



SUKKOT: THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES

On the fifteenth day of the month of Tishri (mid Sept or in Oct.) comes the joyous holiday of Sukkot, the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles. This is five days after Yom Kippur. Observant members of the Jewish community begin building a *succah* as soon as Yom Kippur is finished. This small booth has a roof made of branches so that the stars can shine through and direct one's thoughts toward heaven. The succah is often decorated with colorful fruits of the harvest, gourds, pictures, etc. Meals are to be eaten in this structure during the eight-day celebration.

Traditional symbols include the *lulav*, made of palm, myrtle and willow branches bound together and the *etrog* or citron, which is a citrus fruit resembling a lemon. Together these are known as the *four species*. They are carefully purchased in preparation for the feast. The four species cannot be borrowed (although they can be given away with the stipulation that they must be returned!) The four species have numerous possible symbolic meanings. They are seen as representing the four-letter name of God, YHWH). They can also refer to the worshiper. The etrog represents the heart, the palm the backbone, the myrtle the eyes and the willow the lips. The participant is reminded to serve God with one's heart and mind, body, eyes and lips. The four species are waved in the four directions of the compass to remind the worshiper of God's rule over all creation.

Sukkot is a harvest festival and is a time to ponder the harvest of the nations in the Messianic Age, when all nations are brought into God's kingdom. Redemption, peace and brotherhood are expected to be experienced by all. The seventy bullocks sacrificed during the first seven days are interpreted by the rabbis as having atoned for the sins of the 70 nations of the world; the single bullock offered on the eighth day is interpreted as having been for Israel. Hospitality and the invitation to the poor to participate in the feast are also in focus. The Hallel (Ps. 113-118) is chanted.

In the Bible, the Israelites were told to refrain from work and hold a sacred assembly on the first and eighth days. They were to dwell in booths (as a reminder of God's care during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness) and take choice fruit and leafy branches and rejoice before the Lord. On the first day, in addition to the regular offerings, 13 bullocks were sacrificed along with two rams, 14 male lambs and a goat for a sin offering. The number of bullocks diminished by one each day to make a total number of 70. On the eighth day, only one bullock was offered. The prophet Zechariah spoke of a time when all nations would come to

Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (14:16 & 17). The penalty for not coming was to be drought.

SIGNIFICANCE FOR NEW COVENANT BELIEVERS

In Jesus' time, there was the practice of the pouring out of the water libation conducted by the priest on duty. This practice reached its climax on the last day of the feast known as the Hoshana Rabba, when, with much ceremony and singing, a golden vessel of water was poured out symbolizing dependence upon God to send down his blessing from heaven, the rain. It was in this context that Jesus said, "If a man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." (John 7:37 & 38). Jesus promised us the Holy Spirit to quench our spiritual thirsting and produce a harvest of fruit in us. (John 15:5)

We are eligible to receive the Spirit because Jesus Himself came and "tabernacled" with us. He became the sin offering we needed. People of all nations are coming into a covenant relation with the God of Israel. He has offered us his hospitality and providential care if we rest from our works and trust in the ultimate sin offering he has provided. We are called, in joyous response to God's love and care, to serve him with all our beings. Psalm 118, part of the Hallel, says that "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." (Ps. 118:22) Jesus is this stone (Mat. 21:42-44), and he has become the capstone of the New Temple made of living stones (I Peter 2:4-10; Eph. 2:19-22). We are called not only to bear fruit but to reap a harvest. The fields are ripe for harvest. Pray that the Lord will send out workers (Mat. 9:37 & 38).

WITNESSING SUGGESTIONS

1. Read Leviticus 23:33-44, Numbers 29:12-40, Zechariah 14:1-21, Psalms 113-118, and the New Covenant passages cited above.
2. Ask your Jewish friend what he is doing for Sukkot, if anything. Wish him a "Good Yontif" (literally a "good good-day")
3. Ask your friend if he has read the Bible passages above. Read them over together.
4. Prepare a one-two minute testimony of what Sukkot means to you as a believer.
5. Ask your friend to invite you to participate in the celebration. There is often a succah built on campus. You would probably be welcome to join in the fun.
6. Pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send out laborers to gather in all nations. Rejoice in God's providential care over you!

DATE: Always mid September through October. Do an internet search yearly for the exact date and remember the Jewish Holidays start the night before.

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