

Sukkot

Ushpizin, Shefa, and Choosing Openness Despite Having Been Forced Open

by Ri J. Turner on Friday October 02, 2009

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Sukkot, Sukkot

Sukkot is a fall harvest holiday, coming fast on the heels of the High Holidays, joyful and abundant in counterpoint to the somberness and sensory deprivation of Yom Kippur. One *Sukkot* custom, which I first heard of due to the recent eponymous Israeli movie, is the custom of *ushpizin*. *Ushpizin* is the Aramaic word for “guests,” and it refers to the custom, originated by the Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed in the 16th century, of inviting seven spirits into our *sukkot* — the spirits of seven Biblical men, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David. Each of the ancestors is associated with one of the seven lower *sefirot* (emanations of God) — *chesed* (lovingkindness), *gevurah* (strength), *tiferet* (beauty), *netzach* (victory), *hod* (awe), *yesod* (foundation), and *malchut* (kingdom). We are invited to focus on one of the ancestors, and his accompanying *sefirah*, each day of the seven days of *Sukkot*. To make the ritual gender-egalitarian, some also invite the seven prophetesses (as *ushpizot*): Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther.

As the meaning of *ushpizin* (guests) implies, the custom is sometimes considered a custom of hospitality (in fact, some put food out for the *ushpizin* and then later donate that food to the hungry). In the aforementioned Israeli film, *Ushpizin* (2004), the custom becomes quite literally about hospitality—and its limits—when an observant Israeli couple, Moshe and Malli, suddenly find themselves saddled with two challenging guests for the holiday—escaped convicts, one of whom is an old friend who reminds Moshe a little too much of his own shady past.

Sukkot in general is a holiday about boundaries, about what we let in and what we keep out. The central physical ritual of the holiday is the *sukkah*, a flimsy temporary shelter. In *Ushpizin*, Moshe says that the *sukkah* is meant to remind us that everything in this life is temporary. We are challenged to let go of the illusion of control, to see what becomes possible when we admit that we are vulnerable, exposed to the elements. The custom of *ushpizin*, too, especially when taken literally as a practice of hospitality and *tzedakah* (charity), can challenge us to risk opening ourselves to uncomfortable experiences—we may send money to those we deem “unfortunates,” but are we prepared to invite them to sit around our own tables? When we open up to the uncertainty and discomfort of such an experience, what might be shattered for us, and what might be transformed?

At the same time, *Sukkot* also encourages us to open up to easier things—the pleasures of the harvest, the satisfaction of abundance, perhaps even the fullness of *shefa* (divine flow)—which Moshe and Malli experience when, in the midst of their poverty, they unexpectedly receive the resources they need to observe *Sukkot*. The custom of *ushpizin*, too, offers us the opportunity to invite G!d into our space and into our selves, one *sefirah* per day.

When I consider *Sukkot*'s tendency to challenge us to receive and to let in, I become immediately conscious of how the exhortation to “Open up!” takes on a different cast when it is addressed to those of us who have experienced abuse, particularly sexual abuse and assault. While “opening up” can be transformative, it can also be exactly the wrong thing to do when we already feel that our selves and bodies are wide open, too open. Even those of us who have not endured specific incidents of abuse may struggle with setting boundaries, with feelings of guilt or fears of abandonment whenever we say, “No, I’m keeping this for me, it’s not yours to take.” Many of those of us who are perceived as female especially experience this boundary confusion due to constant messages that everything we have—material, spiritual, creative, nurturant—should be made available for the use of others.

For those of us with these feelings of vulnerability, what do we do, then, with *Sukkot*'s invitation to open and receive? Before I say anything else, I first want to offer the solution that is most important and most neglected: we can opt out. Tradition, commandments, and “but this is such a nice holiday, you’ll get to be part of a lovely ritual with all your friends, dear” notwithstanding, no one but you gets to decide what you observe and how you observe it. If what you need to be doing is closing down shop and going inside for a while, then maybe it’s not the right time to be doing any opening or any sleeping under the stars.

However, while I have certainly had the experience of simply needing to say NO to spiritual opening, I have also experienced times when I’ve really wanted to open up but not known how. Paradoxically, those of us who have experienced violation or who have trouble setting boundaries are often the least available for intimacy—we drive our softest parts underground, out of reach of invaders. We do this for good reasons, but after a while, sometimes we lose our access to the deepest aspects of ourselves, even when it is safe to bring them out into the light. Some of us lose the ability to take pleasure in relationships, in sensory experience, in sex, in our relationship with the divine.

I want to propose that *Sukkot* and the custom of *ushpizin* can serve as a ritual of re-opening, of conscious opening, of learning how to unbury our ability to receive—this time in a safe, boundaried way that brings us a sense of connection and abundance rather than a sense of violation.

On a joyful occasion, it is easy to think, “Why am I feeling so numb? Why can’t I rejoice along with everyone else? I must not be trying hard enough.” Once we begin to feel safe, to know



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how to say NO and trust that our NO's will be respected, to feel ready to begin to say yes to some things—then we develop all sorts of expectations about how we “should” feel. After all, on Sukkot we are actually commanded (Leviticus 23:40) to rejoice! However, like the *ushpizin*, like *shefa*, joy is a guest. Guests can be invited, but they can't be dragged in: they have to come willingly, or they are no longer guests but prisoners.

What does it mean to rejoice on command? Perhaps it does not mean attempting the impossible task of dredging up an emotion that we simply are not experiencing. Perhaps it simply means becoming open to the possibility of experiencing it, letting go of whatever we're holding on to, allowing ourselves to be conduits—becoming present to what is, including the abundance of the season. If the result of this exercise in mindfulness is that we spend Sukkot numb and silent, collapsed in tears, or burning with rage, then maybe that's what rejoicing means for us this year. In fact, in the film *Ushpizin*, the moment at which Moshe says to Malli that he feels they are about to experience *shefa* is the moment right before all hell breaks loose. The point, I think, is that abundance isn't always easy. Especially on Sukkot with its emphasis on ephemerality, *shefa* may come in like Kali or Shiva, the whirlwind that breaks everything apart in order to make room for something new and more whole.

Either during or right after *Sukkot* (depending on your tradition), we read *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), which contains the famous line, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven” (*Kohelet* 3:1). Whatever “rejoicing” looks like for you this year, most likely it will be different next year. And it is my experience that when I don't fight to feel (what I shortsightedly assume is) joy, but rather permit myself to “rejoice” by feeling numbness, grief, or anger when those are what is present, I begin to find the hidden, tender parts of myself again, and gradually recover my ability to experience pleasure, connection, and devotion. So may it be for you—this Sukkot I wish you the blessings of conscious re-opening and of finding your own path back to joy.



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