

What Exactly Is a Sukkah?

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Have you ever asked yourself what defines a sukkah? Not how to build one or what makes it kosher, but why have one in the first place? What is its purpose? Was the sukkah part of daily life in ancient Israel? Did it have a role outside the holiday that bears its name?

The Torah does not address any of these questions directly. To solve the riddle of the sukkah we must first turn to the book of Isaiah, which mentions the sukkah as an aside in two passages. In 1:8 we read:

וְנוֹתְרָה בְּתִצִּיּוֹן כְּסֹכָה בְּכַרְם כְּמִלּוֹנָה בְּמִקְשָׁה כְּעִיר נְצוּרָה:

The daughter of Zion is left as a sukkah in a vineyard, as a hut in a cucumber patch, as a city besieged.

This analogy reveals two details: (1) the sukkah was situated in the agricultural fields, and (2) it was a vulnerable, probably temporary structure. The second passage is 4:6:

וְסֹכָה תִהְיֶה לְצִלְיוֹמָם מֵחֶרֶב וּלְמַחְסָה וּלְמִסְתוֹר מִזֶּרֶם וּמִמְטָר:

[God's protection] shall be a sukkah for shade during the days from heat, and as a refuge and shelter from the downpour and rain.

The sukkah's purpose was to protect one from the elements. That is why Jonah built a sukkah outside the city of Nineveh (Jonah 4:5). The sun was hot and there was no shade to be found in the fields. The sukkah was his only shelter and without it he wished to die (4:8).



A sukkah in a vineyard at the foot of Mt. Tabor, ca. 1920–1933 (Matson Collection)

While the books of Isaiah and Jonah tell us much about the sukkah, we still do not know why the sukkah is connected to Sukkot. For this we will turn to a different type of source, the ethnographic record. During the 1800s and early 1900s, a number of travelers described the practices of the Arab farmers in the land of Israel, then known as Palestine. These travel writings are important to Bible scholars because they describe agricultural practices very similar to the ones found in the Tanakh and archaeology. For example, in 1838, Edward Robinson and Eli Smith described the grape harvest outside of Hebron:

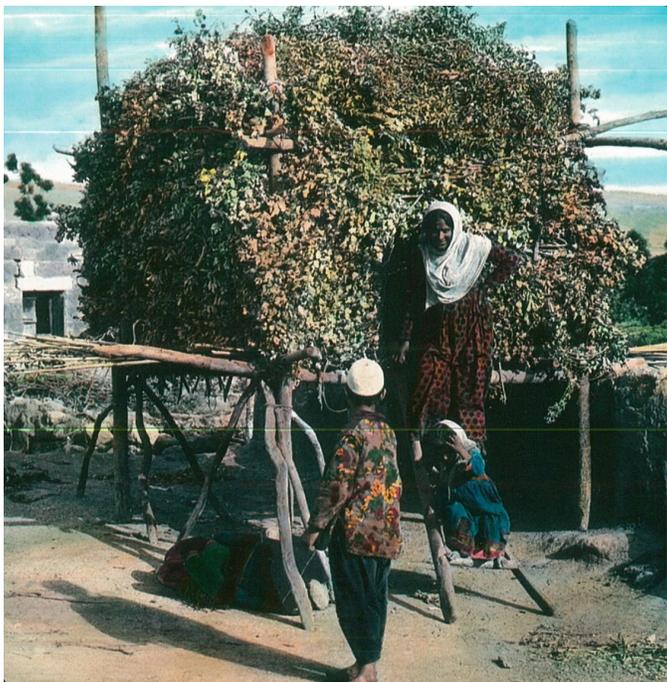
“The vintage is a season of hilarity and rejoicing to all; the town is then deserted, and the people live among the vineyards in lodges and in tents. The produce of these vineyards is celebrated throughout Palestine.” *Biblical Researches in Palestine* (Boston: 1856), 2:81.

The “lodges and tents” were in all likelihood the sukkot mentioned in the books of Isaiah and Jonah. What Robinson

and Smith add is that the sukkah was used during the harvest, which was a time of great joy and celebration. Similarly, Gustav Dalman observed in the early 1900s:

“[Between August and October], when the ripe grapes and figs need to be watched night and day, the farmer lives with his whole family in the vineyards ([Arabic] *kerūm*), which are also fig orchards. There he erects a pergola (*‘ari ṣhe, khēme*) out of some poles, usually on the roughly built watch-tower (*qaṣr, maṭṭara*) that always stands there (Is 5:2; Matth 21:33), and covers it with leafy branches or reeds. Living under the pergola means a joyful time during which there is no lack of special songs, and people eat their fill of fruit.” *Work and Customs in Palestine*, translated by Nadia Abdulhadi Sukhtian (Ramallah: Dar Al Nasher, 2013), 165 [161].

Dalman’s “pergolas,” or “Laube” in the original German, would have been called sukkot in Hebrew. Dalman clarifies how the farmer’s sukkah was occupied during the days of the tree-fruit harvest, which were arguably the happiest days of the year.



A sukkah with “leafy branches” near Banias, ca. 1900–1920
(Eretz Israel Museum)

Now that we have examined Isaiah, Jonah, and the ethnographic record, let us focus on Leviticus 23:39 and Deuteronomy 16:13, which explicitly link the holiday of Sukkot to the harvest:

אֲךְ בַחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַסְפֹּךְ אֶת־תְּבוֹאֹת
הָאָרֶץ תַּחְגּוּ אֶת־חַגֵּיהוָה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים

Certainly, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month when you gather in the produce of your land you shall observe the festival of the Lord seven days. (Leviticus 23:39)

חַג הַסֻּכּוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לְךָ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּאַסְפֹּךְ מִגֶּרְנֶךָ וּמִיְקָבְךָ:

You shall observe the festival of Sukkot for seven days when you gather in from your threshing floor and your wine vat. (Deuteronomy 16:13)

Sukkot and the harvest are inextricably tied to one another. Whereas Passover coincided with the barley harvest, and Shavuot coincided with the wheat harvest, Sukkot coincided with the tree-fruit harvest. This meant grapes, pomegranates, olives, dates, and figs. Dried grains were also brought indoors at this time in anticipation of the coming winter rains.

What emerges from this analysis is that Sukkot is a celebration of the fruit harvest, and the fruit harvest is celebrated in the sukkah. For the ancient Israelite, the sukkah would have conjured up feelings of joy and thanksgiving to God. That is why the sukkah was—and still is—a fitting symbol for the holiday that bears its name.