

Sukkot: The Joy of Ingathering with God

The Jewish life cycle includes three major Fall Feasts: *Rosh Hashanah* (The Head of the Year), *Yom Kippur* (The Day of Atonement), and *Sukkot*. The first two emphasize repentance and redemption. *Sukkot* wraps up the Fall season on a lighter note. God gave the children of Israel the Feast of *Sukkot*, meaning “Weeks.” It is also known as “Tabernacles,” “Indwelling,” or “Ingathering” and is commanded in Leviticus 23 (Lev. 23:33-44). The celebration lasts for seven days in booths (little shelters) plus one “solemn assembly” and includes traditions started in the biblical days that are still in practice today. The early Jewish people called it “The Feast” (1 King 8:2), showing the importance they placed on it.

God asked the Jewish people to build booths once a year to commemorate the wilderness wanderings (v.43). *Sukkot* was also a time for Jewish people to bring an offering to God from the latter or Fall harvest (vv. 36-40). It is reminiscent of our Thanksgiving feast and, as a matter of fact, it is widely believed that the puritans established the first Thanksgiving after the biblical example of *Sukkot*. The emphasis was on remembering God’s provision for His people both during the Egyptian captivity and thereafter.

Based on twelve verses in Leviticus as well as a few other passages (Ex. 23:14-17, Num. 29:12-38, I Kings 12:25-33, Neh. 8:13-18), rabbis developed a series of practices associated with the observance of *Sukkot*. The booth has become one of the central aspects of *Sukkot* in modern days. The rabbis determined that based on the theme of Israel’s wilderness wanderings and God’s provision; the booth should be flimsy, as a temporary dwelling. It should be a structure with one side open and a roof made of intertwined, leafy branches thick enough to protect from the sun but not solid enough to protect from the rain. Families are to share their meals in the *sukkah* (booth) and even sleep there, weather permitting.

Based on Leviticus 23:40, rabbis have developed over three hundred laws regarding what is known today as the “four species.” Each year, families must obtain their own *lulav* and *etrog* (terms not found in the Bible) for the celebration. The *lulav*

literally means “sprout” and refers to the three species: palm, myrtle, and willow. The *etrog* means “one that shines” in Aramaic and is a citrus fruit very similar to a lemon in shape and color, slightly bigger but much more fragrant.

All four species are held (*etrog* in left hand and all other three or *lulav* in right hand) and are waived and shaken all around ones body, atop, under and to all sides symbolizing that God is everywhere.

Additionally, all four species have either fragrance or beauty, both or none. This has come to represent the four kinds of Jewish people with either deeds or knowledge, both or none.

Biblical Perspective. Now, we must go back to the first century BCE and see how *Sukkot* was celebrated then to gain a greater appreciation of God’s meaning behind “The Feats” as well as the messianic implications. At this time, we need to remember that *Sukkot* is the only Fall Feast of the three that required Jewish people to be in Jerusalem for the celebration (Passover and Pentecost being the other two).

Sukkot being a harvest festival and ancient Israel being an agrarian society, much depended on rain for survival. By the time of Messiah, a ceremony known as the Water Drawing Ceremony” was firmly in place in Israel. Levitical priests went down to the pool of Siloam to fetch water and bring it back to the Temple in a processional. The water was poured over the altar as an offering to the God of Israel for Him to provide for rain. A greater meaning is attached to the water libations, as it also represents the *Ruach Hakodesh* (Holy Spirit). The rabbis taught that one day God would pour His Holy Spirit on Israel (Joel 2:28).

This particularly comes to life in the days of *Yeshua* when in John 7:37-39, during the seventh day of *Sukkot*, the Messiah relates the outpouring of the water to Himself and the water of eternal life that He gives. His Jewish audience would in no way miss the connection. A lighting ceremony also took place at the Temple on *Sukkot*, where the priests would light giant golden candlesticks for all to see. This symbolized the *Shechinah* glory of God. *Yeshua* commented at the lighting ceremony that He was the Light of the World (John 8:12) and that those who walk with Him would walk in the light and not in darkness.

Yeshua the Messiah, Who is God in the flesh dwelling with us, is the perfect fulfillment of Tabernacles. Ultimately, *Sukkot* will be fulfilled as we all dwell with Messiah in His future Millennial Kingdom. The prophet Zechariah tells us that we all will be celebrating the Feast in the Kingdom (Zech 14:16-19). Peter, at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36), mistakenly thought *Yeshua* had brought in the Kingdom, and he wanted to build three booths; one each for Messiah, Moses, and Elijah.

The Jewish calendar is not only a reminder of God's "Holy Convocations" for the children of Israel, but it also renders a vivid picture of God's love, grace, and provision for the Jewish people and the rest of mankind. Each and every one of the Levitical feasts points to a specific event in the redemptive career of *Yeshua* the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We worship the living God who is in control of every detail of our lives as He has shown us through the intricate richness of the High Holy Days.