S8ccMpELf6Y>

We combine the *ethrog* and *lulav* ceremonies into one by smashing our *ethrog*/pomegranate against our own little "altar" to signify the same thing - to show our willingness to give up control over our own lives. In humility we acknowledge we can't keep the Law. We reject eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Jesus not only recombined the letters and vowel points of the Torah correctly for us, he freed us from the curse of the Law by both fulfilling the Law in His own life, and taking the curse and punishment for humanity's breaking it on Himself on the cross.

LIGHT - "Blessed art thou oh Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Festival Light."

Light streaming from the Temple literally lit up the city of Jerusalem. Giant oil-filled lamps burned in the courtyard, with the cast-off soiled garments of the priests serving as wicks. The prophets saw Israel as a "light to the Gentiles" in the future Days of Messiah.

Isaiah 60:1-3 - "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Isaiah 62:1 - "For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth."

During the feast, Jesus got up in the middle of the ceremony of lighting the lights and said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (**John 8:12**)

LIVING WATER - Each day of the feast, early in the morning, the High Priest filled a pitcher of water from the Pool of Siloam. A huge procession followed him back to the Temple, where he poured it on the altar as a drink offering. On the last day, water and wine were poured out together.

The people chanted "With joy we will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3).

The secret of the "festival of the water libation," according to the Jerusalem Talmud: the great joy was in the receiving of prophetic inspiration. For the Hebrew word for the "drawing" of the water, sho'eva, also indicates drawing in a different direction - the drawing down of prophetic enlightenment. Thus "whoever has never seen the celebrations of the Festival of the Water Libation, has never experienced true joy in his life"

At this point in the feast Jesus stood up and said He provided the "living water" that people are spiritually thirsting for.

John 7:37-39 - "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

In **John 2:1-11**, Jesus - probably at the time of the feast of Tabernacles - attends the wedding at Cana and miraculously turns water into wine, pointing to the High Priest's mixing the water and the wine on the seventh day of the feast. He linked this water/wine ceremony with the wedding aspect of the Feast.

WEDDING CEREMONY - The Jewish custom of a 7-day wedding was patterned on the Feast of Tabernacles. It reflects the 7 days of creation as well as linear time itself. Living in the booth directs our attention to God as the real "*chuppah*" - the Jewish wedding canopy. Jesus used a wedding feast in several parables. All are invited to the feast, both "bad and good," but not all respond to the invitation.

Psalms 137:6 - "Jerusalem is to be raised above our chiefest joy." Thus at the hour of a man's chiefest joy, his wedding, he breaks a glass under his foot to symbolize the destruction of the House of the Lord. (For the same reason, when an individual builds a home, he must leave a small section of the wall opposite the entrance blank and unplastered).

WHITE GARMENTS - The gathering of crowds clothed in white robes and waving palm branches at the Feast of Tabernacles is depicted in John's vision of the final Harvest in the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 7:9-10 - "After this I looked and saw a multitude too large to count, from every nation and tribe and people and tongue, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Isaiah 61:10 - "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels."

At a royal wedding feast, the king would distribute white linen wedding garments to each guest. In Jesus' parables, the garments represent the sinless nature of Christ and prohibit anyone from displaying their own status or wealth (or their own imagined righteousness). All would be equal and the king would be glorified. To not have on the right garment was an act of rebellion against the king, and is punished by being thrown into outer darkness. (**Matthew 22:1-14**)

The picture goes all the way back to Genesis:

Genesis 3:21 - "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them." A sacrifice was required to make those skins, and this pointed toward Christ's sacrifice for sin on the cross.

God provides us with the garments of righteousness, but we are instructed to “keep” the garments from being spotted by the flesh, through repentance and humility.

THE EIGHTH DAY - The eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles is linked to the feast but mysteriously it is also distinct from it. This is called an “intimate supper” by the rabbis, and represents the consummation of the marriage, the coupling of the Bride and Bridegroom in the private bridal chamber. (The eighth day as a type of being “outside of time” is also depicted in circumcision - the sign of the covenant - which is performed on the 8th day after birth).

The Psalms of Ascent and the Hallel are sung on the Feast of Tabernacles. The reason is to increase the joy:

The Divine presence itself only rests on one who is joyful. Thus with regard to the prophet Elisha, the verse states (**2 Kings 3:15**) "And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him."