

## The Jewish Holiday of Sukkot



Immediately after the Jewish Days of Awe – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur – comes the less-known holiday of *Sukkot*; the Feast of Booths.

Like many Jewish holidays, it has both an agricultural theme and a historical theme. This reminds us both of the land of Israel (it is the harvest-time there) and of the history of the Jewish people. When the Jewish people left Egypt and were wandering in the desert, God sheltered them in protective dwellings called *Sukkot*.

The agricultural theme of the holiday also brings out its universal motifs. All of us, no matter our religion, can take a moment to offer thanks to God for all that we have been able to gather close to ourselves in our lives. Even if we are not farmers gathering in the harvest, we can give thanks for our families, our paychecks, our homes etc. *Sukkot* is called “the time of our joy” and is a spiritual precursor to the more secular Thanksgiving holiday.

Jews celebrate *Sukkot* by building temporary *sukka* dwellings for the eight-day holiday. Jewish custom is to eat meals and spend leisure and quality time in the *sukka* and – in some places – even sleep overnight there. It is also a time when families and friends come together to celebrate.

The most important part of the *sukka* itself is the roof, which must be made of items – such as bamboo or palm branches – that grow from the ground. This loose covering allows one to see the stars while sitting in the *sukka*; it is an opportunity to reflect on the beauty of the world that God created.

When the weather is bad, we go indoors, as sitting in the *sukka* is meant to be a pleasant experience. The *sukka* is usually decorated with festive holiday hangings and posters and children's artwork.

Another element of the *Sukkot* holiday is the taking and gentle shaking of the Four Species – palm branch (*lulav*), citron (*etrog*), myrtle, and willow. These four contribute to the harvest festival-feel of the holiday. Some Jewish philosophers have said that the greatness of sitting in a *sukka* is that it is an act that one can do with one's whole body. Similarly, the palm represents the spine, the citron the heart, the myrtle the eyes and the willow the lips, suggesting that we should devote our entire bodies to this celebration.

Finally, Jewish tradition teaches that on *Sukkot*, the world is judged for its water. Since we know the devastating effects of drought on millions of human beings in the world, it is a good opportunity to pray for a plentiful gift of water this year so that we will all have enough to drink and to grow the crops we depend upon for our survival. Enjoy the holiday!



# User's Guide to Acquiring, Using and Caring For Your Four Species on Sukkot

## **The Four Species**

The Biblical commandment to take the four species is found in Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:40: “and you shall take for yourselves on the first day the beautiful fruit of a tree (i.e. *etrog*), palm branches (i.e. *lulav*), bough of a leafy tree (i.e. myrtle, or *hadasim*) and river willows (i.e. *aravot*)” There are many interpretations of the symbolism of these species. One is that they represent the spine (*lulav*), heart (*etrog*), eyes (*hadasim*) and lips (*aravot*) of our bodies and that by bringing them together and shaking them (see below) we are symbolizing our whole bodies rejoicing in service of Hashem, in King David's words “all my bones speak out!”

In order to beautify the *mitzvah* we gather the *lulav*, the three myrtle branches and the two willows together in one package, held together by a sheath woven from dried *lulav*. The *hadasim* (myrtle) should be on the right side and slightly higher than the willows on the left-side.

## **What to Look For**

The *mitzvah* of the four species is meant to be done in a beautiful way, especially the *etrog*, which is called “a beautiful fruit” in the Torah. Here's what most people look for:

**Etrog** – nice and yellow, lots of bumps, symmetric hourglass shape, no blotches or dark spots, especially towards the top. Should have a nice fresh fragrance. Reminds us of the heart.

**Lulav** – straight and tall. The two top leaves at the least should be stuck together, forming a sort of spear at the top. Remind us of the spine or backbone.

**Hadasim** – should be *meshulash*, that is, 3 leaves should come from each stem. They should have a fresh smell and be shaped a bit like eyes.

**Aravot** – should ideally have red stems, straight edges on their leaves and be shaped somewhat like lips. Need to be kept hydrated so they don't dry out and crumble.

## Shaking the lulav

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת לְוִלָּב.

*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech ha-Olam, Asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al netilat lulav*

(Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us on the taking of the *lulav*.)

*When you take the four species on the first two days of sukkot, add:*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁהַחַיְנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעְנוּ לַזְמַן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech ha-Olam, She'Hechyanu v'Kiymanu v'Higiyanu l'Zman Haze.*

(Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who has sustained us and enabled us to reach this time.)

Holding the *lulav* (and connected species) in the right hand and the *etrog* in the left – and preferably in the *sukka* – one makes the blessings: “*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al netilat lulav*” (Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, king of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us on the taking of the *lulav*”) and on the first day you also say “*Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam shehechyanu v'kiymanu v'higi'anu laz'man ha-zeh*”. (“Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, Who has kept us alive us and sustained us and brought us to this day.”)

Then, bring the *etrog* close to the *lulav*, uniting the four species. (Some people hold them together with the *etrog* upside down during the blessing and then turn the *etrog* right side up before shaking.)

The four species should be shaken once each day all week – and continuing through the last day, before Shmini Atzeret which is the holiday of Hoshana Rabba. The 4 species are not taken on Shemini Atzeret or Simchat Torah.

The order of shaking is a matter of some dispute:

### Option A

Most Ashkenazim shake the *lulav* in the following order:  
front (i.e. east)-right-back-left-up-down.

### Option B

My custom (and the custom of many Sephardim and Chassidim) is to shake right-left-front-up-down-back.

Everyone agrees that the species are shaken three times in each direction, returning to the chest each time. It is not necessary to shake it very vigorously.

The 4 species are also shaken during the Hallel prayer. First the chazzan, then the congregation shakes. In the Artscroll transliterated:

1) p. 655: for Ashkenazim: “Hodu (front), Ladonai (no shaking), ki (right), tov (back), ki (left), l’olam (up), chasdo (down). This is done by most congregations twice.

2) It is done twice more at p. 658, at “Ana” (front, right) “Adonai” (no shaking), “Hoshi’a” (back, left), “Na” (up, down).

3) One final time at the second Hodu.(p.659)

It is also held during the special prayer called “Hoshanot” while the congregation walks around the Torah and the bima.

The idea is to give thanks to God who rules all four corners of the world and who rules in Heaven and Earth. It also recalls the Clouds of Glory that sheltered the Jewish people in the desert on all four sides, above (from the sun) and below (from scorpions and sand.) It is also a way of praying for rain, as the world is judged for its water that year on Sukkot.

### **Caring for your species**

Try to keep the *lulav*, *hadasim* and *aravot* moist during the holiday. Refrigerate the *hadasim* and especially the *aravot*. The *etrog* needs no special care. If you want to smell your *etrog*, you make the blessing” *Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam ha-notein rei’ach tov ba-peiros*” (“who gives a good smell to fruit”), However, many rabbis say one should not intentionally smell the *etrog* during the holiday of *Sukkot* itself.

After the holiday, one may discard withered *aravot* and *hadasim*. Many people save their *lulavs* to either start the fire that burns the *chametz* before Passover or to fire up the oven to bake the Passover matzo. Some people make *etrog* jelly or put cloves in their *etrogs* and use them for *havdala* as *besamim*. (fragrant spices) There is also a tradition for pregnant women to bite off the *pitum* (the knob on top of the *etrog*) as a symbolic prayer for an easy delivery.