

Sukkot: a Jewish Harvest Holiday

...On the fifteenth day of this seventh month is the Festival of Sukkot, seven days for the L-RD. -Leviticus 23:34

The Festival of Sukkot begins on the Jewish month of [Tishri](#) 15, the fifth day after [Yom Kippur](#). Sukkot is so unreservedly joyful that it is commonly referred to in Jewish prayer and literature as Z'man Simchateinu [זמן שמחתנו](#), the Season of our Rejoicing.

Sukkot has a dual significance: historical and agricultural. Historically, Sukkot commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Agriculturally, Sukkot is a harvest festival and is sometimes referred to as Chag Ha-Asif [חג האסיף](#), the Festival of Ingathering.

The word "Sukkot" means "booths," and refers to the temporary dwellings that Jews are commanded to live in during this holiday in memory of the period of wandering. The Hebrew pronunciation of Sukkot is "Sue COAT." The name of the holiday is frequently translated "Feast of Tabernacles," which, like many translations of Jewish terms, isn't very useful. This translation is particularly misleading, because the word "tabernacle" in the Bible refers to the portable Sanctuary in the desert, a precursor to the [Temple](#), called in Hebrew "mishkan." The Hebrew word "sukkah" (plural: "sukkot") refers to the temporary booths that people lived in, not to the Tabernacle.

Sukkot lasts for seven days. The festival of Sukkot is instituted in Leviticus 23:33 et seq. No [work](#) is permitted on the first and second days of the holiday.



Building a Sukkah

You will dwell in booths for seven days; all natives of Israel shall dwell in booths. -Leviticus 23:42

In honor of the holiday's historical significance, Jews are commanded to dwell in temporary shelters, as their ancestors did in the wilderness. The temporary shelter is referred to as a sukka (which is the singular form of the plural word "sukkot"). Like the word sukkot, it can be pronounced like Sue-KAH, or to rhyme with Book-a.

Building the sukka each year satisfies the common childhood fantasy of building a fort, and dwelling in the sukka satisfies a child's desire to camp out in the backyard. The commandment to "dwell" in a sukka can be fulfilled by simply eating all of one's meals

there; however, if the weather, climate, and one's health permit, one should spend as much time in the sukkah as possible, including sleeping in it.

A sukkah must have at least two and a half walls covered with a material that will not blow away in the wind. Why two and a half walls? Look at the letters in the word "sukkah" (see the graphic in the heading): one letter has four sides, one has three sides and one has two and a half sides. The "walls" of the sukkah do not have to be solid; canvas covering tied or nailed down is acceptable and quite common in the United States. A sukkah may be any size, so long as it is large enough for you to fulfill the commandment of dwelling in it. The roof of the sukkah must be made of material referred to as sekhakh (literally, covering). To fulfill the commandment, sekhakh must be something that grew from the ground and was cut off, such as tree branches, corn stalks, bamboo reeds, sticks, or two-by-fours. Sekhakh must be left loose, not tied together or tied down. Sekhakh must be placed sparsely enough that rain can get in, and preferably sparsely enough that the stars can be seen, but not so sparsely that more than ten inches is open at any point or that there is more light than shade. The sekhakh must be put on last. Note: You may put a water-proof cover over the top of the sukkah when it is raining to protect the contents of the sukkah, but you cannot use it as a sukkah while it is covered and you must remove the cover to fulfill the [mitzvah](#) of dwelling in a sukkah.

It is common practice, and highly commendable, to decorate the sukkah. In the northeastern United States, Jews commonly hang dried squash and corn in the sukkah to decorate it, because these vegetables are readily available at that time for the American holidays of Halloween and Thanksgiving. Many families hang artwork drawn by the children on the walls. Building and decorating a sukkah is a fun family project, much like decorating the Christmas tree is for Christians.

Many Americans, upon seeing a decorated sukkah for the first time, remark on how much the sukkah (and the holiday generally) reminds them of Thanksgiving. The pilgrims were deeply religious people. When they were trying to find a way to express their thanks for their survival and for the harvest, they looked to the Bible for an appropriate way of

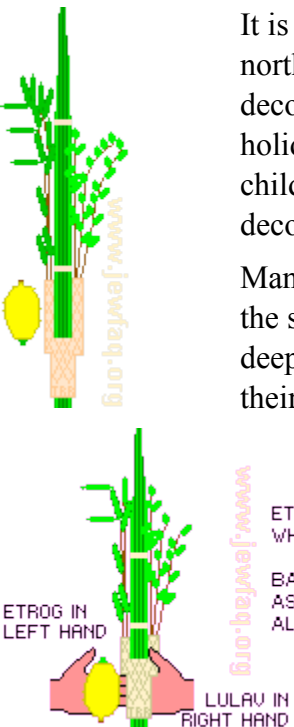
celebrating and found Sukkot. This is not the standard story taught in public schools today (that a Thanksgiving holiday is an English custom that the Pilgrims brought over), but the Sukkot explanation of Thanksgiving fits better with the meticulous research of Mayflower historian Caleb Johnson, who believes that the original Thanksgiving was a harvest festival (as is Sukkot), that it was observed in October (as Sukkot usually is), and that Pilgrims would not have celebrated a holiday that was not in the

Bible (but Sukkot is in the Bible).

Arba Minim: The Four Species

אַרְבַּע מִיָּנִים

On the first day, you will take for yourselves a fruit of a beautiful tree, palm branches, twigs of a braided tree and brook willows, and you will rejoice before the L-RD your G-d for seven days. -Leviticus 23:40



Another observance during Sukkot involves what are known as the Four Species (arba minim in Hebrew) or the lulav and etrog. We are commanded to take these four plants and use them to "rejoice before the L-rd." The four species in question are an etrog (a citrus fruit similar to a lemon native to [Israel](#); in English it is called a citron), a palm branch (in Hebrew, lulav), two willow branches (aravot) and three myrtle branches (hadassim). The six branches are bound together and referred to collectively as the lulav, because the palm branch is by far the largest part. The etrog is held separately. With these four species in hand, one recites a [blessing](#) and waves the species in all six directions (east, south, west, north, up and down), symbolizing the fact that [G-d](#) is everywhere. Detailed instructions for this ritual can be found under [Sukkot Blessings](#).

The four species are also held and waved during the [Hallel](#) prayer in religious services, and are held during processions around the bimah (the pedestal where the Torah is read) called hakafot each day during the holiday. These processions commemorate similar processions around the altar of the ancient [Temple](#) in Jerusalem. This part of the service is known as Hoshanot, because while the procession is made, we recite a prayer with the refrain, "Hosha na!" (please save us!). On the seventh day of Sukkot, seven circuits are made. For this reason, the seventh day of Sukkot is known as Hoshanah Rabbah (the great Hoshanah).

After the circuits on Hoshanah Rabbah, willow branches are beaten against the floor five times, shaking loose some or all of the remaining leaves. A number of explanations are offered for this unusual beating practice, but the primary reason seems to be agricultural: the rainy season in Israel begins in the fall, and the leaves falling from the willow branch symbolize our desire for beneficial rainfall.

Why are these four plants used instead of other plants? There are two primary explanations of the symbolic significance of these plants: that they represent different parts of the body, or that they represent different kinds of Jews.

According to the first interpretation, the long straight palm branch represents the spine. The myrtle leaf, which is a small oval, represents the eye. The willow leaf, a long oval, represents the mouth, and the etrog fruit represents the heart. All of these parts have the potential to be used for sin, but should join together in the performance of [mitzvot](#) (commandments).

According to the second interpretation, the etrog, which has both a pleasing taste and a pleasing scent, represents Jews who have achieved both knowledge of [Torah](#) and performance of mitzvot. The palm branch, which produces tasty fruit, but has no scent, represents Jews who have knowledge of Torah but are lacking in mitzvot. The myrtle leaf, which has a strong scent but no taste, represents Jews who perform mitzvot but have little knowledge of Torah. The willow, which has neither taste nor scent, represents Jews who have no knowledge of Torah and do not perform the mitzvot. We bring all four of these species together on Sukkot to remind us that every one of these four kinds of Jews is important, and that we must all be united.

