



About Sukkot

- Sukkot is *the* festival.

Seriously. Even the Bible and the Talmud say so. In the Bible it is referred to as simply *chag*—"festival" (Lev. 23:39, 41; 1 Ki. 8:2, 12:32); since the holiday was so important, Solomon chose it as the occasion to celebrate the consecration of the Temple; and according to Deuteronomy, the public reading of the Torah was to take place every seven years on Sukkot (31:10-13). Sukkot was the first sacred occasion observed after the resumption of sacrifices in Jerusalem after the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity (Ezra 3:2-4). A measure of the importance of a holiday is the number of sacrifices specified for the occasion. By this measure, Sukkot is unmatched; Numbers 29:12-39 deals exclusively with all the sacrifices that are to be offered during the holiday: no less than 70 bullocks are required along with numerous other sacrifices. Zechariah wrote that in messianic times, all of the world's nations will come to Jerusalem on Sukkot to celebrate the holiday (14:16).



Sukkot has other names besides *Chag* and *Chag ha-Sukkot*: it's also referred to as *chag ha-asif*, "festival of the ingathering" (Ex. 23:16), *chag Adonai*, "festival of the Lord" (Lev. 23:39; Judg. 21:19), *chag ba-chodesh hashvei'e*, "festival of the seventh month" (Ezek. 45:25; Neh. 8:14) and *zman simchateinu*, "season of our rejoicing" (Deut. 16:14).

- Agricultural origins of the festival.

The foundations of the civilizations of the ancient middle east started with nomadic tribal communities, but as agriculture became more widespread, many nomadic groups settled into fixed areas to practice crop farming. The harvest seasons were times of great activity, and the completion of the harvest was a time of celebration. The fall holidays of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot likely have their origin in the fall harvest, and may even have originally been derived from a single holiday. The Bible mentions a festival celebrated by the Canaanites who observed a joyous feast in the fall at the end of the grape harvest (Judg. 9:27). During the harvest, the entire community would stay out in the fields until all the crops were in, living in temporary shelters very similar to the sukkot used during the Sukkot festival.



That Sukkot was originally a harvest festival is evident in one of its names, "Feast of Ingathering," and from the Torah's descriptions, "At the end of the year when you gather in your labors out of the field" (Ex. 23:16) and "...after you have gathered in from your threshing-floor and from your winepress" (Deut. 16:13). Isaiah mentions that grape harvesters lived in booths in their vineyards during the harvest (Isa. 1:8). Pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem during the harvest festivals also likely lived in booths during their stay for the festival—the ancient version of a trailer park.

Harvest festivals were a major part of the community's culture, even more so in pagan societies, where the festivals celebrated the fertility aspects of their gods. The Temple priests were extremely anxious to completely separate the festival harvest celebration from its pagan origins, so Sukkot became transformed from a solely agricultural celebration to a commemoration of the Israelites' 40-year journey through the wilderness to reach Israel. Thus we find this instruction in the Torah: "You shall dwell in *sukkot* seven days ... so that your generations shall know that I caused the children of Israel to dwell in *sukkot* when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 23:42-43). However, contrast this with the many statements elsewhere in the Torah which relate that while in the wilderness, the Israelites dwelt in tents (see, for example, Ex. 16:16, 33:8, 10; Num. 11:10, 16:27, 24:5; Deut. 1:27, 5:27).

So did they live in *sukkot* or tents? Actually, this was the subject of a rabbinic debate, recorded in *Sifra*, the halakhic *midrash* on Leviticus; various versions of this debate are found in other rabbinic writings.

R. Eliezer says: They were real *sukkot*. R. Akiba says: The *sukkot* were the clouds of glory (*Sifra Emor* 17:11 [103a-b]).

How was R. Akiba's opinion accepted? It was apparently quite convincing, because it became accepted as the majority rabbinic interpretation and is found in the targums (the Aramaic translations of the Torah) and in many later writings. Why would this happen? It all boils down to whether "dwelling in *sukkot*" is to be a re-enactment or a commemoration of the exodus. R. Eliezer supported the former while R. Akiba argued for the latter. Akiba's argument is that *sukkot* are not built in the desert; they are built in agricultural fields for the protection of the workers and their animals. They're constructed of the sort of materials one would expect to find in an agricultural setting—tree branches, wood, straw, etc. Such materials are not found in the desert.

Akiba also sees the statement that God "caused the children of Israel to dwell in *sukkot*" did not mean that "the Israelites built *sukkot* and dwelled in them." And if God provided the *sukkot*, then they likely were not material structures but metaphorical shelters. If these "booths" were just simple structures made of ordinary materials, why make them into a religious institution? For the answer, let's look at how the word *sukkah* is used elsewhere in the *Tanakh*.



And God will create over all Mount Zion ... a cloud ... (which) shall serve as a *sukkah* for shade from heat by day and for shelter and protection against storm and rain (Isa. 4:5-6).

He made darkness His screen; dark thunder-heads, dense clouds of the sky were His *sukkah* round about him (Ps. 18:11-12).

Can one, indeed, contemplate the expanse of clouds, the thunderings from His *sukkah*? (Job 36:29)

Akiba was aware of the *Tanakh's* association between "cloud" and "*sukkah*," and also that while the exodus narrative never mentions *sukkot*, it is replete with references to clouds—the pillar of cloud that guided the Israelites in the desert; the cloud from which God speaks to Moses; the cloud above the tent of meeting where God appears—there are many references to these clouds in the last four books of the Torah. And where does the pillar of cloud first appear to the Israelites? It's at a place called—Sukkot!

And they journeyed from Sukkot and they camped at Ethom, in the edge of the wilderness and the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them in their way, and by night in a pillar of fire, to give light to them.... (Ex. 13:20-21)

Akiba's interpretation is based upon viewing the *sukkot* of Leviticus 23 as the metaphorical shelter of God's *sukkah*, the sheltering cloud that accompanied the Israelites during their trek. So the commandment to "dwell in *sukkot*" during the holiday is not a physical re-enactment of the Israelites' desert travels but a commemoration of that period.

When did the custom of dwelling in *sukkot* as a matter of ritual law begin to be observed? Unlike most other such rituals, we actually might be able to date when the law of dwelling in *sukkot* began. After the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they celebrated Sukkot by making and dwelling in *sukkot*. Nehemiah reported of this practice, "the Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua" (Neh. 8:17). Since the book of Joshua is silent on the matter of dwelling in *sukkot*, we can safely assume that this *mitzvah* had its origins during the return from exile.

- **Sukkot is really two holidays that are celebrated concurrently.**



Startling, right? Actually, if you carefully read Exodus 23:16 and then Leviticus 23:43 and note the names of the holiday, you'll notice that it's referred to as *chag ha-asif*, a "feast of ingathering" in Exodus and *chag ha-sukkot*, a "feast of booths" in Leviticus. Leviticus goes on to state that the holiday is to be celebrated for seven days, provides for an *atzeret*, a day of assembly on the eighth day, and then specifies certain sacrificial procedures. But this doesn't end the discussion of the topic. With verse 39, the text goes on to call for a *chag Adonai*, a "feast of the Lord," and seemingly repeats much of verses 34 to 38. There appear to be two different holidays being described: an agricultural festival, *asif*, celebrated using the four species (Lev. 23:40), and a historical commemoration, *sukkot*, celebrated by living in booths (Lev. 23:42). The

duplication, and the restatement of the festivals' dates, serve to emphasize that the historical commemoration does not replace or supercede the agricultural celebration, but actually coexists with it, giving the festival a new additional purpose. Actually, this might be one of the major reasons for the importance of this festival—it really celebrated two holidays.

Another reason for its importance could be related to the time of the year of its celebration. Apparently everyone came to Jerusalem on Sukkot to celebrate; this was, after all, one of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals. The other two are Pesach and Shavuot, but during the seasons when these are observed, farmers were still quite busy working their land; it would have been very difficult to spare the time to travel to Jerusalem in the spring or early summer. But in the fall, after the fall harvest, there would have been plenty of time to get away for Sukkot to celebrate, and they did indeed celebrate.

- **In addition to its religious significance, Sukkot has historical and ethical components.**

Of course the story of the exodus, the 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, and the use of *sukkot* for shelter while in the desert is probably closer to a national mythology than an actual history. But an association of Sukkot with actual historical events is suggested in the Bible: the dedication of both of the Temples is said to have taken place during the Sukkot holiday. The historical association of Sukkot with the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees after their recapture of Jerusalem is well documented.

The ethical components of Sukkot have to do with the holiday's theme of food and shelter. The temporary shelter of the *sukkah* is a reminder to us of the homeless, and the plentifulness of the harvest season reminds us of those who are hungry. The flimsiness of the *sukkah* also reminds us of the fragility of the earth's ecosystem and the need to protect our environment. And the commemoration of the Israelites' travels through the desert reminds us of the world's refugees who are fleeing danger to seek safety in remote lands. Sukkot also has a custom of inviting guests into the *sukkah*; the guests are ideally those who are unable to fulfill the *mitzvah* of living in the *sukkah*. We traditionally invite into our *sukkot* special guests, *ushpizim*—"guests" in Aramaic—the leading biblical figures in Jewish development. More on Sukkot guests later.

- **The *mitzvot* of Sukkot.**

There are three *mitzvot* specifically associated with Sukkot: dwelling in the *sukkah*, taking up the four species, and rejoicing in the holiday. Of these *mitzvot*, the first is totally unique and stands out among all of the 613 *mitzvot*: "you shall dwell in *sukkot* seven days..." (Lev. 23:42). This is a unique *mitzvah* because nothing more is required of the person than just being in a place. To fulfill the *mitzvah*, one simply enters the *sukkah* and remains, living in the space as if it were one's home. You really don't need to do anything else. For the seven days of the holiday, one is totally surrounded by the *mitzvah*.



This idea was expressed in a discussion involving two nineteenth-century Chassidic rabbis, Rabbi Yitzchak Kalish of Vorki, the Vorker Rebbe, and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of

Kotzk, the Kotzker Rebbe. The Vorker observed to the Kotzker that he preferred the *mitzvah* of dwelling in the *sukkah* to that of the four species, because when he puts down the four species, he no longer holds their sanctity, whereas in the *sukkah*, the sanctity holds him and surrounds him.

The rabbis had no guidance from the Torah about how to build a *kosher sukkah*, so matters of height, area, construction, placement, and even what actually constituted "living in a *sukkah*" had to be debated and codified. An example of the result of one such debate may be found in a *mishnah* that relates how one such law was determined.

If a man's head and the greater part of his body were within the *sukkah* and his table of food were within the house, [this outside of the *sukkah*] Beit Shammai declared such a meal on Sukkot to be invalid and Beit Hillel declared it valid.... Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: "Was there not an incident wherein the elders of Beit Shammai and elders of Beit Hillel went to visit R. Yochanan the son of the Hurani, and they found him sitting with his head and the greater part of his body in a *sukkah*, and the table of food inside the house, and they did not make any comment about it. Did this not imply that the Academy of Shammai had acquiesced in this case to the Academy of Hillel?" Beit Shammai said to them: "Here [specifically] is the proof [to our position]." In actuality the elders of Beit Shammai did say to R. Yochanan, "If it is in such a way that you always perform [the *mitzvah* of *sukkah*], then you never [successfully] performed the commandment in your life-time" (b. *Sukkah* 2:7)

Thus Beit Shammai claimed that both the table of food and the person making the meal both must be inside the *sukkah*. From this *mishnah* we see that this was one of the (rare) cases where Beit Shammai prevailed over Beit Hillel!

What constitutes a valid *sukkah*? The rabbis eventually came up with these rules:



- ◆ a *sukkah* must be a temporary structure, but must be able to remain standing during the festival and be able to withstand normal gusts of wind.
 - ◆ it must have at least three walls, two of which must be complete
 - ◆ it may be free-standing, or may include up to two sides of an adjacent building as its walls
 - ◆ the walls may be made of any material that will not blow away in the wind
 - ◆ it must be built under an open sky, not in a building or under a tree
 - ◆ the roof covering, *s'khakh*, must be of plant material in its natural state that is no longer connected to the ground (i.e., no vines, grape arbors, etc.)
- ◆ the *s'khakh* must provide more shade inside the *sukkah* than it allows sunshine during the day, but stars should be visible through it at night
 - ◆ there is no maximum size for a *sukkah*, but the structure must be taller than about 30 inches and the floor area must be greater than approximately two feet square
 - ◆ there is a maximum height, about 30 feet from the floor to the *s'khakh*—because one must be able to see the *s'khakh*, and if the walls were too high, any shade would come from the walls rather than the *s'khakh*.

"Dwelling in a *sukkah*," according to *halakhah*, means to live there in the same way as one lives in his home during the rest of the year. According to the *Shulchan Aruch*, one must eat every regular meal and sleep in the *sukkah* for all the days of the festival (*Orach Chaim* 639:2). It was recognized that not everyone would be able to fully comply with the *mitzvah* to dwell in the *sukkah* for the seven-day festival, so *halakhah* specified that the absolute minimum number of meals that a person is obligated to eat in a *sukkah* is one, on the first night of the holiday (and, in the diaspora, a second meal on the second night). During the rest of the festival, one may eat "snacks" that are not required to be eaten in a *sukkah* (*Orach Chaim* 639:3). However, if living in the *sukkah* causes discomfort, perhaps as a result of rain or cold weather, one is exempt from the *mitzvah*—again, because one dwells in the *sukkah* in the same way as one lives in his home, and if living in the home caused significant discomfort, one would not necessarily stay (b. *Sukkot* 26a). This is the only instance where a *mitzvah* may be set aside for issues of comfort, and is done because if the person is uncomfortable and miserable, he loses his presence of mind and will not be able to appreciate the joy of the *mitzvah*. The *Shulchan Aruch* states this quite plainly, "One who is exempt from remaining in the *sukkah* and does not leave is called an ignoramus, will obtain no reward for staying there, and is not permitted to say the benediction."

Besides the *mitzvah* of the four species, covered next, the third holiday *mitzvah* is that of rejoicing in the holiday. No other holiday mentioned in the *Tanakh* has as many references to its celebration with joyfulness as Sukkot; in fact, it is referred to as *zeman simchateinu*, "season of our rejoicing" in Deuteronomy 16:14.

- **The *Arba'ah Minim*, the "Four Species."**

The four species are also known as the "*lulav* and *etrog*," but the *lulav* is actually a composite object that consists of three different plants. The *lulav* itself is a branch or frond from a date palm. It is placed into a woven-reed holder that contains branches from two other plants, three branches from the *hadas* (myrtle) tree and two branches from the *aravah* (willow) tree. Where do we find the commandment for the four species?



On the first day you shall take the *pri etz hadar* (fruit of beautiful trees), branches of palm trees, boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days (Lev. 23:40).

From this description, we can identify two of the four species—the palm and willow. Where did the other two come from? The source, apparently, was oral tradition, since the use of the four species was known to be ancient even from the perspective of Talmudic times. The custom of using the four species was commented on by Nehemiah, where he reported that the people "go out to the mountains and bring branches of olive, and branches of wild olive, and branches of myrtle, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees to make booths" (Neh. 8:14-15). Nehemiah considers the myrtle and "thick trees" to be different; this is noted in the Talmud with the explanation that these represent different species of myrtle and what Nehemiah calls "myrtle" is really a "wild myrtle," and not the kind used in the four species. The Talmud, in *Sukkot* 23b, identifies "thick trees" as the *hadas* tree, based on a characteristic of its leaf

growth.

Identifying the last of the four was done very creatively. What is an *etz hadar*, a beautiful/pleasant/goodly tree? One sage held that it meant that "the fruit and the tree on which it grows are equally pleasant. What fruit tastes like the tree? It is the *etrog*" (*Sukkot* 35a). Since they already knew that the fourth species was the *etrog*, or citron, they didn't spend much additional time trying to make the biblical description fit the *etrog*. Nachmonides, in discussing the *etrog* in his Torah commentary, points this out and says that the talmudic commentary merely confirms what was already known. He goes on to mention that the word *etrog* is Aramaic and is a literal translation of the Hebrew word *hadar*, both meaning "pleasant" (*Commentary on Vayikra* 23:40).

Why were the four species chosen to be used in rituals during the Sukkot holiday? They certainly aren't examples of anything harvested, except possibly the *etrog*, but the *etrogs* of early biblical times had heavy rinds and little pulp. The reason isn't known, but one commentator points to the relationship of Sukkot to rain and water, and as both the myrtle and willow are associated with brooks, and the date palm with plentiful harvests (the "honey" in the phrase "land of milk and honey" was date honey), the two tree branches could have been symbolic of plentiful water. The willow itself is particularly representative of water. Willows are found in areas of plentiful water; they need large quantities of water to grow. However, they are useless plants, they consume large quantities of water to support their growth, but have no fruit nor other useful product. The willow thus can be viewed as a symbol for an over-abundance of water. So the inclusion of the willow in the four species speaks to a desire for the blessing for plentiful water. How the *etrog* fits in is a mystery. Perhaps worshipers simply needed a hardy fruit that could stand repeated handling over the seven-day holiday; the *etrog* is capable of withstanding some pretty rough handling, and will last the entire holiday period without spoiling. Although we don't know the rationale for the original choice of the four species, there's ample information about the symbolic and homiletic meanings attached to them by later rabbinic commentators.

- ◆ The *etrog* is shaped like the heart, representing the hope for divine forgiveness for the impure desires of the heart.
- ◆ The *lulav* is like a person's backbone, a reminder of the ideal posture for prayer, standing erect before God.
- ◆ The leaves of the *hadas* are shaped like an eye, recalling that one must resist the temptations one sees daily and expressing the desire for divine forgiveness for envy and greed.
- ◆ The leaves of the *aravah* are shaped like lips, reminding one to use restraint in speech so as not to engage in idle talk and falsehoods.

The four species are said to represent different kinds of people.

- ◆ The *etrog* has both aroma and taste, and is likened to a person who is knowledgeable in the law and performs good deeds.
- ◆ The *lulav* has no aroma but does have taste, represents one who is versed in scholarship but seldom performs good deeds.
- ◆ The *hadas* has aroma but no taste, symbolizes a person who has little Torah knowledge

but performs good deeds.

- ◆ The *aravah* has neither taste nor aroma, and represents one who lacks both knowledge and good deeds. (*Lev. Rabbah* 30:12)



The *etrog* is the subject of many *midrashim*. One *midrash* even claims that the fruit that Eve offered Adam to eat in the Garden of Eden was the *etrog*.

What is that tree whence Adam and Eve ate? Aba of Acre says: "Go forth, then, and see what tree it is that we may eat its woody stalk as its fruit, and you will find none other than the *etrog*." (*Gen. Rabbah* 15:7)

According to *halakhah*, each worshiper must use his or her own *lulav* and *etrog* set, based upon an interpretation of the verse in Leviticus. Using a borrowed set is not strictly valid, but a person may make a "gift" of their set to another person to use, and this satisfies the requirement for using one's own set. However, since children cannot legally transfer ownership to others, they should be given the set to use after the last adult.

- **Customs and rituals of the Sukkot holiday period.**

Of course the most well known are the ones concerning the *sukkah* and the four species, but there are a number of other customs whose origin and purpose might be more obscure.

Hosha'not. During the morning service on each day of Sukkot, prayers that begin with the words *hosha na*, "save us," are recited, which is the source of the name of this ritual. This supplication derives from Psalm 118:25 (*Ana, Adonay, hoshi'a na ...*, "We beseech you, O Lord, save us ..."), which is also recited, along with special verses for each day of Sukkot, as worshipers make one *hakafah*, "circuit," of the sanctuary carrying their *lulavim* and *etrogim* while a *sefer Torah* is held at the *bimah*. This ceremony recalls the procession conducted in the Temple, where the altar was circled. In the synagogue, the Torah replaces the altar. There was no procession in the Temple on Shabbat, and the *lulav* and *etrog* are not carried on Shabbat, so while the verses are recited on Shabbat, there is no procession in the synagogue.

Megillat Kohelet. On the Shabbat that occurs during Sukkot, one of the five *megillot* (scrolls) of *Ketuvim* (the last section of the *Tanakh*), *Megillat Kohelet*, is read in the service. *Kohelet*, the book of Ecclesiastes, discusses the place of humankind in the universe and the ultimate meaning of existence. This book was chosen because its themes complement the nature of the *sukkah*: as the physical world can be transitory and fleeting, so is the *sukkah*; and the purpose of life is enhanced through the love of God and by observing the *mitzvot*, and one demonstrates this commitment by observing the *mitzvah* of the *sukkah*.

Water Libation Ceremony. During Temple times, every morning during the festival (except Shabbat) was marked by a unique ceremony called the *Nisukh haMayim* (literally, "pouring of the water"), the "Water Libation Ceremony." In discussing this ceremony, the Talmud points out that Sukkot was the time of the year that God judges the world for rainfall, so this ceremony was intended to invoke God's blessing for rain during the winter season. The source for the water used in the ceremony was the Pool of Siloam, near the Temple, and is the likely origin of

the verse in Isaiah, "And you shall draw waters with joy from the wells of salvation" (Isa. 12:3).

On the evenings preceding the Water Libation Ceremony, thousands would gather at the Temple for the celebration called the *Simchat Beit haSho'eivah* (Rejoicing at the Place of Water-Drawing), where worshipers would dance with torches and sing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God, while being accompanied by the musical instruments played by the Levites. The festivities frequently lasted all night, culminating with the escorting of the priests to the Pool of Siloam to draw the water for that morning's ceremony. According to the *Mishnah*, "He who has not seen the rejoicing at the Place of Water-Drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life" (b. *Sukkah* 51a).

These ceremonies are commemorated by a modern celebration held in some communities. The *Simchat Beit haSho'eivah* is now observed in events combining music, dancing, and refreshments served in the *sukkah*. The festivities usually begin late in the evening and can last long into the night.

Welcoming guests. In a tradition established by the kabbalists in the 16th century that was based on the *Zohar*, during each day of the holiday, Jews invite seven symbolic guests (known as *ushpizin* in Aramaic) to celebrate the festival with them in the *sukkah*. The traditional *ushpizin* are the "Seven Shepherds of Israel," Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David. According to tradition, on each night of the festival a different spiritual guest enters the *sukkah* first, followed by the remaining six. Festival prayerbooks contain the special prayers that are used for welcoming them to the *sukkah*; in their traditional order of entry. Each of the *ushpizin* represents a unique perspective on Jewish observance; for example, Abraham represents the *mitzvah* of *hakhnasat orekhim*, hospitality to guests. Sephardim often set aside a special chair in the *sukkah* laden with holy books for the *ushpizin*.



- **How many holidays does Sukkot really consist of, anyway?**

Hoshanah Rabbah. Ask a simple question, get a complicated answer. In biblical times, Sukkot was celebrated for seven days, and the seventh day was marked by a unique ceremony involving *hosha'not* with the four species and bunches of willow branches. This day became known as Hoshanah Rabbah, "the Great Supplication," because instead of one single *hakafah*, or circuit, worshipers make seven *hakafot* of the sanctuary with their *lulavim* and *etrogim*, and then a bundle of five *aravah* branches is taken and beaten against the ground, accompanied by a series of liturgical verses. This recalls the *aravah* ceremony of the Temple in Jerusalem, when the altar was heaped with willow branches in a symbolic prayer for plentiful rain, and worshipers paraded around the altar reciting the *hosha'not* verses. Beating of the willow branches stripped the leaves from the branches, another representation of a ritual intercession for rain. Since this day was the close of the entire festival period that began with Rosh Hashanah, this day was the absolutely final opportunity to ask God for forgiveness, and, indeed, tradition says that God doesn't close the Book of Life until Hoshanah Rabbah. Performing this ceremony was considered to be so important that when the calendar calculation rules were finally codified in the fourth century CE, a rule was established that Hoshanah Rabbah could never fall on a Shabbat (since

the prohibition against carrying would apply).

Shemini Atzeret. Sukkot ends after seven days. But the Torah added an additional holiday at the end of the Sukkot festival, Shemini Atzeret, meaning "eighth day of assembly." This holiday is actually not part of Sukkot itself, and the *lulav* and *sukkah* are not used, but since in the diaspora the celebration of Sukkot is lengthened to eight days, Shemini Atzeret became incorporated into Sukkot, and some communities in the diaspora have the custom to continue to eat in the *sukkah* on Shemini Atzeret. Actually, the holiday overlap occurs on the first day of Shemini Atzeret, since in the diaspora this holiday is also lengthened by one day. The source for the holiday is found in the verse, "On the eighth day you shall hold an assembly; you shall not work at your occupations" (Num. 29:35). One special prayer that is added to the liturgy on this holiday is *tefilat geshem*, the prayer for rain, since this holiday marked the end of the fall growing season, and rain during the winter months was essential to assure good crop yields in the next harvests. It's likely that the prayer for rain wasn't added to the ceremonies until after Sukkot was over because no one wanted to sit in a *sukkah* in the rain!

There is another holiday in the holiday cycle that is called "*Atzeret*": this name is used in the Talmud for Shavuot, recognizing certain similarities between these two holidays. According to the rabbis, one possible meaning for *atzeret* could be "remain with Me [God] for another day," implying that *atzeret* represents a completion or a final part of a festival; thus Shemini Atzeret could be seen as the conclusion of the festival of Sukkot just as Shavuot could be viewed as the conclusion of the festival of Pesach.

Simchat Torah. There's yet another holiday added at this time: it's Simchat Torah, which means "rejoicing in the Law." This holiday was added some time during or after the third century CE, when the yearly Torah-reading cycle was formally fixed. Simchat Torah in Israel is celebrated concurrently with Shemini Atzeret (also by many Reform communities), but in the diaspora, Conservative and Orthodox communities celebrate it on the second day of Shemini Atzeret. Simchat Torah celebrates the conclusion and recommencing of the yearly Torah-reading cycle and has its own collection of customs and rituals.

So the answer to the question posed above is: In Israel (and for most Reform communities), Sukkot is a seven-day holiday that is followed by a single holiday on the eighth day on which both Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated. In the diaspora, Sukkot is eight days long; on the eighth and ninth days Shemini Atzeret is celebrated, and Simchat Torah is celebrated on the ninth day.





Simchat Torah

Rejoicing in the Law



- Unlike every other holiday of the year, Simchat Torah is a holiday that has no historical, cultic, or agricultural basis. All the other holidays celebrate a harvest (Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot), a historical event (Chanukah, Purim, Pesach, the fast days), or a religious observance (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret). Simchat Torah as a holiday evolved out of the events that marked the end of the Torah-reading cycle. Another oddity: all of the festivals are marked with a Torah or *haftarah* reading that has some connection to its biblical roots. The Simchat Torah readings have no connection to any biblical event or observance; the Torah readings simply comprise the ending and the beginning of the Torah; the *maftir* is the regular festival *maftir* portion; and the *haftarah* is taken from the first chapter of the book of Joshua.
- The custom of reading the Torah publicly, which began after the return from Babylonian exile, did not become a fixed ritual until some time after the third century CE, so there was no particular date when the entire Torah's reading was completed and begun anew. The custom of marking the reading of the end of Deuteronomy with a celebration was known in Babylon during the gaonic period (ca. 590-1000 CE), when the reading of the Torah was fixed on a one-year cycle, but these celebrations were not the origin of the Simchat Torah holiday.

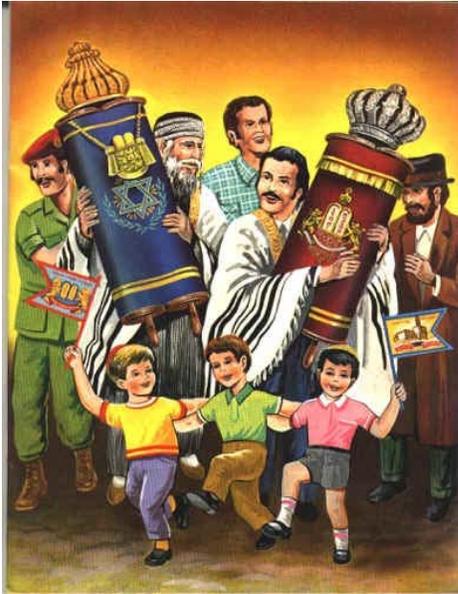


In Babylon during the gaonic period, the Torah had been divided into 54 *parashiot*, "reading portions," with one (or two during the shorter non-leap years) to be read each Shabbat during the year. The day that the last portion of Deuteronomy was read was called *Yom haBrakha* after the name of the *parashah*, *v'Zot haBrakha*. Some communities, particularly those in northern Africa, called it *Yom haSiyyum*, the "Day of Completion," while in Spain it didn't have any name in particular, it was just referred to as the last *yom tov* of *Chag*.

During this period in Israel, the Torah was read on a three- to three-and-a-half year cycle, not necessarily finishing at the same time for each cycle. Descriptions survive from Israel that tell of celebratory meals following the completion of reading cycles, but these too were not equivalent to the later Simchat Torah observance. The Talmud doesn't make any special mention of celebrations marking the ending of the Torah reading cycle; it only regards the day as an extension of Shemini Atzeret.

- The completion of the Torah reading cycle was just that: a completion. The aliyah for the final portion of Deuteronomy became known as the *chatam Torah*, the "sealer of the Torah." In an interesting corruption of this term, as Simchat Torah evolved this *aliyah* came to be called *chatan Torah*, which means "bridegroom of the Torah." The custom of reading the first few verses of Genesis after the Deuteronomy reading is complete also began during the gaonic period; the person honored with this *aliyah* is called *chatan Bereshit* (*kallat Bereshit*, "bride of Genesis," in some communities). Adding this reading after the Torah reading cycle was ended was done to symbolize that the reading of the Torah is never completed.

- *Haftarah* (from the Hebrew root *pey-tet-resh*, "to conclude") readings were assigned to each Torah reading of the 54 *parshiyot* fairly early in the history of the beginnings of public Torah readings, but little is known of the actual origin of this custom. One theory holds that the readings were established in the third century BCE to differentiate Jewish practice from that of the Samaritans, who believed that only the Torah, and not the Prophets, were holy works. Another points to the period when Israel was under the domination of the hellenistic Syrians in the second century BCE, who forbade the teaching of Torah, so readings from the prophetic writings were substituted. It is well documented that *haftarah* readings were firmly established in the liturgy by 100 CE, and references to this practice appear in the Christian Bible. The *haftarah* of Simchat Torah is unique in that it is the latest change to the Torah-reading liturgy, occurring hundreds of years after the *haftarah* readings were established. The original *haftarah* assigned to this *parashah* was from 1 Kings chapter 8, which told of Solomon's dedication of the Temple on Sukkot, but in the ninth century Rav Amram Gaon, head of the Sura academy in Babylon, wrote that the *haftarah* used for the holiday was from chapter 1 of the book of Joshua; this reading has been the custom ever since.



- Development of the Simchat Torah celebration into its modern form seems to have occurred slowly, over the course of several centuries. Until the eleventh century the holiday continued to be known as the second day of Shemini Atzeret or even, as in Spain, as the ninth day of Sukkot. It appears that the first use of the holiday name of "Simchat Torah" occurred in Spain some time during the late eleventh century.
- Practice of Simchat Torah prior to the fifteenth century seems to have been limited to very few added customs. Chief among these, reported in the *Kol Bo*, a compendium of Jewish law thought to have been published during the middle of the fifteenth century, were collective group *aliyot* and a ceremony where all of the *sifre Torah* were removed from the ark and readings celebrating Moses and "those who had contributed to the honor of the Torah, the living and the dead," were declaimed. From this description, there wasn't much "*simchat*" involved.
- Historical records are silent about the holiday until the sixteenth century, when a number of elaborate ceremonies began to be attached to the holiday. The sixteenth century saw a dramatic rise in Jewish mysticism, and the town of Safed in Ottoman Palestine was the epicenter of the movement, of which a school established by Rabbi Isaac Luria, the "Ari," was in

the forefront. The mystics of Safed developed many ritual practices, including the *tikkun leil Shavuot*, the night-long Shavuot text-study session, and their contribution to the celebration of Simchat Torah appears to be the *hakafot*.

The custom of performing the *hakafot*, the circuits of worshipers around the sanctuary, was an adaptation of the custom of the Hoshanah Rabbah *hakafot*, where the *bimah* was circled seven times by worshipers with their *lulavim* and bunches of *aravot* branches. While the *hakafot* on Hoshanah Rabbah circled the *bimah* where the Torah remained stationary, for Simchat Torah the Torah, and sometimes all the *sifrei Torah*, joined the procession. The earliest Simchat Torah *hakafot* involved anywhere from one to seven circuits. This custom is unknown prior to the late sixteenth century, and seems to have remained a local custom in Palestine for almost one hundred years.

By 1660, letters, books, and visitors to Palestine had brought descriptions of the Simchat Torah celebrations of Palestine to the Jews of Europe, from Russia to Spain. Also, this period was an emotionally charged one, marked by the appearance of a Jew named Sabbatai Zevi, who claimed to be the messiah. Although it may be a coincidence, the spread of the new Simchat Torah customs seemed to accompany the messianic fervor many communities showed in favor of Zevi, and by the end of the seventeenth century, the nature of Simchat Torah had completely changed throughout Europe. The way the holiday had now become celebrated—as another Purim, in fact, complete with frivolity, public intoxication, and rowdiness, hallmarks of Sabbatian-inspired events, suggests the influence of Zevi's followers.



- There are some customs on Simchat Torah that appear to defy *halakhah*.
 - ◆ Collective *aliyot*. This is the only time that collective *aliyot* are permitted—in fact, are mandated. The idea is that every worshiper should have an *aliyah* on this holiday, and a large *tallit* is held over the group to symbolize the unity of the Jewish people.
 - ◆ *Aliyot* by children. Before their *b'nei mitzvah*, children are not given *aliyot*. On Simchat Torah, however, there is a special *aliyah*, *kol ha-na'arim*, "all the children," when the children gather around the *bimah* and a large *tallit* is spread over them while they recite the blessings.
 - ◆ Torah reading at night. According to *halakhah*, the Torah is not read at night. However, it's read on *erev* Simchat Torah in most communities.
 - ◆ What's read from the Torah on *erev* Simchat Torah? It could be anything (except the last verses of Deuteronomy). Customs vary, and in some synagogues the section that the Torah is open to, whatever it happens to be, is read. Note that many synagogues have a number of *sifrei Torah*, and every one of them would not necessarily be rolled to the current *parashah*.
 - ◆ Dancing with the *sifrei Torah*. Sometimes the dancing and parading spills out into the street.
 - ◆ Unrolling the Torah. Normally *halakhah* doesn't permit the exposing of more than three columns of the Torah for public viewing, a kind of "modesty" issue. On Simchat Torah some celebrations may involve unrolling the scroll to encircle the entire room.

- ◆ Decorum is a non-starter. In some communities, particularly traditional ones, the frivolity at Simchat Torah even outdoes Purim. Throwing candy and fruit at the Torah reader? Check. During Torah reading? Check. Practical jokes on the Torah reader and others on the *bimah*? Check. There were even some changes made to the order of the liturgy to accommodate some of the shenanigans.
 - ◆ Eating and drinking in the sanctuary. Yes, even when the Torah was being read.
 - ◆ Playing music on *yom tov* in the sanctuary. This is ordinarily forbidden, but on Simchat Torah many rules are suspended. After all, we're supposed to "rejoice"!
- Simchat Torah has many other intriguing and unique customs, past and present. Here are several, excerpted from *Toldot Chag Simchat Torah* by Avraham Ya'ari.

- ◆ In Worms, the *hakafot* used to take place around bonfires. In many seventeenth century Ashkenazi communities, particularly in Poland and the Balkans, there were games and rituals which involved fire, including jumping over fires and setting off firecrackers.
- ◆ Fire seemed to play an important role in the holiday. During the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries in Israel, worshipers would do their *hakafot* holding lit candles or even *havdalah* candles; this custom spread to other countries too. And children would make fires to burn the *s'khakh* from Sukkot.
- ◆ In a highly controversial custom, a small number of communities in Europe would engage non-Jews (as well as Jews in certain places) to accompany singing with instruments. In Sarajevo, the *hakafot* were accompanied by drums.

- ◆ In the synagogue, men and women worshiped separately; a screen called the *mechitzah* divided the men's and women's sections, or the women's section was in a balcony of the shul. But in many communities on Simchat Torah, the barriers came down, and women took part in the festivities too. Once the *hakafot* began, in many shuls women were allowed to watch, even in communities such as Yemen, where women generally did not come to shul at all. In Ukraine, women were actually allowed into the men's section; in Lithuania, women and girls came into the synagogue to kiss the *sifrei Torah*; in Baghdad, each shul used to lay out all of its *sifrei Torah* and both the men and the women used to go from shul to shul kissing each Torah.

- ◆ Women pretty much got left out when it came to ritual observances. But on Simchat Torah, communities allowed or even encouraged women to become involved—but not in the actual rituals of the holiday. Some of the things women did for the holiday included decorating the *sifrei Torah* after *mincha* on Shemini Atzeret in preparation for the holiday; throwing candy at the *chatan Torah* and *chatan Bereshit*, honoring the wives of the *chatan Torah* and *Bereshit* as "*kallot Torah*," "brides of the Torah"; and even auctioning off the women's *mitzvot* for the rest of the year. One of those *mitzvot* was—sweeping the shul's floor.
- ◆ Simchat Torah has been compared with Purim, but its celebration, it seems, has a history of being even rowdier. For example, the *birkhat kohanim*, the priestly blessing, was moved from the *musaf* (afternoon) service to *shacharit* (morning) so that the *kohanim* would not be drunk when they said it. Some synagogues canceled the blessing altogether. Parodies of religious songs were common, and in some communities, a "Purim rabbi," typically a yeshiva student, would be appointed to manage the services. Good-natured practical jokes, like tying people's



tallitot together, splashing water on the service leader when he reads the prayer for rain during the *amidah*, and similar pranks, if not widespread, are well known.

- ◆ We can get some idea of a seventeenth century Simchat Torah service from a non-Jewish source: Samuel Pepys, the famous English diarist, described visiting a synagogue in 1663 in London in one of his entries. Of course he had no idea that what he was witnessing was not typical, but his horrified reaction is some indication of just how raucous the event must have been.

Thence home and after dinner my wife and I, by Mr. Rawlinson's conduct, to the Jewish Synagogue: where the men and boys in their vayles [tallitot], and the women behind a lattice out of sight; and some things stand up, which I believe is their Law, in a press [aron] to which all coming in do bow; and at the putting on their vayles do say something, to which others that hear him do cry Amen, and the party do kiss his vayle. Their service all in a singing way, and in Hebrew. And anon their Laws that they take out of the press are carried by several men, four or five several burthens in all, and they do relieve one another; and whether it is that every one desires to have the carrying of it, I cannot tell, thus they carried it round about the room while such a service is singing. And in the end they had a prayer for the King, which they pronounced his name in Portugall; but the prayer, like the rest, in Hebrew. But, Lord! to see the disorder, laughing, sporting, and no attention, but confusion in all their service, more like brutes than people knowing the true God, would make a man forswear ever seeing them more and indeed I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this. Away thence with my mind strongly disturbed with them, by coach and set down my wife in Westminster Hall, and I to White Hall....

- Simchat Torah is the only holiday that is not celebrated at the same time everywhere in the world—and even on different dates by different denominations! In Israel, the holiday is celebrated concurrently with Shemini Atzeret on 22 Tishrei. In the diaspora, where Shemini Atzeret is two days, Simchat Torah is celebrated on the second day, 23 Tishrei. To make matters more complex, many Reform and liberal Jewish communities in the diaspora only celebrate one day of Shemini Atzeret, and some of these follow Israel's calendar, celebrating Simchat Torah on 22 Tishrei. Fitting, isn't it—that a holiday that's celebrated with such abandon can't be pinned down to a specific date!

