

Simply Sukkot: The Basics of the Feast of Tabernacles

INTRODUCTION

I hesitated for the longest time about putting out an article on Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) because I felt there were already so many great books and articles out on the subject from a Messianic and Natsari perspective that I didn't want to feel that I was reinventing the wheel. So instead I put the majority of my efforts into writing many articles about obscure and detailed aspects on things dealing with the various facets Sukkot. But to my surprise I discovered many of my readers still did not know the basics regarding Sukkot. Learning this and seeing as Sukkot is my most favorite of the High Holy Festivals, how could I not eventually pen an article about the basics of Sukkot?

SUKKOT: THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

The following are the key passages in the Torah dealing with Sukkot:

Exodus 23:16, Lev. 23:33-43, Num. 29:12-39 and Deut. 16:13-17

The Feast of Sukkot, also known as, The Feast of Tabernacles, is often mistaken by Christians as a "Jewish Holiday", but it is not, it is a High Holy Holiday appointed by God Himself for everyone who worships and serves the God of Israel. Sukkot has been translated, "tabernacles" or "booths" but the root word of Sukkot means, "to dwell."

ANCIENT AND MODERN OBSERVANCE

Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles is the last in the cycle of the annual the High Holy Day Festivals which takes place in the fall of the year. On the secular solar calendar Sukkot falls in September or October. On the Hebraic and Rabbinical Lunar calendar Sukkot begins on the 15th day of the 7th month called Tishrei. Sukkot is an 8 day long Festival, 7 symbolizing completion and 8 symbolizing a new beginning. The first and last days of the Festival is considered and observed similar to a weekly Sabbath where no work is done, where the Sabbath candles are lit and the traditional blessings over the bread and wine are said and the community meets to worship ADONAI through prayer and reading of Biblical texts relating to the Holy Day. One may work during the intermediary days of the

Festival. Seeing as the Tabernacle and Temple are no longer standing, prayers have been considered to temporarily replace the sacrifices until the 3rd Temple is rebuilt.

During then time when the Temple stood many sacrifices were made:

- The Feast of (Sukkot) Tabernacles there were a total of 71 bullocks, one for each nation and one for Israel.
- 15 rams, the number fifteen symbolizes the Completion of God's Grace, and His Kingdom. The Completion of God's Grace 3 x 5. The fifteenth day of the first month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the symbol of the sinless body. The fifteenth day of the seventh month is the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles marks the end of the sixth day of man and the beginning of the seventh day of the Kingdom.
- 105 lambs. The number 105 is made up of three Hebrew letters, Ayin, Lamed and Hey, and it creates the word meaning to rise or to go up. Going up is always referred to as going up to meet G-d on the Temple Mount to sacrifice and fellowship with Him. This speaks to us that ADONAI is King and we are created to serve and worship Him. This testifies to the obligation of the word to recognize and follow through with these facts.
- 8 goats offered during the feast, with accompanying meal and drink offerings. Eight is the number symbolizing new beginnings, speaking of a new week and a New Era, a New World, a Heavenly Divine Kingdom Age to Come. Goats also remind us of Yom Kippur and allude to the fact that this new rule and world will be without sin and will be forever new.

Sukkot is an Autumn or Latter Harvest Festival as well as a time of giving thanks. It is well documented that the pilgrims got their inspiration for Thanksgiving by reading about The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot) in their Bibles. Historians speculate the pilgrim's celebration was originally in early October, which, coincidentally, is during the time of Sukkot. They however, modified it from the original seven days as God commanded, to three days of thanksgiving. In our modern times, it has dwindled down to one day.

It is also a Festival commemorating Israel's 40 year nomadic wandering in the desert and the future fruitfulness of the Promised Land. It is over a week long Holiday which calls every Jew and Hebrew back to their roots so in the midst of blessing and prosperity of the Promised Land one will not forget their humble beginnings.

This God Ordained Festival is observed in several ways, one of which and the most well-known is by, as the Torah passages commands, building a temporary shelter and living in it all throughout and during the festival. If weather and climate permits one is expected to literally make this temporary shelter their home for the holiday, but in order to fulfill the commandment of “dwelling” in a sukkah one is encouraged to, at the very least, eat meals, study, pray and worship there. The Rabbinic decree has always been like over law and if one’s life is put in danger one may forgo observing the commandment. For example, in the Diaspora many Jews now live in cold climates and may be able to spend time out in their sukkah eating or playing games, but it would be too cold and dangerous to one’s health to sleep out there. God does not expect one to risk or in danger one’s health in order to fulfill a commandment.

THE SUKKAH

The sukkah (hut or booth) can be made out of virtually any material the only requirements by Torah and Rabbinic tradition is that it at least has three walls and the roof must be made from branches, leaves and or other natural foliage. And it is important to leave spaces in the roof to where one can look up and view the stars. The sukkah is decorated with fruits and harvest themed items; some even decorate them with holiday lights. People build sukkah’s in their yards, on their decks and on the balconies of their apartments, wherever they can. Along with the remembrance of the 40 year wandering of Israel in the Wilderness, all of this is to remind the individual of the fragility and temporality of our own bodies, that they are only temporary dwelling places for our souls and that our New Home is in the heavens among the stars in the World to Come where our God is.

THE LULAV AND ETROG

The next item associated with and used during Sukkot is the four species, called the Lulav and etrog made up of a (lulav) palm frond, two (aravot) willow branches and three (hadassim) myrtle branches all bound together like a bouquet topped off with an etrog, a close cousin to the lemon. This represents the fruitfulness and bounty of the harvest. The Lulav and Etrog are used during prayer and recitation of the Hallel Psalms (113-118) as praise unto ADONAI by being shook in all six directions, North, South, East, West, Up and Down. There are many teachings on the Lulav and Etrog. The Rabbi’s and Sages say that the Lulav and Etrog represent us, our bodies. The palm frond represents our spine, the willow leaves are the lips, the myrtle leaves the eyes, and the etrog represents the heart. It is also taught that

the Etrog symbolizes Abraham had a big heart and was blessed with old age. The palm fronds represent Isaac who was spread out upon the altar. The myrtle has many leaves and represents the many children he had. The willow is like unto Joseph who died before his brothers just as the willow wilts before all the other foliage. The Lulav and Etrog have also been linked to the four directions and four elements. It has also been taught that the Lulav and Etrog represent different types of Jews where the Etrog which is aromatic and sweet is like unto person full of Torah and good deeds. The palm frond which comes from the date palm has a fruit that tastes sweet but has no fragrance and is like a person who has Torah knowledge but no good deeds. The myrtle smells nice but has no taste and is like one who has good deeds but no Torah knowledge. The willow has neither smell or taste and is like a person with neither Torah knowledge or good deeds.

EVENTS DURING SUKKOT

SOLOMON

In I Kings 8 and II Chronicles 7, it speaks of King Solomon fulfilling the life-long dream of his father David and himself, of having built the Holy Temple of ADONAI. It says the he “Chanukah-ed” it, dedicated it, and had a 7 day festival and ended it on the 8th day, hence 8 days of Chanukah, just as we have today. The Ark of the Covenant is placed in the newly built Temple during the Festival of Sukkot, so that particular Sukkot doubled as a Chanukah celebration as well!

Today Sukkot is the last of the High Holidays and is the precursor to Chanukah as we know it. Yet both deal with the Dwelling place of G-d among men. So these eight crazy days of Sukkot (counting Shimini Eretz and Simchat Torah) leads us to the eight crazy nights of Chanukah!

NEHEMIAH

In Nehemiah 8:14-18, We see that a portion of Judah has returned from Babylonian captivity. We also see the model for the modern synagogue service, but we also see that Sukkot had not been celebrated with regularity since the time of Yehoshuah (Joshua) and it is thus observed.

YESHUA

In Luke 2 Yeshua was born on the first day of Sukkot in a sukkah where animals of an Inn keeper gathered and was circumcised the last day of Sukkot at the Temple.

In Matthew 17 Yeshua takes Kefa, Ya'akov and Yochannon (Peter, James and John) up on a mountain and is transfigured before them as Moses and Elijah show up and Kefa desires to build a sukkah for each one of them.

In John 7 Yeshua celebrates Sukkot despite the risk to his own life! Also during this time He proclaims Himself as the Living Water during the annual water pouring ceremony on the Altar by the Priests at the Temple.

IN THE FUTURE

Zechariah 14 prophecies of Messiah's return and how even the Gentiles will celebrate Sukkot.

THE EIGHTH DAY – SIMCHAT TORAH

Simchat Torah (Rejoicing with the Torah), also known as Shimini Atzret (The Eight Day) and it is the last day of Sukkot in which the last Torah portion is read and we begin the annual Torah cycle reading again for a new year. It has become a holiday in and of itself. But it is an awesome way to end Sukkot with a bang and a last hurrah! The Rabbi, Synagogue Officials and Congregants all take turns dancing around the synagogue with the Torah scroll

“On Simchat Torah, the Torah wants to dance, but lacking the physical limbs with which to do so, it employs the body of the Jew. On this day, the Jew becomes the dancing feet of the Torah.” -- The Lubavitcher Rebbe

When I was a Christian going to a very conservative Bible College, our campus was right next door to an Orthodox Synagogue. I decided to go one Shabbat incognito just to observe and learn. When I saw the Torah Procession, and I saw everyone touching and kissing the Torah scroll all bedecked with crowns and a priestly breastplate, in my Christian thinking I was saddened, thinking that they were worshipping the Torah scroll. However, little did I know at the time that the Torah is the Divine Law of the Malkut Shemayim, and the Olam Habba (The Kingdom of Heaven and the World to Come). It supposed to rule every aspect of our daily lives because it is the expressed will of ADONAI. Walking in the Torah of ADONAI there is no “secular” and “sacred” moments, all is sacred, everything becomes a divine moment to carry out ADONAI's will. I failed to recognize back

then that the Torah represents the Priestly and Kingly Messiah of Yeshua who is the Living manifestation of the Written Torah (John 1). Now I know that out of respect of the Law and of the future reign of Messiah, we dress the Torah in a Priestly and Kingly garment and pledge ourselves to walk in the Path of Torah which is nothing less than the path of Messiah.

By the way, in Hebrew the word, Simcha, which means Joy can also spell two other very important Hebrew words that are inseparable to this day of Simchat Torah. Switch the letters of Simcha in Hebrew around and you get, Chamesh, meaning, Five, meaning the Five Books of Moshe (Moses), The Torah! Rearrange the words again and you get Moshiach, Messiah! So in other words you can't have Joy without Torah, and without the Torah you can't have the Messiah!

Simchat Torah is the culmination of the Fall Festivals of, Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Let nothing stand in our way in celebration of the Torah.

CONCLUSION

At Sukkot you stand in the middle between the end of one chapter and the beginning of another; the end of harvest and the entry into the Promised Land. We recall our past wilderness wanderings and our new home and dwellings. We stand betwixt death and rebirth such a wonderful mystical time of the year. No wonder ADONAI choose this time of the year for Messiah to be born and also slated it for the time of His transfiguration His revelation to the people of being Messiah during the Temples water pouring ceremony and also the season of His future return. Sukkot is pregnant with meaning past, present and future with prophetic significance that run the gamut of linear and eternal time.

And no wonder this is also the time satan works overtime and has his unholy counterfeit of pagan solstice, harvest festivals and Halloween which represents death, destruction and depravity, the opposite of Sukkot.

I hope this has been a good hearty overview for my readers of one of the best Festivals on the Hebrew Calendar.

Pastor Kris Shoemaker – Rabbi Yehudah ben Shomeyr

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