



Special Sukkot additional information

The Special Holy Guest

Spending time in Sukkah generates enormous powerful spiritual energy. As it says, the souls of the seven shepherds of Israel leave the Garden of Eden to join in the divine light of the earthly Sukkah.

What is the Garden of Eden? This is the place where worthy souls, having passed from this world, enjoy the light of the divine presence as they await entrance to the World to Come -- i.e. the post- Messianic age (Talmud - Sabbath 152b; Derech Hashem 1:3:11).

The Holy Zohar writes in his book of Jewish mysticism, that the Sukkah generates such an intense concentration of spiritual energy, that the divine presence actually manifests itself there in a similar way to Eden. During Sukkoth the souls of the seven shepherds of Israel -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and King David actually leave the Garden of Eden to partake in the divine light of the earthly Sukkot (Zohar - Emor 103a).

Each day of Sukkot, all seven souls are present, but each takes his turn to lead the other six. Collectively these transcendent guests are known as *Ushpizin*, the Aramaic word meaning "guests." To welcome these illustrious souls, many have the custom to recite a lengthy mystical invitation upon entering the Sukkah for the first time. Additionally, many invite the *Ushpizin* each time they partake of a meal in the Sukkah. Some Sephardic Jews even have the custom of setting aside an ornately-decorated chair covered with fine cloth and holy books.

The Seven Holy Shepherds

Learning slightly deeper, we find that the Ushpizin fit into a recurrent theme in Jewish philosophy -- that time moves in set patterns and that history is moving toward an ultimate goal (Derech Hashem 4:7:2).

King David writes: "*A thousand years in Your eyes are like a day*" (Psalms 90:4). Each day of Sukkot corresponds to one of the days of the week, and to each of the seven millennia of human history - starting with Adam and leading to the Messianic era (Talmud - Sanhedrin 97a; Derech Hashem 1:3:9). Accompanied by the seven shepherds, Sukkot is the holiday that represents the concept of the Jewish people working together to bring about world peace and perfection (Sfas Emes).

Further, the Jewish mystical texts explain that each of the seven Ushpizin correspond to a fundamental spiritual pathway (sefirah) through which the world is metaphysically nourished and perfected (Derech Hashem 3:2:5, Zohar Chadash, Toldot 26c; cf. Zohar 2:256a).

1. Abraham represents love and kindness
2. Isaac represents restraint and personal strength
3. Jacob represents beauty and truth

4. Moses represents eternity and dominance through Torah
5. Aaron represents empathy and receptivity to divine splendor
6. Joseph represents holiness and the spiritual foundation
7. David represents the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth

When we follow in the footsteps of these spiritual attributes, the divine light (as directed through that particular transcendental conduit) shines down into the world and brings it closer to its completion (Derech Hashem 4:2:2,5). As the Talmud says: "With the very measuring cup that a person measures, are [the spiritual influences] measured out for him" (Sotah 8b).

Feeding the Poor

Now aside from these lofty spiritual matters, Judaism's prime emphasis remains on human actions. The Zohar (Emor 103a), after explaining the Ushpizin continues. *"One must also gladden the poor, and the portion [that would otherwise have been set aside for these Ushpizin] guests should go to the poor. For if a person sits in the shadow of faith and invites those guests and does not give their portion [to the poor], they all remain distant from him...One should not say "I will first satisfy myself with food and drink, and I shall give the leftovers to the poor." Rather, the first of everything must be for one's guests. If one gladdens his guests and satisfies them, God rejoices over him. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the others shower him..."*

Similarly, Maimonides brings this as a matter of religious obligation: "While eating and drinking himself, one is obligated to feed the stranger, orphan, and widow, along with the other unfortunate poor... [One who does not] is not enjoying a mitzvah, but rather his stomach" (Laws of Yom Tov 6:18).

May the inspiration of the holy Ushpizin guests help us to fulfill the potential of the Sukkot holiday -- enjoying and uplifting both ourselves and the world around us!

2) The Eighth Day of assembly

After all these spiritual moments, God adds a special day at the end of Sukkoth, a day of great closeness with our Creator, as He asks His Jewish children to remain with him for just extra personal time together.

Just visualize yourself orchestrating a several day reunion for good old times and you nearly invite everyone. But this is no "regular" reunion: It's one solid week of food, music, dance and fun. Sooner or later things are starting to wind down and people beginning to leave. As you are the host, you quietly go over to a few of your best friends and whisper: "Stick around after everyone else leaves - that's when I'm breaking out the good stuff."

God has a weeklong festival each year called "Sukkoth." In ancient times in the holy city of Jerusalem, the service in the Holy Temple during the week of Sukkoth featured a total of 70 bull offerings. This, the Talmud explains, reflects to each of the 70 nations of the world. The Temple was not just for Jews. The prophet Isaiah refers to the Temple as a "House for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7).

The Holy Temple was the universal core of spirituality, a concentrated point where God-consciousness filtered down into the world. In fact, the Talmud says that if the Romans had realized how much benefit they themselves were getting from the Temple, they never would have destroyed it!

So at the end of Sukkoth, God added a special day called Shmini Atzeret, literally the "Eighth Day of Assembly". On that great day, only one bull was offered -- reflecting the Jewish people. It is a day of great closeness with our Creator, as He asks His Jewish children to remain with him for extra personal time together. (Talmud - Sukkot 55b)

The eight day called Shmini Atzeret is a full public holiday, as described in Leviticus 23:36. Even though it immediately follows the seven-day Sukkoth festival and is often considered part of Sukkoth, it is, in fact somewhat a separate holiday. This means that the She'hechyanu blessing is recited, and the obligation to sit in the Sukkah does not apply.

The nature of Seven

The famous Nachmanides whom lived in the 12th century. Explains a striking kabalistic concept: Seven is the number of nature. There are seven days in the week, there are seven notes on the musical scale and there are seven directions left, right, up, down, forward, back and center. "Seven" -- represented by the seven days of Sukkoth -- is the world of nature. "Eight" -- represented by Shmini Atzeret -- is that we call beyond nature.

Speaking about eight-days, Hanukkah an eight-day holiday, as well has beyond nature miracle concepts.

The Jewish people, says the Talmud, are beyond nature. We have survived every imaginable persecution, exile, hardship and expulsion. And still, we have achieved and thrived far beyond our numbers. As Mark Twain wrote: "All things remain mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

The "secret," as we know, is the special gift that God gave to the Jewish people: The Torah. As Rabbi Emanuel Feldman writes:

"Torah is the mysterious bridge which connects the Jew and God, across which they interact and communicate, and by means of which God fulfills His covenant with His people to sustain them and protect them."

Therefore it is no coincidence that on Shmini Atzeret we also celebrate the completion of the yearly cycle of Torah readings and the beginning of a new cycle. This event is lovingly referred to as *"Simchat Torah,"* literally "Rejoicing of the Torah." (Outside of Israel, Simchat Torah is celebrated the day after Shmini Atzeret.)

Why are we accustomed to both finish and re-start the reading of the Torah on the same day? The Sages explain: "To show that the Torah is beloved to us like a new object and not like an old command which a person no longer treasures. Since it is brand new to us, we all run to greet it." We sing and dance around the bima (the platform where the Torah is read), carry the Torah Scroll, and express our joy at having the opportunity to come so close to God.

At this special day of Shmini Atzeret, as we complete this holiday season, we offer a special prayer to God for rain. Rain represents the blessings of growth and abundance. Through all the hard work of, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkoth, we have come a long way. Our duty now is to carry that energy throughout the upcoming year.