

## **Sukkot: Redemption, the Harvest, and Healing**

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Sukkot offers many paths to healing for those dealing with illness, treatment, and recovery. Patients, families, friends, and caregivers can all draw on these powerful resources.

Three biblical commandments govern Sukkot: to dwell in a Sukkah, to gather the four species, and to rejoice. Other observances include the *hoshamot* (circling around the synagogue while reciting the *hoshanna* prayers), reading *Ecclesiastes*, inviting *ushpizin* (symbolic guests) into the sukkah, and performing various rituals and customs connected to the holiday's seventh day, known as *Hoshanna Rabbah*. In this article, I explore these commandments and several other rituals, and suggest how they can be used and adapted to support Jews who are ill and their loved ones.

### *The Sukkah as Dirat Ara'i: Temporary Dwelling, Eternal Home*

According to Jewish law, we can use a variety of materials for building the Sukkah, and the guidelines for its dimensions are quite flexible. The bottom line, though, is that the Sukkah must not be a permanent structure.

The Sukkah conveys a paradoxical notion of protection. It suggests that true shelter does not exist in physical permanence but resides, instead, in harmony with the elements. It does not come from the vain attempt to deny, evade, or transform cosmic, natural forces such as wind and rain, but from the celebration of God's eternal safeguarding and providence. True shelter exists in exposure to the heavens and in living within the community. Similarly, true healing is born of the seasons and living in Jewish history and tradition.

Those of you struggling with serious illness can find strength in designing and constructing a Sukkah which reflects an intensified appreciation of life's blessing and curses, beauty and vulnerability. Erecting a special Sukkah or building a portion of a communal one provides constructive (literally!) activity in the face of physical and emotional challenge. You might designate the Eastern Wall as one of healing, decorating it with images of Zion and Jerusalem integrated with personal symbols of hope and wholeness.

You may also want to extend hospitality to family and friends who have recently undergone surgery or other treatment, as well as their near ones. Chanting the *sheheheyanu* blessing, singing special "healing songs" (such as *esa einai* and *lo alekha hamlakha ligmor*), and enjoying contemplative silence can create a simple but evocative ritual.

## *The S'khakh: Open to the Heavens*

The key element of the Sukkah is the roof, known as *s'khakh* (literally, “covering”). Like the walls, the *s'khakh* must be temporary, and should be made from something organic that is detached from the ground. At night, whoever sits in the Sukkah must be able to see the stars through the *s'khakh* branches, although during the day this covering should ensure more shade than sunlight. The *s'khakh* is open to the sky, to the heavenly bodies of light, to God’s sheltering presence, to the *Sh'khinah* (God’s “feminine,” in-dwelling, comforting, and nurturing aspect).

## *Beautifying the Mitzvah*

Finding beauty in observing the commandments is central to Sukkot, and Jews traditionally work hard to embellish the *s'khakh* and Sukkah walls. We typically hang fruits and vegetables overhead – examples of the harvest that are neither eaten nor preserved, but allowed to age and even rot during the holiday. The Talmud (*Betzah* 30b) suggests hanging “handmade carpets and tapestries, nuts, almonds, peaches, pomegranates, branches of grape, vines, flasks of oil, fine meal, wreaths of ears of corn...” You can supplement these items with objects that symbolize healing—treasured photographs, meaningful cards and letters, poetry, quotes from Psalms, personal talismans.

## *Arba Minim: The Four Species and Spiritual Wholeness*

As a central ritual of the holiday, *Leviticus* 23:40 commands us to gather together four species: the *etrog* (citron) and the *lulav's* branches of palm, willow, and myrtle. The number four, of course, suggests the four winds, the four directions, the four seasons, even the four letters of God’s name. But the particular qualities of these natural elements have provoked many interpretations over the centuries. They have been explained as symbolizing four types of Jews, rating each on the basis of taste (learning) and fragrance (good deeds), and joining them together in the hope that our respective strengths will enable us to complement one another and overcome our individual limitations.

A popular approach is to assign parts of the body and human abilities to each species:

<i>Etrog</i>	<i>Palm</i>	<i>Willow</i>	<i>Myrtle</i>
heart	spine	lips	eyes
feelings	actions	words	insights

To concentrate on the healing symbolism and power of the *Arba Minim*, one might compose a *kavvanah* – a special mediation – on what the act of gathering them together represents. For example: May it be Your Will, Adonai our God, that in joining together these *Arba Minim* I may

unite my body and soul in a complete and peaceful healing. Just as these four species represent the coming together of different types of Jews and the ultimate reunion of our people in Zion, so may they be the harbinger of a true *r'fuah shlemah*, a total healing, of *all* aspects of my being, of organs, limbs, senses, and faculties, of mind, heart, spirit, and soul, of thoughts, feelings, actions, and words. Let me share fullness with all, gathering strength from all in my community, and from You and Your Shelter of Peace. *Sukkat Shalom*. Amen

### ***Ushpizin: Figures from the Past to Heal the Present***

Many Jews enrich their experience of the Sukkah by symbolically welcoming significant figures from Jewish history. We summon them by reciting prayers that invite and recall these individuals and by posting signs bearing their names. This custom, called *ushpizin*, traditionally drew on the Biblical figures of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David (all of whose lives entailed wandering or exile of one sort or another). Since *ushpizin* is not a legal requirement, many Jews have updated the list to include women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Abigail, and Esther.

Those dealing with sickness, treatment, and recovery can adapt this beautiful ancient custom to include Jews who themselves struggled with illness, as well as those who helped heal others. You can devote each day of Sukkot to a different figure, gleaning from their lives and the legends built around them, spiritual guidance and nourishment.

Possibilities include:

**Abraham:** In Rabbinic lore, Abraham is not only the first Jew, but the first patient for whom God Himself made a *bikur holim* visit. This was during Abraham's recovery from his divinely commanded auto-circumcision, at age 99; see *Genesis 18:1* and commentaries; also Talmud *Sotah* 14a.

**Miriam:** While she was afflicted by debilitating and life-threatening leprosy, her brothers, Aaron and Moses, prayed, the latter crying out, "Oh, God! Heal her now!"; see *Numbers 12* and commentaries.

**Hannah:** Struggled with infertility; see *I Samuel 1, 2* and commentaries. Chapter 2 includes her beautiful prayer of joy, thanks, and faith.

**Elijah:** The great prophet of the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., became known as a miraculous healer; see various chapters in *1* and *11 Kings* and many stories in the Talmud (and Jewish folklore in general) of Elijah's restoring individuals' health. *Note:* Many Sephardic Jews set aside a special, ornate chair for each day's honored guest and declare, "This is the chair of the *ushpizin*," Adapting this custom, which parallels that of Elijah's Cup at Passover, one might designate an Elijah's Chair in the Sukkah as a focal point for reflection and prayers of hope and healing.

**Elisha:** Prophet who succeeded Elijah, his mentor, whose healing works he continued. See *11 Kings, 2, 4, and 8*, where he cures miscarriages, reviews a seriously ill child, and more.

*Rabbi Yohanan*: Talmudic scholar (1st century C.E.) known for his empathy in reaching out to the afflicted; see anecdote in Talmud *Berachot* 5b.

*Maimonides*: (1135-1204 C.E.) Preeminent rabbinic authority, law codifier, philosopher, and royal physician, author of many medical works sensitive to the spiritual needs of the ill.

*Franz Rosenzweig*: (1886-1929) German Jewish theologian/philosopher who struggled valiantly against illness in his short life. He continued his intellectual and literary activities despite a paralysis that virtually precluded mobility and speech for seven years.

*Henrietta Szold*: (1860-1945) Zionist; philanthropist, founder and first president of Hadassah, which funded, and still supports, Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem.

### *A Time for Every Purpose*

On the Shabbat that falls during the middle of Sukkot, some Ashkenazim read *Sefer Kohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*). *Kohelet* is unusual in its cynical view that all is vanity and transitory, but this outlook may tie in with Sukkot's message that material possessions (and houses) do not provide true security. Perhaps there is another connection, too – between *Ecclesiastes'* almost hedonistic exhortation to “Eat, drink, and pursue pleasure” (although the book concludes with a more sedate, pious directive {see 12:13}, and the commandment to rejoice during Sukkot (*Deuteronomy* 16:14,15).

But *Ecclesiastes* also includes the beautiful, comforting verses (3:1-8) popularly known as “To Everything there is a Season.” Certainly a central theme of Sukkot is the reaffirmation of one's part in the cycle of life. Singing these lines (Pete Seeger composed a well-known melody for the English version), embracing their meaning – even writing them on the wall of the Sukkah – can create a meaningful ritual for those who are ill and those who care for them.

### *Hoshannah Rabbah: Beating the Willows, Joining the Flow*

The seventh and last day of Sukkot is known as *Hoshannah Rabbah*. On this day, we increase the number of *hoshannot*, encirclings of the synagogue, to seven, marching, marching triumphantly with our *lulav* and *etrog* in hand. Some congregations and *havurot* might like the idea of dedicating a special *hoshannah* to healing. In advance, participants can alphabetically assemble verses or phrases from the Torah that deal with healing (the *hoshannot* are all alphabetized); people who have been ill, their friends and family members, and health care professionals can then lead a special procession around the sanctuary while chanting these lines.

An even more dramatic and unusual ritual entails the willful beating of the willow branches, virtually denuding them by striking them on the floor or against a pew. One interpretation of this custom is that we symbolically join nature and God in this new season, when dead or dying leaves fall to the ground to fertilize the soil.

One can also perceive in this ritual an uncharacteristic level of aggression and anger – it is not often that Jews gather to harm or destroy part of Creation. Here we sense part of the ambivalence of the harvest: it is difficult to accept that winter (read: hardship, deprivation, emptiness...) is coming and that autumn's bounty cannot last.

### ***Rejoicing: Simha – Where Spontaneity Meets Responsibility***

The Hebrew cognate that is singularly associated with Sukkot is S-M-H, the root of *simha*, happiness. We are actually *commanded* to rejoice – see especially *Deuteronomy* 16:14, 15 – and the holiday is nicknamed “*Z'man Simhateinu*,” the Season of (our) Rejoicing.

In *Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)* 4:1, our rabbis teach: “Who is wealthy? One that is happy with his/her lot.” We simultaneously rejoice in our humble, flimsy huts *and* in the vase, eternal home of the universe. Sukkot helps us put our lot in context – to appreciate our portion of eternity, to savor our piece of the whole, our link in the chain.

The message of Sukkot, then, is that to be human is to be vulnerable. No one lives without illness and death. Our Sukkah, *the place of shared vulnerability*, is where we accept, explore, and even celebrate both our earthly existence *and* our aspirations of holiness, our finite existence *and* our infinite worth. What enables us to transcend the limitations of our physical beings is our “corporate consciousness,” our place in both the endless cosmos, and, closer to home, an eternal people. Sukkot lets us share the immediate, tangible harvest while partaking in a taste of freedom, redemption, and the Messianic Age.

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