



Holiday: Sukkot
Q-Ushpizin

by Chaim Moshe haLevi on Saturday October 07, 2006
15 Tishrei 5767
Zohar, Sukkot

There's a place for us/ Somewhere a place for us/ Peace and quiet and open air/ Wait for us/ Somewhere. (From West Side Story)

Ever since childhood, Sukkot has been my favorite Jewish holiday. I have always been intrigued by the beauty of a holiday that is devoted to nature and its bounty, which goes beyond the traditional Thanksgiving foci of the Macy's parade, football games, and turkey dinner. Even so, I realized early on how much of an outsider I was within our largely Orthodox Jewish community because my family paid minimal attention to this Festival of Booths (one of Sukkot's various names).

Living in an apartment building, we had no sukkah of our own and, I am sad to say, we were hardly ever extended an invitation of *hachnasat orchim* (hospitality to guests). To this day, I am puzzled when an event occurs that includes some and excludes others. It is even worse when anyone is explicitly excluded.

I remember learning that when Abraham was recuperating from his circumcision, God came to pay a *bikkur cholim* (a visit to one who is ill). When Abraham saw guests approaching his tent, he took leave of God and ran to welcome them, knowing that the importance of hospitality to strangers took precedence over his own needs. If our tradition places such emphasis on the *mitzvah* of *hachnasat orchim*, then why should anyone be considered an outsider, especially during the observance of a holiday?

Originating in the kabbalistic tradition of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria of Tzfat, among the customs associated with Sukkot is the invitation of the *Ushpizin*, the sacred guests from our heritage. According to the *Zohar*, the primary text of Jewish mysticism, the *Ushpizin* traditionally include the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as Moses, Aaron, Joseph and King David. These men, considered among the foremost leaders of our tradition, are distinguished for their ability to overcome trials through Divine intervention, even while being separated from their loved ones.



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Each of the Ushpizin personifies a specific positive character trait. Abraham—*chesed* (love and kindness); Isaac—*gevurah* (restraint and personal strength); Jacob—*tiferet* (beauty and truth); Moses—*nezah* (eternality and dominance through Torah); Aaron— *hod* (empathy and receptivity to divine splendor); Joseph— *yesod* (holiness and spiritual foundation); and David— *malchut* (the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth). These virtues are designed to assist us two-fold. These qualities teach us to sustain our faith, even in the face of great adversity. Likewise, they assist in the manifestation of God’s presence in the world.

Egalitarianism has added the inclusion of *Ushpizot*, or female guests. According to the tradition of Medieval Italian kabbalist Menachem Azariah of Fano, they are Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah and Queen Esther because these women are distinguished in the Talmud as prophetesses. Variant traditions include the biblical figures Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Dinah, Ruth, and others. Likewise, others include a list of historically significant Jewish women such as Dona Gracia de Nasi, Emma Lazarus, and Hannah Szenesh.

According to kabbalistic belief, each night of Sukkot all of the Sacred Guests are said to descend from the Garden of Eden/heaven to partake in the nightly meal in our sukkah. There are specific prayers that welcome the Sacred Guests and include, among other requests, that those in need be provided with adequate sustenance. The very meal that would be given to the *Ushpizin* is allocated to the poor: one may have that person as a guest, donate the food, or contribute the equivalent amount in *tzedakah*. The Rambam reminds us this is a matter of religious obligation. One must feed the stranger, widow, orphan, and unfortunate, otherwise one is attending to his own needs only and is forsaking a *mitzvah*.

We, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning (GLBTIQ) Jews, know all too well what it is like to be considered outsiders in society – unwelcome in the home of a relative, the sukkah of a friend, the synagogue of our childhood, or the rabbinical schools of particular denominations of our faith.

We know that people are impoverished in various ways. Hunger extends beyond the physical nourishment one receives from nutritious food and beverages. One may be emotionally drained. His hunger may be for love, kindness, peace, and understanding. Similarly, one may be spiritually depleted. She may long for connection to the divine, through sacred space, time, ritual, and prayer.

If we, as GLBTIQ Jews, are to truly claim the tradition of inviting Sacred Guests into our Sukkot, whom would we add to the lists? Would they be famous people who have worked to advance our equality by serving as role models? Or, would they be the thousands for whom we say *Yizkor* (memorial prayers) whom we have lost to the plague of AIDS, the blight of cancer, and so many horrific acts of violence committed in the name of homophobia? Perhaps they would be



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those straight allies who have stood up defiantly in support of us despite potential risk to themselves.

In conclusion, I offer the following blessing that might be included in your queer Sukkot celebration.

Eternal God, for far too long your gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and questioning children have been marginalized by their straight counterparts, especially those of the “religious right.” We have been made to continue wandering in the desert rather than being invited into the presence of the *Shechinah* who resides within the shelter of the sukkah. We ask, as we do each evening in the *Haskivenu*, “*u’phros aleinu sukkat shlomecha*” (spread over us your sukkah of peace).

We are not guests. We are equal inheritors of the Torah and full members of *k’lal Yisrael*. We embody the “four species” associated with Sukkot. We are sturdy like *lulavim* (palm fronds); we stand tall and proud. The *hadassim* (myrtle branches) of our eyes are fully open, basking in Your awesome radiance. The *aravot* (willow branches) of our lips impart the words emanating from our hearts, minds, and souls. We are created in Your image, holy vessels filled with the perfumed splendor of *etrogim* (citrons).

We, your daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, grandparents, relatives, colleagues, and friends, ask You who are *Baruch HaMakom*, the Source of Absolute Sacredness in our lives, to inspire every person with understanding. May we all enjoy the blessing of full inclusion at holiday tables and, especially, in the hearts of others. Amen.



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