

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
First Two Days of Sukkot
September 30th & October 1st, 2023 ***15th & 16th Tishrei. 5784

[First Days of Sukkot Torah in a Nutshell: Leviticus 22:26 – 23:44; Numbers 29:12-16
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/742773/jewish/First-Days-of-Sukkot-Torah-Readings-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/742773/jewish/First-Days-of-Sukkot-Torah-Readings-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The reading begins with an injunction that a newborn calf, lamb, or kid must be left with its mother for seven days; one may not slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day.

The reading then lists the annual Callings of Holiness — the festivals of the Jewish calendar: the weekly Shabbat; the bringing of the Passover offering on 14 Nissan; the seven-day Passover festival beginning on 15 Nissan; the bringing of the Omer offering from the first barley harvest on the 2nd day of Passover, and the commencement, on that day, of the 49-day Counting of the Omer, culminating in the festival of Shavuot on the 50th day; a "remembrance of shofar blowing" on 1 Tishrei; a solemn fast day on 10 Tishrei; the Sukkot festival — during which we are to dwell in huts for seven days and take the "Four Kinds" — beginning on 15 Tishrei; and the immediately following holiday of the "8th day" of Sukkot (Shemini Atzeret).

G-d declares the fifteenth day (and the subsequent 6 days) of the seventh month to be a holy convocation, no work shall be done during that time. The reading then describes the Sukkot offerings which were brought in the Holy Temple.

[First Days of Sukkot Haftorahs in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/742779/jewish/First-Days-of-Sukkot-Haftorahs-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/742779/jewish/First-Days-of-Sukkot-Haftorahs-in-a-Nutshell.htm

[Day One: Zachariah 14:1-21.](#)

The prophet Zachariah prophesies about the world transformation that will occur in the end of days, when “the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one.”

But first he describes a great war that will center around Jerusalem immediately before the ultimate Redemption. G-d will gather the nations for war, and He will do battle with them, by visiting various diseases and ailments upon them. Zachariah then notes that those of the nations who will survive this cataclysmic war will be required to go to Jerusalem every year on the holiday of Sukkot to pay homage to G-d.

[Day Two: I Kings 8:2-21.](#)

Today's haftorah describes the dedication of Solomon's Temple, which occurred during the holiday of Sukkot. (The celebration of the completion of the Holy Temple began a few days earlier, on the 8th of Tishrei.)

The construction of the Holy Temple was completed. King Solomon assembled the

leaders and elders of the tribes to Jerusalem, and amidst great fanfare the Levites transported the Ark from its temporary location in the City of David and installed it in the Holy of Holies chamber in the Holy Temple. Immediately, G-d's presence appeared in the Temple, in the form of a smoky cloud. King Solomon then blessed G-d. He recalled the history of the sanctuary, how his father, King David, had wanted to build it—but was told by G-d that it would be his son who would accomplish this feat. "And the L-rd has established His word that He spoke, and I have risen up in the place of David my father, and sit on the throne of Israel, as the L-rd spoke, and have built a house for the name of the L-rd, the G-d of Israel. And I have set there a place for the ark, wherein (is) the covenant of the Lord, which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt."

[Succot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/succot-family-edition/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/succot-family-edition/>

Part I

The Torah tells us to: "Live in succot for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in succot so that your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in succot when I brought them out of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" ([Vayikra 23:42-43](#)).

There are two opinions in the Mishnah. Rabbi Eliezer held that the succah represents the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Israelites during the wilderness years, protecting them from heat during the day and the cold during the night, and bathing them with the radiance of the Divine Presence. Rabbi Akiva on the other hand said, "*Succot mammash*", meaning a succah is a succah, no more and no less: it is a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. It has no symbolism. It is what it is. If we follow Rabbi Eliezer then it is obvious why we celebrate by making a succah. It is there to remind us of a miracle. All three pilgrimage festivals are about miracles. Pesach is about the miracle of the Exodus, Shavuot is about the miracle of the revelation at Mount Sinai, and Succot is about God's tender care of His people, during the journey across the desert. But according to Rabbi Akiva, a succah is merely a hut, so what was the miracle? There is nothing unusual about living in a hut if you are living a nomadic existence in the desert. Why should there be a festival dedicated to something ordinary, commonplace and non-miraculous? Rashbam (Rashi's grandson) says the succah was there to remind the Israelites of their past so that at the very moment they were feeling the greatest satisfaction at living in Israel – at the time of the ingathering of the produce of the land – they should remember their lowly origins. They were once a group of refugees without a home, never knowing when they would have to move on. The festival of Succot, according to Rashbam, exists to remind us of our humble origins so that we never

fall into the complacency of taking freedom, the land of Israel and the blessings it yields, for granted. However, there is another way of understanding Rabbi Akiva. The succah represents the courage the Israelites had to travel, to move, to leave security behind, and follow God's call, as did Avraham and Sarah at the dawn of our history. According to Rabbi Akiva the succah is the temporary home of a temporarily homeless people. It symbolised the courage of a bride willing to follow her husband on a risk-laden journey to a place she had never seen before – a love that showed itself in the fact that she was willing to live in a hut, trusting her husband's promise that one day they would have a permanent home.

What is truly remarkable is that Succot is called, by tradition, *zeman simchateinu*, "our time of joy." That, to me, is the wonder at the heart of the Jewish experience: that Jews throughout the ages were able to experience risk and uncertainty at every level of their existence and yet they were still able to rejoice. That is spiritual courage of a high order. Faith is not certainty; faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. Faith is the ability to rejoice in the midst of instability and change, travelling through the wilderness of time toward an unknown destination.

Part II: Succot for Our Time

Of all the festivals, Succot is surely the one that speaks most powerfully to our time. Kohelet (which we read on Succot) could almost have been written in the twenty-first century. Here is the ultimate success, the man who has it all – the houses, the cars, the clothes, the adoring women, the envy of all men – who has pursued everything this world can offer from pleasure to possessions to power to wisdom, and yet who, surveying the totality of his life, can only say, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."

Kohelet's failure to find meaning is directly related to his obsession with the "I" and the "Me": "I built for myself. I gathered for myself. I acquired for myself." The more he pursues his desires, the emptier his life becomes. There is no more powerful critique of the consumer society, whose idol is the self, whose icon is the "selfie" and whose moral code is "Whatever works for you." This is reflected in today's society that achieved unprecedented affluence, giving people more choices than they had ever known, and yet at the same time saw an unprecedented rise in alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, stress-related syndromes, depression, attempted suicide and actual suicide. A society of tourists, not pilgrims, is not one that will yield the sense of a life worth living. Of all things people have chosen to worship, the self is the least fulfilling. A culture of narcissism quickly gives way to loneliness and despair.

By the end of the book, Kohelet finds meaning in simple things. "Sweet is the sleep of a labouring man. Enjoy life with the woman you love. Eat, drink and enjoy the sun." That, ultimately, is the meaning of Succot as a whole. It is a festival of simple things. It is, Jewishly, the time we come closer to nature than any other, sitting in a hut with only leaves for a roof, and taking in our hands the unprocessed fruits and

foliage of the palm branch, the citron, twigs of myrtle and leaves of willow. It is a time when we briefly liberate ourselves from the sophisticated pleasures of the city and the processed artefacts of a technological age, and recapture some of the innocence we had when we were young, when the world still had the radiance of wonder.

Part III

The power of Succot is that it takes us back to the most elemental roots of our being. You don't need to live in a palace to be surrounded by Clouds of Glory. You don't need to be rich to buy yourself the same leaves and fruit that a billionaire uses in worshiping God. Living in the succah and inviting guests to your meal, you discover – such is the premise of Ushpizin, the mystical guests – that the people who have come to visit you are none other than Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaacov and their wives. What makes a hut more beautiful than a home is that when it comes to Succot, there is no difference between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. We are all strangers on earth, temporary residents in God's almost eternal universe. And whether or not we are capable of pleasure, whether or not we have found happiness, we can all feel joy.

Succot is the time we ask the most profound question of what makes a life worth living. Having prayed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to be written in the Book of Life, Succot and Kohelet force us to remember how brief life actually is, and how vulnerable. “Teach us rightly to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” ([Tehillim 90:12](#)). What matters is not how long we live, but how intensely we feel that life is a gift we repay by giving to others. Joy, the overwhelming theme of the festival, is what we feel when we know that it is a privilege simply to be alive, inhaling the intoxicating beauty of this moment amidst the profusion of nature, the teeming diversity of life and the sense of communion with those many others with whom we share a history and a hope.

Part IV

Most majestically of all, Succot is the festival of insecurity. It is the candid acknowledgment that there is no life without risk, yet we can face the future without fear when we know we are not alone. God is with us, in the rain that brings blessings to the earth, in the love that brought the universe and us into being, and in the resilience of spirit that allowed a small and vulnerable people to outlive the greatest empires the world has ever known. Succot reminds us that God's glory was present in the small, portable Mishkan that Moshe and the Israelites built in the desert even more emphatically than in Shlomo HaMelech's Temple with all its grandeur. A temple can be destroyed.

But a succah, broken, can be rebuilt tomorrow. Security is not something we can achieve physically but it is something we can acquire mentally, psychologically, spiritually. All it needs is the courage and willingness to sit under the shadow of God's sheltering wings.

The succah became in the course of time a symbol, not only of forty years in the wilderness, but of centuries of exile and dispersion. In the Middle Ages alone, Jews were expelled from England in 1290, from France several times (1182, 1322, 1394), from Vienna in 1421, Cologne in 1424, Bavaria in 1442, Milan in 1489 and most traumatically, from Spain in 1492. In the 1880s a wave of pogroms in Eastern Europe sent millions of Jews into flight to the West, and these migrations continue even today. Jewish history reads like a vast continuation of the stages of the Israelites' journey in the thirty-second chapter of the book of Bamidbar: "They traveled...and they encamped.... They traveled... and they encamped." Too often, home turned out to be no more than a temporary dwelling, a succah. More than most, whether in the land of Israel or elsewhere, Jews have known the full force of insecurity.

Yet with its genius for the unexpected and its ability to rescue hope from tragedy, Judaism declared this festival of insecurity to be *zeman simchateinu*, the season of our rejoicing. For the succah, that quintessential symbol of vulnerability, turns out to be the embodiment of faith, the faith of a people who forty centuries ago set out on a risk-laden journey across a wilderness of space and time, with no more protection than the sheltering presence of the Shechinah. Sitting in the succah under its canopy of leaves, I often think of my ancestors and their wanderings across Europe in search of safety, and I begin to understand how faith was their only home. It was fragile, chillingly exposed to the storms of prejudice and hate. But it proved stronger than superpowers and outlived them all.

Toward the end of his great book, *A History of the Jews*, Paul Johnson wrote:

The Jews were not just innovators. They were also exemplars and epitomisers of the human condition. They seemed to present all the inescapable dilemmas of man in a heightened and clarified form.... The Jews were the emblem of homeless and vulnerable humanity. But is not the whole earth no more than a temporary transit camp?

Those words go to the heart of Succot. To know that life is full of risk and yet to affirm it, to sense the full insecurity of the human situation and yet to rejoice: this, for me, is the essence of faith. Judaism is no comforting illusion that all is well in this dark world. It is instead the courage to celebrate in the midst of uncertainty, and to rejoice even in the transitory shelter of the succah, the Jewish symbol of home.

Part V: The Arba Minim – The Four Species

The *Arba Minim*, the "Four Species", is one of the central commands of the festival. The Torah specifies:

"On the first day, you shall take for yourselves a fruit of the citron tree, palm fronds, myrtle branches and willows of the brook, and be joyous in the presence of the Lord your God for seven days." Vayikra 23:40

What the Four Species have in common is that wherever you find them, there is

water. They are the visible blessings of the rain that fell in the previous year. We bring them together now in thanks to God for the blessing of rain in the past year, and to pray for rain in the year to come.

The blessing we recite refers only to the lulav, since it is the tallest and most conspicuous of the four species. The lulav is waved in six directions: east, south, west and north, (i.e., straight ahead, right, rear, left) corresponding to the directions of the wind, then up and down. In each case it should be waved three times.

The Four Species represent four parts of the body. The lulav represents the spine, the myrtle the eyes, the willow the mouth, and the etrog the heart. As the etrog has both aroma and fruit, so there are those in the Jewish people who have knowledge of Torah and good deeds. As the palm tree has fruit but no aroma, so there are those in the Jewish people who have knowledge of the Torah but not good deeds. As the myrtle has aroma but no fruit, so there are those in the Jewish people who have good deeds but not knowledge of the Torah. And as the willow has neither aroma nor fruit, so there are those in the Jewish people who have neither Torah nor good deeds. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “To make it impossible for Israel to be destroyed, let all of them be bound together, and let each atone for the others” (Pesikta deRav Kahana 27:9).

The Four Species are a symbolic expression of our rejoicing that the Israelites left the wilderness, “A place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; there was not even water to drink” ([Bamidbar 20:25](#)), and came to a country full of fruit trees and rivers. In order to remember this, we take the fruit which is the most pleasant of the land, branches that smell the best, the most beautiful leaves, and also the best of herbs, i.e., the willows of the brook. These four kinds have also these three purposes: First, they were plentiful in those days in the Land of Israel so that everyone could easily get them. Secondly, they have a good appearance, they are green; some of them, namely the citron and the myrtle, are also excellent as regards their smell, the branches of the palm tree and the willow having neither good nor bad smell. Thirdly, they keep fresh and green for seven days, which is not the case with peaches, pomegranates, asparagus, nuts and the like.

But is Israel really a land with plentiful water? Moshe described it to the people in a way that suggested it was not:

The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

Devarim 11:10–12

Israel would not have a regular, predictable water supply like the Tigris-Euphrates valley or the Nile Delta. It depends on rain, and in Israel rain is not something that

can be taken for granted. Drought and famine led Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov into exile at some time in their lives.

The uncertainty of rain is another dimension of insecurity that frames Succot as a festival. The natural focus of attention for those who live in the land is to look up to the heaven, rather than down to the naturally fertile earth. It meant the strongest possible connection between faith itself and the rainfall needed for the land to yield its produce, and for the nation to be able to celebrate a harvest of plenty. Israel is a land where the climate itself becomes a commentary on the faithfulness of the nation to God. Israel is the land of promise, but it will always depend on God's willingness to fulfil His promises.

The topography and climate of a country affects the culture and ethos of those who live there. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, the most powerful reality was the regularity of nature, the succession of the seasons which seemed to mirror the slow revolution of the stars. The cultures to which these cradles of civilisation gave rise were cosmological and their sense of time cyclical. The universe seemed to be ruled by the heavenly bodies whose hierarchy and order was replicated in the hierarchy and order of life on earth.

Israel, by contrast, was a land without regularities. There was no guarantee that next year the rain would fall, the earth would yield its crops, and the trees their fruit. So, in Israel a new sense of time was born – the time we call historical. Those who lived, or live, in Israel exist in a state of radical contingency. They can never take the future for granted. They depend on something other than nature. In Egypt, where the source of life was the Nile, you looked down. In Israel, where the source of life is rain, you had no choice but to look up.

When Moshe told the Israelites the full story about the land, he was telling them that it was a place where not just wheat and barley, but the human spirit also, grew. It was the land where people are lifted beyond themselves because, time and again, they have to believe a Being beyond themselves. Not accidentally but essentially, by its climate, topography and location, Israel is the land where, merely to survive, the human eye must turn to heaven and the human ear to heaven's call.

[Why We Gather – Sukkot by Alisa Braun](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-we-gather/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-we-gather/>

This past motzei Shabbat marked 38 weeks since the demonstrations in Israel against the judicial overhaul began. Once again my social media accounts lit up with photos of the streets of Tel Aviv engulfed in crowds, powerful images of democracy in action. I find the sight of so many people gathering to be awe-inspiring and uplifting, and in a ceremony associated with the holiday of Sukkot, I have found some clues as to why witnessing and joining such gatherings can be so moving.

Just a few weeks ago we read Parashat Vayeilekh, which includes Moses's

command that the Torah be read publicly on Sukkot every seven years:
And Moses instructed them as follows: Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Deut. 31:10–11

The ceremony is known by term hakhel (gathering), based on the first word of the verse that follows: “hakhel et ha’am,” “Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching” (31:12)

Why does this gathering take place on Sukkot?

According to the biblical scholar Marc Brettler, it is likely that in agriculturally-oriented ancient Israel, Sukkot, not Rosh Hashanah, was the new year festival. Celebrated at the end of the harvest season, it marked the end of one year and the beginning of another. Sukkot was the time when everyone could finally rest after months of hard work. It was thus an appropriate time for this kind of large-scale ritual to take place. And since logistically it would be impossible to gather all members of the community annually, it was instructed to happen once every seven years.[1]

What happens at the Hakhel? The verse says that B’nai Yisrael must gather “so that they may hear, and so learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching” (31:12). Maimonides understands this as a kind of reenactment of the revelation at Sinai (Hilkhot Hagigah 3:6). The only other place in the Tanakh where the phrase “hakhel et ha’am” is used is earlier in Deuteronomy when Moses recounts God commanding him to gather the nation at Sinai.

In this sense, the Hakhel allows future generations to feel the sense of awe and wonder that was present at Sinai. Experiencing the sheer enormity of a gathering where all of Israel would be joined in common purpose would generate a powerful affective response. This sense of awe is furthered by what the Rabbis and commentators understood as the king’s unique role in the ceremony (Sotah 41a). Because the Torah was usually read to the public by the kohen gadol, a prophet or a judge, the king’s presence adds an element of surprise (Abarbanel 31:12).

The integral reason for the Hakhel is that it enables Israel to reconnect with God and renew their relationship with the covenant. Regardless of how powerful the original revelation at Sinai was, we need to be constantly reminded of it. And no one is exempt. According to Maimonides, “Even great Sages who know the entire Torah are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration” (Hilkhot Hagigah 3:6). The ritual thus unifies Israel in shared purpose and moral obligation.

The Hakhel is also an occasion to draw attention to the covenant. According to Sefer Hahinukh, when everyone congregates at one time, it inspires people to ask,

“What is the reason that everyone is gathering together?” (612). The questions provide an occasion to “praise the Torah and to speak of its value,” to ignite a desire to know God and learn Torah. Gathering can amplify a message by creating a sense of curiosity and wonder.

While we of course do not convene the Hakhel in this way today, many Jewish communities, most prominently Chabad, have creatively thought of ways to revive the concept.[2] Yet there are still other ways we can come together with a sense of shared purpose.

Why do we join public demonstrations? Why does even the sight of large-scale collective action provoke an emotional response? As we learn from our commentators’ views on the Hakhel, it’s because it produces a feeling of awe, of being part of something larger than ourselves, and can create a sense of solidarity without regard for distinctions of age, intelligence, or wealth. It is a moment when instead of feeling powerless to change, we can see that we are not alone in our struggles. We can feel strength and confidence in numbers. And in our “blink and you missed it” world, it allows us to draw attention to the causes and issues that are important in our lives.[3]

As the sociologist and journalist Zeynep Tufekci has written, “Collective action is a life-changing experience. To be in a sea of people demanding positive social change is empowering and exhilarating. Protests work because they sustain movements over the long term as participants bond during collective action.”[4]

I would encourage everyone to consider joining a demonstration, a march, a protest to support any cause about which you feel passionate. It can make you feel more hopeful, more confident, and it can inspire others to keep hoping and working for a better world. [1] Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Hakhel Ceremony”

(<https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-hakhel-ceremony-who-what-when-and-where>). There is also a well-known disagreement between the medieval commentators Ibn Ezra and Ramban about whether Hakhel takes place in the seventh year or the eighth year (the year after shemittah). [2] Jackie Hajdenberg, “The ancient Jewish practice of Hakhel, an every-7-years gathering, gets a 21st century revival,” JTA October 9, 2022. [3] For a sustained discussion of the Hakhel as a framework for viewing “political gathering as spiritually transformative” see community organizer Meir Lakein’s “On Gathering”. Political Theology, Vol 23. No 1-2 141-147. [4] “Do Protests Even Work?” The Atlantic. June 24, 2020.

Sukkot: The Tikkun of Climate Action by Rabbi Lisa D. Grant, Ph.D.

https://truah.org/resources/lisa-grant-sukkot-moraltorah_2023/

After the summer we’ve had, you don’t need me to tell you we’re in the midst of a climate crisis. The question is whether we face it with desperation or determination. Climate scientists and activists tell us it’s not too late. We can still avert the worst of what lies ahead with prompt, wise collective action. Yet it’s easy to feel, in our hearts and in the pits of our stomachs, that we are doing too little too late.

The festival of Sukkot offers us rich resources for living this duality, and the spiritual strength to work for change without giving in to despair. There are so many themes in the holiday that connect us to nature, that remind us of the interconnectivity of the universe and of the randomness, futility, and fragility of life. We are instructed to be “only joyful” ([Deuteronomy 16:15](#)) and at the same time we pray the *Hoshanot*, pleading to God again and again, “Save us, save us.” We read in the Book of Ecclesiastes that “all is mere breath” and yet we are instructed to be joyful and do good and take pleasure in our toil, for it is all a gift from God ([3:13](#)). These dualities powerfully capture our current situation where we vacillate between hopelessness and determination. The sukkah itself holds this duality as well. Rabbi Akiva connects the sukkah to “clouds of glory” that protected the Israelites as they wandered through the wilderness ([Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael 13:20:1-2](#), commentary on [Exodus 13:20](#)), yet a sukkah is the most flimsy of dwellings that could easily be swept away by a storm. What a metaphor for this moment!

Perhaps the most dominant theme of the holiday is our dependence on water. As we know too well, water is life in the right measure and death when there is too little or too much. Sukkot falls at the start of the rainy season in the Land of Israel. To mark this seasonal transition, on the final day of the festival, we add a prayer for rain that invokes all of our sacred ancestors’ connection to water and pleads for rain to ensure abundance in the year to come. This is also when we begin inserting a prayer for rain as part of the Amidah in the daily liturgy.

Central to commemorating Sukkot during Temple times was the *Simchat Beit Hasho’evah*, the rejoicing at the place of the water drawing. Every evening during the intermediate days of the holiday, water was poured on the Temple’s altar amidst raucous dancing and singing and blasts of the shofar. Our ancient forebears understood how important rain was for a good life and enacted this ritual to plead with God to provide water in the right balance. This was an anxious time of uncertainty that was surrounded in joyful celebration. Indeed, the Mishnah states that “One who has not seen the *Simchat Beit Hasho’evah* has never seen true rejoicing” ([Sukkah 5.1](#)). The Mishnah goes on to describe the sequence of events: “At the conclusion of the first festival day, the priests and the Levites descended from the Israelites’ Courtyard to the Women’s Courtyard, where they would introduce a significant repair....” ([Mishnah Sukkah 5:2](#)) Or in Hebrew, ומתקנין שם תיקון גדול

The Mishnah is silent on what this great “tikkun” was. The rabbis later explain that it had to do with separating the men from the women so there would not be any licentious behavior in the midst of this ecstatic celebration.

Rather than continuing along those lines, however, let’s imagine a radical reinterpretation and see this “great repair” as an invitation to climate action. Indeed, if we are to bequeath a healthy planet to our descendants, we are in

desperate need of repair. Let Sukkot be our call to action this year. May it give us the spiritual resolve to live in the midst of great uncertainty and challenge, and to take action to pursue climate justice in this vast interconnected world of ours. Only then, when we work together, will we be blessed, as we are taught in **Deuteronomy 16:15**, “For Your God THE ETERNAL will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy.”

(Rabbi Lisa D. Grant, Ph.D. is Director of the New York Rabbinical Program and the Eleanor Sinsheimer Distinguished Service Professor in Jewish Education at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. She is editor, along with Cantor Lisa B. Segal, of “The Year of Mourning: A Jewish Journey” (CCAR Press 2023).)

FYI

[Why most Asian Jews use imported etrogs on Sukkot even though their countries grow the fruit by Jordyn Haime](https://www.jta.org/2023/09/27/global/why-most-asian-jews-use-imported-etrogs-on-sukkot-even-though-their-countries-grow-the-fruit)

[jta.org/2023/09/27/global/why-most-asian-jews-use-imported-etrogs-on-sukkot-even-though-their-countries-grow-the-fruit?](https://www.jta.org/2023/09/27/global/why-most-asian-jews-use-imported-etrogs-on-sukkot-even-though-their-countries-grow-the-fruit?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_Around_the_World&utm_medium=email&mpweb=161-62510-45437)

[utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_Around_the_World&utm_medium=email&mpweb=161-62510-45437](https://www.jta.org/2023/09/27/global/why-most-asian-jews-use-imported-etrogs-on-sukkot-even-though-their-countries-grow-the-fruit?utm_source=JTA_Maropost&utm_campaign=JTA_Around_the_World&utm_medium=email&mpweb=161-62510-45437)

TAIPEI, Taiwan (JTA) — Rebecca Kanthor, a member of a progressive Jewish community in Shanghai, knows that she can easily order lulavs and etrogs in a few clicks online.

Kanthor, who belongs to Kehilat Shanghai, simply logs onto Taobao, China’s equivalent to Amazon. Etrogs, important components of a ritual for the Sukkot holiday, are known as xiang yuan (fragrant citrus, or citron) in Chinese. While American Jews may spend anywhere between \$20 and \$200 on a single etrog grown in the Mediterranean, etrogs grown in China, mostly in the southwestern Yunnan province, are available on Taobao for about \$2 each.

Taobao also sells a wide array of traditional products made from the etrog, including tea, perfume, preserves and candy. The fruit is well known in China as a medicine used to treat everything from stomach issues to severe cough. (The components of the lulav, the other major component of Sukkot rituals, are available, too, in potted form: palm, willow, and myrtle plants go for around \$7 altogether.)

But even though etrogs are available locally, most Jewish communities throughout Asia opt to import them from countries such as Israel or Italy for Sukkot. That’s because rabbinic authorities on Jewish law have for decades debated whether etrogs grown in Asia meet the standards for ritual use.

The etrog plays a central role on Sukkot, when Jews are commanded to hold it as they shake the lulav and recite the holiday’s prayers. The fruit’s ritual significance has given rise to a competitive marketplace: Some Jews pay hundreds of dollars for the perfect fruit and spend hundreds more on etrog boxes.

Most important to observant Jews today are the rules proclaiming that an etrog

must be clean and without blemishes; that it retains its pittam — a protrusion separate from the stem; and that the plant must not be grafted.

“Most important: etrog is a weak tree,” said Rabbi Shalom Chazan, an emissary for the Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement stationed in Shenzhen, China. “Usually, farmers will make a graftage between an etrog and lemon tree to make it stronger. That makes the etrog not kosher. We don’t know if the Chinese farmers do it or not, therefore we buy from Israel or Italy, and Morocco, to make sure it’s kosher.” Chabad will import about 40 etrogs to share with the eight Chabad communities throughout China this year, he said.

Centuries of debate over the ritual propriety of Asian etrogs

These rules are borne out of rabbinic commentary, not the Torah, which only describes the ritual fruit as p’ri etz hadar, which has been interpreted as “fruit from the beautiful tree,” “beautiful fruit from any tree” or the “choice fruit of a tree.” Scientists have traced the fruit’s genetic origins to the triangle of southwest China, northern Myanmar and northeast India. Today the etrog still grows in abundance in that area. But it was after the fruit migrated that it caught on with ancient Jews. According to David Z. Moster, a Bible scholar and author of “Etrog: How a Chinese Fruit Became A Jewish Symbol,” the etrog was the first citrus fruit that traveled from East to West — likely because of its thick rind that hardens rather than rots over time, preserving the fruit and seeds inside. It arrived in Israel around the fourth to third centuries BCE, and while it is not clear when exactly the etrog became the “choice fruit of the tree,” it quickly rose as an important symbol to distinguish Jews from Christians and Samaritans while fulfilling rules laid out in the Torah.

“Every Jewish community has, in the past, found what they wanted the most,” said Moster. “There’s the Yemenite etrog, which, if you get a really good one, you get the size of a football. ... A lot of the European Jews are looking for [an etrog with] a gartel, a belt ... Now, in the modern world, a person like me can go to Borough Park [a heavily Orthodox neighborhood in Brooklyn] and see 10,000 etrogim in one day.”

In modern times, most Jews in the West used etrogs grown in what is now Israel, the Caribbean or North Africa, including Morocco. But in the East, where most Jewish communities formed in the 18th and 19th centuries, debates over the etrog continued, especially with the discovery of the Chinese “Buddha’s hand” citron, which sprouts finger-like protrusions due to a genetic mutation.

Rabbi Asher Oser of Hong Kong’s historic Ohel Leah synagogue has researched the subject heavily for classes he has taught. He found documents revealing debates among Baghdadi rabbis about the Buddha’s hand citron, which is often not considered an etrog at all. (“All etrogim are citrons but not all citrons are etrogim,” Moster wrote.) Most important, the rabbis wrote, was continuing tradition. “In the city of Baghdad we don’t allow the Dibdib tree, which has all the signs of an

etrog, except it is sour,” wrote Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad in 1909 in response to questions about the Buddha’s hand. “If a person is in a strange place and they find a fruit completely similar to etrogs of the place where they are coming from, then they can be used. If they’re not completely similar ... they should not be used.” Hong Kong’s Jewish community has continued the tradition today, ordering etrogs from Israel or the United States.

Thapan Dubayehudi, a member of the Jewish community in Kochi, India, said Jews enjoyed local etrogs from trees outside of the local synagogue until the late 1990s. But as more Jews began traveling between Israel and Kochi every year, the community elected to ditch the local fruits and use Israeli ones brought back by individuals.

“There’s high-quality, rabbinically blessed supplies coming from Israel. Then why would we grow the local varieties that are usually smaller and not exactly the same species?” Dubayehudi said. “It’s been 30 years, none of the trees are left there.”

[A World War II etrog rescue, of sorts](#)

According to researchers, etrogs from what is now Israel or Iraq have long been preferable in Asia. Jewish communities in Shanghai and Kobe, Japan, for decades in the late 19th and early 20th centuries received etrogs from the wealthy Abraham family, international traders who had brought a Baghdadi etrog plant with them to Shanghai. It was planted outside the Abraham mansion and tended by Chinese gardeners, according to Yechezkel Leitner’s 1987 book “Operation–Torah Rescue.” Leitner wrote that this tradition ended after Pearl Harbor, when patriarch David Abraham was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp and the family’s property was seized by the Japanese, who had occupied parts of the city. With the Jewish community desperate for the ritual fruit at Sukkot, someone was sent to climb the walls around the family’s garden and pick etrogs to distribute. The Japanese army then cut down the tree in retaliation.

With no other choice, the Jews were left to source local etrogs and were again faced with the Buddha’s hand variety. The community was conflicted.

“Some experts in halacha [Jewish law] used this esrog for the religious observance without pronouncing the customary blessing over it — to denote their doubts regarding its authenticity,” Leitner wrote. Others used it as a symbolic physical reminder of the mitzvah, while others refused to use it at all.

[Getting ‘creative’ to import etrogs](#)

In today’s world, importing fresh fruit across borders is a complicated process that can require significant paperwork and sometimes diplomatic intervention. Chabad was only able to legally import etrogs into China beginning in 2017, after a Chinese professor of Jewish studies helped the communities provide adequate documentation, according to an article from that year on the Lubavitch website. Before then, emissaries had to come up with “creative alternatives,” said Rabbi Shalom Greenberg of Shanghai. Chabad emissaries did not elaborate when asked

what those solutions were.

In Taiwan, decades ago, community members would bring etrogs from Hong Kong back to Taipei in their luggage. Since Chabad arrived in 2011, they have been legally imported with the help of the Israeli representative office but not always made available to the wider community.

Today, the Japan Jewish Community in Tokyo also gets help from the Israeli consulate and Chabad, though “nothing is certain until it arrives,” said Rabbi Andrew Scheer. One lulav and etrog set is priced at \$150 before shipping, and as far as Scheer knows, etrogs don’t grow locally. “If it could be produced locally, that would be best. Just like with cars, ‘Made in Japan’ implies the highest quality.” The etrog has long been hard to get, said Moster.

“In many Jewish lands, if they wanted an etrog, they’re gonna have to send someone on a multi-thousand-mile trip and cross many nations, just to be able to pick this thing up and get it there in time,” he said. “So the idea of it being historically hard to get also added to its value.”

At least one community in Asia has used locally grown etrogs since its establishment over 2,000 years ago: the Bene Israel in Western India, where the citron is known as the bijora.

In Bene Israel Jewish culture, the bijora appears across traditions and holidays, said Esther David, a Bene Israel writer from Ahmedabad, a city of about 8 million with a community of about 100 Jews.

“For Bene Israel Jews, Bijora is a holy fruit and placed as an offering with a myrtle twig on the chair of Prophet Elijah, at the synagogue. Bijora is also placed on the prophet’s chair during the circumcision of a Jewish male child,” David said. During a malida — a ceremony of thanksgiving to the prophet Elijah unique to the Bene Israel — a bijora is placed on the ceremonial plate.

Austen Haeems, a member of the Ahmedabad community, has been growing etrogs for over a decade and providing them to the community free of charge. He says they are grown naturally and without grafting, starting from the seed. The trees produce 30 to 40 fruits each year.

But if there isn’t enough to go around, bijoras are readily available at local markets for about 100 rupees, or \$1.20, year-round.

“On my dining table, you will always find one etrog. My wife keeps it until it dries up,” Haeems said.

Yahrtzeits

Bob Woog remembers his father Cornelius M. Woog on Sun. Oct. 1st.

Rich Cohen remembers his father William Cohen on Sun. Oct. 1st.

Edna Axelrod remembers her mother Edna Kaplan Ball Zehner on Wed. Oct. 4th

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin’s sister Rose Rand on Wed. Oct. 4th

Perry Fine remembers his father Melvin Fine on Fri Oct. 6th

