

After the High Holy Days and the celebration of breaking the fast, there is another feast. It is only five days after Yom Kippur. It seems God wanted his people to spend the whole month at the temple!

The feast of Sukkot (or Tabernacles) is an eight-day festival that begins on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, known as Tishri today. In this “lasting ordinance for the generations to come,” God commanded a sacred assembly and that no regular work be done. In the book of Numbers, God communicates the specific amount and type of offerings to be made on this day and throughout the next seven days. Another sacred assembly follows at the end of the week: Hoshana Rabah, the great hosanna.

Tabernacles is a harvest festival. It is very instructive that God ordained three major festivals within fifteen days of each other during the fall harvest. Harvest time was, and still is, a very busy time. It was easy to become preoccupied with responsibilities and feel as if it were necessary to work seven days each week to bring in the crop. It was easy to lose focus and believe that success depended on oneself and one’s labor. After all, if one didn't work hard, how would he support himself and his family? One might even reason that hard work is the sacrifice made to provide for the family. We think that way today also.

But God will have none of that. He is always reminding us He is the Provider. He brought his covenant people out of the land of Egypt. He parted the Red Sea to deliver his people from the hand of Pharaoh. He provided water from the rock and manna in the wilderness. He gave his people a covenant to live by until the day he would provide a Redeemer to bring His people home. For most of their wilderness journey, survival required only that they thank and praise God. It is this time that is remembered during the Feast of Tabernacles..

“On the first day you are to take choice fruit from the trees, and palm fronds, leafy branches and poplars, and rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. Live in booths for seven days: all native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”

So was born the Sukkah. The Sukkah is the booth; a temporary dwelling built by a Jewish family in yards, on rooftops, or even indoors. Sukkah means hut, tent, or Tabernacle and has become a Jewish tradition that symbolizes the wandering in the wilderness. The booth is designed as a reminder of Israel’s migration from Egypt to the promised land. The feast of Tabernacles, then, celebrates the historic event of the wandering and also expresses gratitude for God's provision.

The ceiling of the Sukkah tent is made of foliage spread sparsely enough to let those inside glimpse the sky. It symbolizes God's protection over those who seek him. It is not a ceiling of man's design that provides protection from the elements but a ceiling of God's design that emphasizes vulnerability. The Sukkah is built from branches. Nehemiah directed the people to gather branches from olive and wild olive trees and from myrtles palms and shade trees. The people were to live in these booths for seven days to remember those who lived in temporary

dwellings during the wandering. Today, while some Jewish people may build a Sukkah, rarely does anyone live in it. Some may eat a meal in the Sukkah. It does however, stand in the presence of the people as a reminder.

Rabbis have given the elements used to build the Sukkah their own interpretation. The choice fruit that God commands is called etrog and is a heart-shaped citrus fruit. Often those who build a Sukkah will hang citrus fruits from its bows. The etrog symbolizes the best fruit of the land and is evidence of God's abundant provision. Rabbis also teach that the etrog stands for a kind heart that belongs to God. Second, lulav or palm branches represent the agricultural aspect of the feast. The palm branches also represent the spinal cord, a symbol of courage and steadfastness. Hadas, or myrtle, is the third element and represents the human eye because of the eye shaped leaves of the myrtle. With such an eye, the Jewish person can see the good in man and shun the sin of envy. Finally, the aravah, or the willow branch, is used to represent the mouth, to teach man right thinking and straight speaking. Rabbis teach that the Sukkah is a picture of the ideal Jewish person, a wanderer who exhibits kindness, courage, freedom from envy, and cleanness of speech. Binding together each of these elements, Jewish people weave the lulav in all directions as a reminder that God's protection and provision surround them.

If the Sukkah is a picture of the ideal righteous Jewish person, then truly, there is only one person it can picture. The psalms remind us that there is no one living who is righteous before God. Yet God himself became a man, a Jewish man who walked the dusty roads of the promised land. Jesus is the only man who exhibits pure kindness and courage. Only he is free from sin, full of right thinking and straight speaking. He came to us to save—and also to teach. He chose the feast of Tabernacles to teach us about himself.

Jesus' brothers had asked him to attend this feast with them in Jerusalem. This is recorded in John 7 verses one through ten. They were skeptics and wanted Jesus to prove in public the things they had heard about him. Jesus declined to go with them, but later he went in secret to fulfill all God had commanded. Jesus listened to the crowd to hear what they said about him. Halfway through the festival, Jesus began to teach, but his words were not understood. His teaching was not received. Then on Hoshana Rabah, he used another of the traditions of his people to make his meaning clear.

On the last day of the feast of Tabernacles, the priests at the temple poured out water from a large urn into a basin. The water represented God's spirit and was a prayer that God would send rain to the earth and that next year's harvest would be plentiful. This tradition continues today as Jewish congregations gather on Hoshana Rabah and pour water onto dry and thirsty ground. To us the water represents God's spirit poured out on a dry and thirsty people. Why? Because Jesus proclaimed loudly in John 7, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture is said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

Suddenly, it is clear. The pouring out of the water, the representation of God's spirit, the references to Isaiah's prophecies of Messiah, and the time in the wilderness came together in one astonishing claim by this man. The rock that God used to bring forth water to quench the thirst of a weary and grumbling nation was right there before them. And for those who would believe, the

spirit of God would indeed flow from within them, pouring out life to those who share in that water, refreshing them in their weariness and removing any need for grumbling.

But before this water can flow, another stream must flow. It has only been two weeks since Yom Kippur. But the sins have already started to stack up for a new year. The animal sacrifices will never take it all away. Another sacrifice must be made. Jesus is that sacrifice. He knows that for water to flow from within us, it must flow from him first. And so, Jesus poured himself out for us. On the cross, thirsty himself, he drank from a stalk of hyssop, gave up his spirit, and died. And as a spear pierced his side, a stream of water flowed from his body— water that would quench the fires of hell, and give life to our parched hearts.

Jesus' physical life on earth was only temporary. He was destined to die for our sins, and for this purpose God became a man. His time in the tomb was also only temporary. He was destined to rise from that tomb to go to his own home and prepare an eternal place for us. The Sukkah tent built during this feast of tabernacles is a temporary dwelling, but through its sparsely thatched roof one can see the stars in the heavens. We see up and out to our eternal dwelling place. For our faith is in him who builds us a permanent home on the Rock.