



## **Around the Shabbat Table**

**Sukkot / Shemini Atzeret / Simchat Torah 5765  
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### **Introduction**

This week, with Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur behind us, we enter a new part of the holiday cycle as Sukkot begins on Wednesday evening. Sukkot commemorates both the harvest season as well as the exodus from Egypt. We spend as much time as possible living in a *sukkah* during these days. The *sukkah* is a temporary structure, whose covering is built out of natural materials and is somewhat open to the sky and to the elements. In addition, we celebrate the holiday using four types of produce that are specified by the Torah and by later rabbinic writings. There is a special *beracha* (blessing) on these "*arba'ah minim*" ("four species"), and they are carried through the synagogue in a festive procession.

The weeklong festival concludes with another holiday: Shemini Atzeret, the "eighth day of gathering." In Israel and in most Reform congregations, this is the end of the holiday. However, traditional congregations outside Israel celebrate an additional festive day, which has become known as Simchat Torah (in Reform congregations and in Israel, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated on the same day).

The celebration of Simchat Torah (Rejoicing of the Torah) has developed over many centuries. It is based on the ancient tradition among Babylonian Jews to read the entire Torah in synagogue over the course of a year [In the ancient community in Israel, the custom was to read the Torah over a three year period]. Today, the holiday is celebrated with great festivity as the Torah is carried around the synagogue in seven joyous processions (*hakafot*).



### **Questions for Your Family's Discussion**

As your family shares a meal over this holiday, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. It has been suggested (in the commentary on *Siddur Sim Shalom*) that Simchat Torah reflects the centrality of democracy in Jewish observances. That is, there was rabbinical opposition to the way that Simchat Torah developed (such as the dancing in synagogues that takes place -- this was considered to be in opposition to the "resting" that is characteristic of Biblical holidays). Yet, the popular support of these innovations won out.
  - a. Do you know of other times in which people "voted with their feet," developing their own Jewish beliefs or practices even when they were sometimes opposed by rabbinical leadership? Consider some examples: early Zionism, which was initially opposed by most rabbis (particularly Orthodox and Reform), or the Hasidic movement (whose adherents were excommunicated in its early days).
  - b. When do you think that it's OK for innovations to Jewish beliefs or practices to be introduced? When would you limit innovations?
2. There is an interpretation that the four species of produce that are used to celebrate Sukkot represent parts of the body:
  - a. Lulav (palm branch) - the spine
  - b. Etrog (citron) - the heart
  - c. Hadasim (myrtle) - the eyes
  - d. Aravot (willow) - the mouth

According to this understanding, by bringing these plants, and through them, our bodies into unity with God, we show how we can use all of our bodies to serve God. Can you think of how one might serve God through our spines? Through one's heart? By using the eyes? With our mouths?

### **Some Texts to Wrestle With**

Rabbi Eleazar said: [on Sukkot, the sacrifices consisted of] Seventy bulls for the seventy nations. But why a single bull [on Shemini Atzeret]? For the unique nation. This can be compared to a king of flesh and blood who said to his servants, "Make me a great feast." On the last day he said to his beloved, "Make me a little feast, that I may take pleasure in you."

(Talmud)

The text indicates that on Sukkot, there is a concern for all nations of the world, on whose behalf the offerings were given. Shemini Atzeret, at the conclusion of Sukkot, is viewed by the text as a day in which greater emphasis is on Israel's relationship with God.

1. How do you think Judaism views our responsibility towards other religions and cultures?
2. When is our responsibility towards fellow Jews stronger than our responsibility towards those of other religions and cultures (if ever)? Why?

### **Towards an Action Agenda**

1. On Shemini Atzeret a special prayer for rain (Tefillat Geshem) is traditionally recited, recognizing the beginning of the rainy season in Israel. Rain was, and remains, important to a land with limited water resources. Learn more about Israel's water crisis, and some ways it is being addressed at:  
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/scarcity.html>
2. Learn about Sukkot and decorate a virtual Sukkah at  
<http://www.chagim.org.il/frames1.html>



Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to [RavADS@bjeny.org](mailto:RavADS@bjeny.org)

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: [www.bjeny.org](http://www.bjeny.org)

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