

Sukkot

The Joy of Ingathering with God

The Jewish yearly cycle includes three major fall holidays: *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year), *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement), and *Sukkot*. The first two days emphasize repentance and redemption, and then *Sukkot* concludes the fall season on a lighter note.

Biblical Perspective

God gave the children of Israel the feast of *Sukkot*, meaning “Booths.” It is also known as “Tabernacles,” “Indwelling,” or “Ingathering” and is commanded in Leviticus 23:33-44. The celebration lasts for seven days and includes traditions that began in biblical days and are still in practice today. The early Jewish people called it “The Feast” (1 King 8:2), showing the importance they placed on it.

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

Rabbinic Traditions

Based on the 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*. In modern days, the booth has become one of the central aspects of *Sukkot*. The rabbis determined that based on the themes 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 term *lulav* literally means “sprout” and refers to three species: palm, myrtle, and willow. The word *etrog* means “one that shines” in Aramaic. It is a citrus fruit very similar to a lemon in shape and color, but slightly bigger but much more fragrant.

All four species are held – the *etrog* in the left hand and all other three (the *lulav*) in the right hand – and are waved and shaken all around one’s body, over, 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 who have either good deeds or knowledge, both or none.

Messianic Perspective

In order to gain a greater appreciation of God’s meaning behind “The Feasts” as well as the messianic implications, we must go back to the first century BCE and see how *Sukkot* was celebrated then. We need to remember that at that time, *Sukkot* was the only one of the three fall Holy Days that required Jewish people to be in Jerusalem for the celebration (Passover and *Shavuot* being the other two).

Since ancient Israel was an agrarian society and *Sukkot* was a harvest festival, rain was essential 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 procession. The water was poured over the altar as an offering to the God of Israel for Him to provide rain. A greater meaning is attached to the water libations, as water 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. 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 not miss the connection. A lighting ceremony also took place at the Temple on *Sukkot*, in which 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 the Feast 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 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 *sukkot* or booths - one each for Messiah, Moses, and Elijah.

Each one of the Levitical feasts points to a specific event in the ministry of Yeshua the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The Jewish calendar is thus 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.

Discussion Questions

In what way is the *sukkah* (booth) a “shadow” (col 2:17) of the coming Messiah?

Is *Sukkot* different from all the other Levitical Feasts, if yes why (Zech 14:16-19)?

In John chapters 7 and 8, Why did Yeshua choose the Feast of *Sukkot* to authenticate His Messiahship and how did He do it (John 7:37-39, 8:12)



Chosen People Ministries