

BETWEEN THE LINES

A Deeper Look...

#927- SUKKOT: The Feast of Tabernacles

Most Christians feel a relatively easy affinity to the Biblical rituals of *Pesach* (Passover), *Yom Kippur* (Atonement/Judgment), and even *Shavuot* (Pentecost). On the other hand it appears to the majority of Christians the concept of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) and its trappings seems pretty alien and exotic.

Still, we must remember that our Lord fully took part in this (John 7 and onward) and there are good things for us to glean from the Jewish harvest festival too. I feel that if we become more conversant in the issues surrounding this event there will be rich blessings waiting us. Let's see...

The Booth: The Lord asked/demanded that His people annually enact a remembrance of their Sinai experience by spending a week in a temporary, inconvenient home. (Principal passages on this are Exodus 23, Leviticus 23, Numbers 29, Deuteronomy 16 and 31.)

What, according to Jewish tradition, are the parameters of building a booth for Sukkot? If you were an observant Jew this is what you would understand...

- Sukkot is a quick transition from the somber mood of repentance to celebration.
 - It is to be *zeman simhateinu*- "the season of our rejoicing".
- Building the Sukkah is an event of joyous remembrance, not a restrictive burden.
- The construction should begin as soon after Yom Kippur as possible.
 - But don't use it until the first evening of the holiday!
- Don't have someone construct it for you. Savor the essence of the act for yourself.
- There are "prefab" Sukkot available... It's o.k. as long as you build it yourself.
 - (Most of us live in, drive, eat, and sleep on the work of others. In this act you may enjoy the fruits of your own labors.)
- There are arguments as to whether a Sukkah may have four full walls or not.
- The roof must be of organic material. (Palm fronds, bamboo, and evergreen boughs...)
 - It must be impermanent, and seeing the stars through the roof is a blessing... (Almost a *mitzvah* (command) in itself!)
- Decorating the Sukkah accomplishes many things.
 - It personalizes your Sukkah, gets you more personally involved in the act of creation, it allows even the smallest child to be part of the "construction", and it allows the kids something close to the joy of decorating a Christmas tree so that they won't have to be jealous when that season rolls around for the Christian world.
- There are various levels of involvement with your Sukkah once you've built it.
 - You may eat a meal- or many meals in it. You may try sleeping in it- or sleep in it through the whole festival. You may host friends in it- or have the unique blessing of granting hospitality to strangers and those who are less fortunate than yourself.
- There are particular blessings for study, reading, and teaching under the Sukkah.
- Never make the Sukkah overly comfortable... It's to be a reminder of the wilderness!
 - But you must leave if it's too uncomfortable (i.e. raining) for it's to bring joy.
- As you tear it down store the materials with the hope that you won't need it again.

If Messiah comes before next year we'll feast under His *Sukkah Shalom!*

Arba Minim-The Four Species: The representation of living elements of Sukkot have a lot of wonderful ritual and symbolism related to them. This tradition comes from the command of Leviticus 23- *On the first day you shall take the product of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.*

What, in Judaism, has evolved from this command? Let's see...

- "The product of goodly trees" has been interpreted to be the etrog/citron (called *lulav*).
- "Branches of palm trees" are now fulfilled by the lulav.
- "Leafy trees" are myrtle wisps... In Hebrew *hadasim*.
- The Hebrew term for the willow branches are called *aravot*.
- The four species denote the agricultural aspect of the harvest festival.
- In ancient times the four species were used each day within the confines of the temple.
 - Outside the temple they only utilized them on the first day of the festival.
- *Hiddur mitzvah* (beautifying the command) is particularly appropriate in this ritual.
 - Choosing the most attractive elements blesses the festival. Any specimen that is old or dried up is rendered *pasul* (invalid). The fresh essence of the elements denotes a real contrast to the symbolism of the wilderness experience of rootlessness, dryness, and sand.
- The ritual of the four species is fulfilled by very specific commands.
 - The palm, myrtle, and willow are held in the right hand while the citron is held in the left.
 - The *pitom* (pointed end that held the blossom) is to be pointed toward the earth.
 - (This resolves a *halakhic* difficulty regarding the timing of the pronouncement of a prayer and its accompanying deed. After the announcement of the prayer the citron is reversed so the pitom is pointed toward the heavens- made right- and all the bases are covered!)
 - The four species are snapped to each of the four directions after the prayer.
- There are several different teaching elements noted in the four species.
 - An etrog has taste and fragrance- like men who have learning and good deeds.
 - A palm has taste but no fragrance- like men with learning but no good deeds.
 - A myrtle has fragrance and no taste- like men with good deeds but no learning.
 - A willow has neither- like people who have no learning and do no good deeds.
 - Some see the elements as representing a person who worships with vital parts.
 - The lulav is the spine, the myrtle is the eyes, willow is the mouth, and the etrog represents the heart.
- The *pitom* remnant of the citron speaks of the value of the elderly.
 - The blossom, once fragrant and vibrant was irresistible to hummingbirds, bees, and young lovers. As it ages it shrivels up and seems quite useless and without value. What does this say about our value of those who have lost their youth? Do we cherish remnant of our beginnings? An appropriate prayer for this is "Cast us not off in old age..."
- Savoring the citron after Sukkot causes the essence of the festival to linger on.
 - One may make citron marmalade, or citron wine, or stick cloves into it for using during the closing of the Sabbath ceremony (*Havdalah*).

In Conclusion: For the observant and believers on this side of the cross the concept of Sukkot truly is more than a curiosity. The promise of Jesus in John 14 is so precious to us... "That where I am you may be also." We ache for the day of the Sukkah Shalom- the day when it will be shouted,

"The tabernacle of God is with men!"

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