



**Jewish Secular Community**  
of Cleveland

# **SUKKOS / SUKKOT CELEBRATION**

Zoom Edition

## READER 1

Welcome to our celebration. Today's reading will focus on the history, social and ethical aspects of Sukkot. We begin with a brief history of this holiday. *Succos* (in Yiddish) or *Sukkot* (in Hebrew) is our Jewish harvest festival, as suggested by its original name – *Hag Ha-asiph* or The Festival of the Ingathering. It is also known as The Festival of Booths or Tabernacles – referring to the succah or hut where Jewish farmers in ancient Israel slept during the harvest season. They slept in the succah so they could remain close to the fields and get their work done faster.

Along with Passover and Shvuot, Sukkot is one of the three great pilgrimage holidays. In ancient Israel, on these holidays, hundreds of thousands of Jews would flock to the Temple in Jerusalem, playing music, to bring food for the priests and bring animals for ritual sacrifice.

Like these other two holidays, Sukkot is associated with a particular book of the Bible. Passover with the Song of Songs – beautiful love poetry, Shvuot with the Book of Ruth – a warmhearted story about welcoming non-Jews into the Jewish community, and Sukkot with Ecclesiastes. Unlike the rest of the Bible, which emphasizes the role of God in human affairs, Ecclesiastes teaches that life is basically what you make it.

During the period of the Second Temple, beginning in the 6th century BCE, the priests introduced a national theme to the holiday. They claimed that it commemorated the Hebrews' wandering in the desert on their way from Egypt to the promised land of Israel. The succah, they said, was the temporary shelter that our ancestors lived in during this journey. Of course, it would be impossible to find enough wood in the desert to build huts for thousands of people. Tents made of animal skins are what desert travelers in ancient times used for shelter

It is of real historical significance that the Pilgrims recognized Sukkot as the basis for Thanksgiving. Governor Bradford proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day in the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts in 1621. He acknowledged the Pilgrims' debt to the Jewish Bible, but in thanking God, he forgot to show proper gratitude toward the Indians whose generosity kept the Pilgrims alive during their first winter in the New World.

## **READER 2**

**Next, we will examine the social significance of this holiday.**

The succah itself is made with branches of wood and decorated with fruit. The roof should be left partially open so that the sky and stars are visible. As we celebrate Sukkot, we honor the farmers who grow our food. We also pose some difficult questions. Why are farm workers in our own country and elsewhere so badly treated? And why, with food so abundant, are there so many hungry people in the world?

Sukkot is a holiday that draws us to nature. Tu B'Shvat is another. Let us think about how best to protect the environment. Global warming, acid rain, oil spills, nuclear waste, toxic chemicals, ozone depletion, destruction of homes, crops and land by raging fire – all of these and more threaten the future of our planet. Like all living things, we are dependent on nature, but like no other, we have the capacity to dramatically affect our environment. The power to destroy – or to repair – is in our hands. Here is what Jewish traditional literature says on the subject:

*In the hour when the Holy One created the first man, he took him and let him pass before all the growing things in the Garden of Eden and said to him:*

*See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all this I have created for you.*

*Think upon this and do not corrupt and destroy my world. For if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you.*

*Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28*

And now we listen to (and can sing along in our homes) the Woody Guthrie song that has been called our unofficial national anthem. The famous Okie was not Jewish, but his second wife was – Marjorie Mazia, a dancer, whose mother, Aliza Greenblatt, was a Yiddish poet. While living in Coney Island Brooklyn, during the 1940s, Woody wrote the lyrics to many songs about Jewish holidays and history. They were recently discovered by Woody’s daughter Nora Guthrie and put to music by the Klezmatics, a major klezmer band, in two CDs.

### **THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND**

This land is your land, this land is my land  
From California to the New York island  
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters  
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway  
I saw above me that endless skyway  
I saw below me that golden valley  
This land was made for you and me.

I’ve roamed and rambled and followed my footsteps  
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts  
And all around me, a voice was sounding  
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining and I was strolling  
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling  
As the fog was lifting, a voice was chanting  
This land was made for you and me.

Nobody living can ever stop me  
As I go walking that freedom highway  
Nobody living can make me turn back  
This land is made for me and you.

The temporary, unfinished nature of the succah also reminds us of the plight of migrant workers, the homeless, and people with inferior housing. Because all Jewish men, rich and poor, were required to eat and sleep in the succah for the seven days of Sukkot, two of our greatest philosophers, Philo from 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Alexandria, Egypt and Maimonides from 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain taught that the holiday teaches the principle of human equality. "*Equality*," wrote Philo, was "*the first principle and beginning of justice.*"

### **READER 3**

#### **We conclude by considering Sukkot's ethical aspect.**

Secular Jews find value in the custom of symbolically inviting honored guests called "ushpizin" into the succah. Religious Jews limit themselves to Bible heroes. We are free to choose from a wide range of Jewish and non-Jewish heroes who have struggled to create a better and more beautiful world: social activists, crusaders for women's, civil and human rights, union leaders, writers, poets, great teachers and leaders of the secular humanistic Jewish movement.

There are two traditional symbols of this holiday: the lulav and the esrog. The lulav is a date palm branch tied together with strands of myrtle and willow. The esrog is a citrus fruit, called a citron, similar to the lemon.



Lulav



Esrog

*Let us lift up the lulav to celebrate the bountiful harvest of the Earth,  
the people who tend it and defend it,  
and all those who work to sustain us with bread and with roses.*

As secular humanistic Jews, we wave the lulav in the four directions to affirm our responsibility for tikkun olam – the healing of the world. Jewish tradition provides different explanations of the meaning of the lulav and the esrog:

One is that these represent the first four generations of Jewish men – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – each with different leadership qualities.

Another is that these, because of their different shapes, represent different parts of a person. The palm branch is the backbone – the citron is the heart – the myrtle is the eyes – the willow is the mouth.

There is also an ethical explanation, which is perhaps the most important:

The willow has no fragrance or taste – representing a person who is neither educated nor ethical.

The date palm has no fragrance, but is tasty – representing a person who is educated but unethical.

The myrtle has a fragrance but no taste – representing a person who is uneducated but ethical.

The citron has both fragrance and taste – representing a person who is both educated and ethical.

All these types are found among Jews. The willow, myrtle and palm branch need each other to become whole in the form of the lulav, but the citron can stand alone. This proves that a true mentch must combine learning with decency.

## **READER 1**

**We conclude our celebration with thoughts about the food associated with this holiday.**

There are special dishes served on Sukkot. In Eastern Europe, menus included gefilte fish, chicken soup with *kreplakh* (dumplings), potato kugel and stuffed cabbage. Cholent, a stew made with beef, beans, onions and barley was a favorite, served with a *tsimmes*, a simmering combination of carrots, apples, sugar and cinnamon. Apples and honey continue to be popular during all Jewish fall holidays.

Meals are an integral part of our celebration. Before we end this program, let us remember the needs of our fellow human beings for healthy food and decent shelter. Let us also remember the needs of future generations for clean water, clean air and the enjoyment of nature for both body and spirit.

Thank you all for sharing this celebration. We hope that we meet face-to-face soon.