

Gather the People: Reaping Your Sukkot Harvest

By Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon

High Holy Days at Mt. Sinai were enlightening and exhilarating. Now that they are over, let me share some thoughts to inspire you during Sukkot and Simchat Torah, which conclude the High Holy Day season.

Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah are extensions of the High Holy Days, which is why we symbolically start erecting the Sukkah as soon as Yom Kippur ends. The Full Moon of Tishri, a full heart, and a full harvest of joy in covenant and community - these are the themes of Sukkot. The Jewish lunar calendar provides many parallels between the moon's cycles and our spiritual growth. On the first day of Tishri, the Baby Moon of Rosh Hashanah gave us a new lease on life - a spiritual rebirth. As the moon swelled on the 10th of Tishri, Yom Kippur guided us like young adolescents to admit our failings and mistakes before a loving God. On the 15th, Sukkot's Full Harvest moon is like a mature adult who can reap the fruits of repentance, forgiveness and pastoral simplicity with community. Finally, the season concludes on Simchat Torah with a symbolic marriage, as we dance with the Torah, our living covenant with God and other Jews. And so the cycle begins anew.



The Sukkah of Covenant – *Sukkah, Mishkan, and Chuppah* are one

Midrash suggests that it was on the 10th of Tishri – the day later declared



as Yom Kippur – that Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with a second Tablet of the Law, having earlier broken the first tablets in his frustration at seeing the Golden Calf. This second set symbolized God's forgiving the people, and offering them another chance to become a godly people. *Parshat Vayakhel* (Exodus 35-38) describes how shortly thereafter, the people began

constructing the *Mishkan*, the moveable Ark of the Covenant, as the "dwelling place for God's presence" among them. This would have been on Sukkot, so midrashic texts identify the *Mishkan* with the *Sukkah*. The *Mishkan* was a statement that God dwelled within them and protected them, and was at the heart of their civilization. We should erect the Sukkah with the same holy vision, that this is "God's temple" in which we wish to dwell "all the days of our lives" (Ps. 27). The Sukkah reminds us of our covenant with each other and with The Divine, and that the Divine Holy Presence is always sheltering us and dwelling within us. Then the Sukkah becomes like a *Chuppah* or bridal canopy. Just as friends feast the wedding couple for seven days, so we sit under the Sukkah/Huppah and then "marry" the Torah on Simchat Torah!

The Sukkah of Humility

Sukkot is such an all-encompassing holiday with so many layers of meaning that it is also called *He-Chag* - The (Essential) Holiday. All our holidays carry levels of seasonal, historical, philosophical, and personal/spiritual symbolism. As described above, Sukkot reminds us of the Israelite people's 40-year trek through the Sinai desert. But Sukkot is also based on the practical

agricultural needs of ancient Israel. "The Holiday" returns us to the ancient, atavistic roots of our ancestors (and by extension, to all tribal peoples), who camped out in shacks in the fields far from their homes while reaping Fall vegetables like squash, corn and beans. The Sukkah also reminds us that poor people and migrant farm workers around the world still live in such poor ramshackle dwellings. It is therefore appropriate to do *tzedakah* on Sukkot, such as donating food to those in need. In view of our Yom Kippur declarations, Sukkot also reminds us to simplify our lives, re-connect with nature, and not identify with our material possessions.



Bedouin hut

The Sukkah of Peace

The Sukkah is also a universal symbol of inclusion, hospitality to strangers, peace and worldwide tranquility. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, blessings were offered on Sukkot for all 70 nations of the known world. It is common knowledge that the American Thanksgiving holiday is based on Sukkot's theme of a fall communal meal. The Sukkah is open to rain, wind and the elements, to show that we trust in God rather than in walls and weapons. Sometimes I have felt more sheltered and warm in a sukkah than in a house! It is also customary to welcome a different Biblical ancestor each night with the mystical *Ushpizin* ceremony, and it is a mitzvah to invite guests to eat in the Sukkah. What better symbol of faith than a hut that any fierce storm could blow away! What better symbol of peace than a neighborly meal in a backyard shack!

The Sukkah of Community

In the Torah portion cited above (Exodus 35-38), each Israelite was instructed to donate a half-Shekel to build the *Mishkan*, and to give according to their means, abilities, and skills. They contributed precious jewels, fabrics, or labor. No effort or gift was rejected as they erected the symbol of their communal commitment to God and each other. Moshe Rabbeynu was the original "community organizer," building teamwork and a sense of mission by getting everybody involved. Like the old pioneer tradition of barn-raising, we grow in community when we build, decorate and eat together. We also learn from the four different plants that make up the *lulav* and *etrog* that diversity among people is a strength rather than a weakness. Sukkot teaches us to recognize and honor the deeper unity in the diversity of people and ways of life in our world.



I am inspired by this idea of seeing the Sukkah as a Holy Sanctuary. I believe we are strongest when we trust in Divine Assistance and open our temples and our homes on all sides as a shelter to any who wish to sincerely enter and build with us. I pray that Mt. Sinai grows as a community which seeks unity through the diversity of our members. May it be a house of prayer and a shelter from the storm. May we come together this Sukkot with fruitfulness and joy under the shelter of God's love.

How big is YOUR Sukkah??