

Introduction to Sukkot

Sukkot means “huts.” The Jewish festival of Sukkot celebrates and commemorates the shelters in which the Israelites lived for 40 years after leaving Egypt.

Symbols

The main symbols associated with Sukkot are living in a sukka (eating and, when possible, sleeping in the sukka) and the lulav and etrog.

Sukkot is observed at fall harvest time. When many Jews were feeling wealthy due to their produce, we were commanded to live in temporary shelters--in part, to ward off feelings of arrogance or pride in what we had accomplished in the material world. Instead of thinking or feeling that our hard work or great wisdom has made us wealthy, we are reminded that whatever we have comes from God, and that God will take care of us, even in a flimsy “house.”

The lulav and etrog have many meanings. Here are two:

Likening to the Human Body

The four components are compared to four parts of the human body:

- Palm branch: Spine.
- Myrtle leaves: Human eyes.
- Willow leaves: Human lips.
- Etrog: Human heart.

When we hold the four parts of the lulav/etrog together, we are symbolically taking the various components of our bodies together to serve God.

Likening to Types of Jews

The four components are likened to four types of Jews:

- Etrog smells nice and tastes nice--like a tzadik who is knowledgeable in Torah and does mitzvot;
- Myrtle smells nice but does not have a good taste--like a person who does mitzvot but is not knowledgeable in Torah;
- Palm tree (date palm) has a nice tasting fruit but no scent--like someone who has knowledge but lacks mitzvot;
- Willow does not smell nice nor has a good taste--like a person who has neither.

By holding them together, we show that all types of Jews are to be considered as one nation.