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The Feast of Sukkot Celebrated Nehemiah 8: 13-18

The feast of Sukkot celebrated DIG: What happened when the people truly understood (Deuteronomy 16:14)? Who was included in the second-day follow up study? What did they discover and do (see Leviticus 23:34-43)? What is the link between the Exodus from Egypt and their return from the Babylonian Exile? How did this add to the festive spirit?

REFLECT: What acts of God do you celebrate regularly and with joy as the Israelites did here? What three activities from Chapter 8 would be foundational to the renewal of your messianic synagogue or church? How could you help in one such activity?

During the ministry of Ezra (to see link click [Bf](#) - The Second Return). Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs (see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: **The Nehemiah Memoirs).**

On the second day of the seventh month of Tishri, the day after Ezra began reading the Torah scroll (to see link click [Bm](#) - Ezra Reads the Torah Scroll of Moses), a special group consisting of the heads of the families along with the cohanim and the Levites gathered around Ezra to gain insight (Hebrew: *sakal*) into the words of the Torah (Nehemiah 8:13). The word **insight means to be prudent, to be wise, to have foresight, to be shrewd in the practical management of one's daily affairs and includes the qualities of discernment and keen awareness. **In the first example of leadership in the Nehemiah Memoirs (see [Bt](#) - The Third Return), it is essential that leaders have insight. A leader must be able to see the big picture, to envision the tomorrows of any undertaking, to visualize the future consequences of today's actions, to calculate risk and develop contingencies. He or she must look further down the road than those who follow. No leader can remain entangled in only the tedious details of today.****

Knowledge does not automatically create **insight**. Vast amount of Bible facts won't make anyone more **insightful**. Remember the twelve apostles who helped **Yeshua** serve the fish and bread to more than 5,000 people? As they watched the bread and fish multiply in **His** hands, you would think they would have learned that **He** could exercise power over any circumstance in life-that nothing was beyond **His** ability. Yet only a few hours later, they demonstrated that the lesson failed to create **insight**. **Jesus** had them take a boat (without **Him**) across the Sea of Galilee. The sky grew dark as the clouds gathered for a storm. The winds started to blow, the apostles shook with fear. Then **Messiah** arrived walking on the waves: **Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped. They were utterly dumbfounded, for they still hadn't understood about the bread and fish. Instead, their hearts were hardened (Mark 6:51-52). They** had been exposed to **the Master's** immense power over the elements before, **they** had seen **His** miracles and heard **His** teaching, but **their** knowledge failed to create **insight**.¹⁵⁹



The heads of the families along with the cohanim and the Levites gathered around Ezra to gain insight was a more select group than the previous day. **They found written in the Torah that ADONAI had commanded through Moses that Bnei-Yisrael should dwell in sukkot during the feast of the seventh month (Nehemiah 8:14). It** was one of the three great pilgrimage-festivals of the Jewish religious calendar (**Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16**). **Ezra 3:4** describes **the Feast of Booths** being celebrated just after **the First Return** of exiles (see [Aq - Rebuilding the Bronze Altar and the Festival of Sukkot](#)). But eighty years had passed from then until now. We must presume that the celebration of **Sukkot** had fallen into disuse. **They** were so cut to the heart about it that **they** immediately wanted to celebrate **the feast**.

So that limited group went out **and spread this message in all their towns and in Jerusalem saying, "Go out to the hill country and bring olive**

branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees to make sukkot, just as it is written.” We know that this feast should begin on **the fifteenth day of the seventh month.** **So** from the second to the fifteenth **the people went out and brought branches, and made sukkot for themselves, each on their own roof, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of the House of God, in the plaza before the Water Gate and in the plaza of the Ephraim Gate, or Fish Gate (Nehemiah 3:3).** The entire assembly who had returned from the captivity, all Isra’el, made sukkot and dwelt in the sukkot. Since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day Bnei-Yisrael had not done so - and the joy was very great (Nehemiah 8:15-17).

The people had more **joy** than ever. But how could they have **joy** living in **their sukkah?** **They** were **joyful** because they were obedient. I can’t explain how it happens, but when you do what is right, regardless of your economic status, you have **joy** in your life. When you do what is wrong, you may make millions, but you’re miserable. Because **the fathers** in the home had **gained insight** as leaders, **they** had obeyed **the LORD** completely. And **YHVH** gave **them** contentment, which led to **their joy** being **very great.**

Day after day from the first day to the last day, on every one of the **seven days of the Feast of Sukkot,** **Ezra** read from the **scroll of the Torah of God** as commanded in **Deuteronomy 31:11.** **And on the eighth day they** held a **closing ceremony according to the regulation of Leviticus 23:36** and **Numbers 29:35 (Nehemiah 8:18).** This shows that **Ezra** had precisely followed the precepts of **the Torah.** Therefore, the move to make **Scripture** the guiding principle of **Jewish** life was powerfully initiated. The great teaching operation on **the first day of the month,** the training session which had followed it, and now **the seven days of readings at the festival** had exposed **the people** to the fundamentals of **their** faith with considerable thoroughness. But the climax of it was yet to come, as the next two chapters will show.¹⁶⁰

The Feast of Booths, Tabernacles, or Sukkot
(Leviticus 23:33-36, 39-44; Exodus 23:14-17; Numbers 29:12-38; Deuteronomy 16:13-16, 31:9-13; First Kings 12:25-33; Second Chronicles 7:8-10; Ezra 3:4; Nehemiah 8:13-18 Zechariah 14:16-19; John 7:1-41).

Perhaps by now you are beginning to understand why the fall season is considered the time of the high holy days for **the Jewish** community. Three major holy days

occur in the first nineteen days of the biblical month of Tishri (September-October). They are Rosh Ha'Shanah, Yom Kippur and this holy day season ends with **the eight days of Sukkot**.

As with the other days, the name of this holy day tells its purpose. Essentially it is two-fold, the first being related to the fall harvest. As **Leviticus 23** teaches, **Sukkot** was to be a time of bringing the latter harvest. It is, in other words, **the Jewish** "Thanksgiving." In fact, it is widely believed that the Puritan colonists, who were great students of the Hebrew Scriptures, based the first American Thanksgiving on **Sukkot**.

A secondary meaning of this holy day is found in the command to dwell in booths as a memorial of **Isra'el's** wilderness wanderings. To expand the theme of this specific historical event, we might best summarize **Sukkot** with the word "habitation." We know from **the Torah** that **ADONAI** dwelt with **His people** in **their** forty-year wilderness camping trip. Yet, as we camp in **booths** today, we should be reminded that this same faithful **God** watches over our lives. With such meaningful themes, no wonder **Sukkot** is known as *Zman Simkhatenu* (The Time of Our Rejoicing). The fact that **YHVH** provided for us and built **His** habitation with us is something to celebrate!

The Biblical Practice: The feast itself is **seven days** long. It was celebrated by building **booths** or **tabernacles** to commemorate the forty years of wilderness wanderings. The feast was to be celebrated with four species. The first species is the citron, a citrus type of fruit. Second, the branch of a palm tree. Third a branch of a myrtle tree, and fourth a branch of a willow tree. It marked the firstfruits of the fall harvest. Because **Sukkot** follows Yom Kippur, it is considered to be a time of rejoicing following the affliction of the Day of Atonement. **The rabbis developed 326 rules and regulations concerning the four species.**

There was the addition of **an eighth day** of solemn assembly immediately following the seventh day of **Sukkot**, which technically was not a part of **the Feast of Booths**. For **seven days the Israelites** were to live in **booths**, sleep in **booths**, eat in **booths**, to remember the wilderness wanderings. But **the eighth day** was also to be a day of Sabbath rest.



The Jewish Observance: The Torah stipulates **the fifteenth** of the **Jewish** month of **Tishri** as the time when the Jewish people are to begin dwelling in **the sukkah** (singular for booth) and celebrating **God's** provision. This holy day is so joyful, traditional **Jews** don't even wait for **the fifteenth of Tishri** to construct their **sukkah**. Many begin the construction five days earlier, immediately after the close of Yom Kippur.

The construction of **the sukkah** can be both challenging and fun for the whole family. The Bible gives us a rather general commandment to build **a sukkah**, but **the rabbis spelled out ten specific rules and regulations concerning the building of the booth**.

First, there must be the feeling of a temporary abode. So it must be built in a somewhat flimsy way to emphasize the wilderness wanderings. The temporariness is not in the walls as such, but in the roof part of the sukkah.

Second, the material for the roof must possess three specific characteristics. First, it must come from the earth and this excludes making the roof from animal skins, metal or cloth. But wood can be used. Secondly, the roofing material must be cut down and no longer connected to the ground, which excludes using attached branches. They must be cut off. Thirdly, it must not be subject to ritual impurity so the roof cannot contain fruits and food that will spoil.

Third, the roof must always be put on after the walls are totally completed so that when it is constructed, the booth is complete.

Fourth, the roof must be sufficiently thick so that there is more shade than sun. No opening can be more than eleven inches and the stars should

be visible on a clear night. Nevertheless, it should not be so thick as to keep rain out.

Fifth, any **booth** built inside or under an overhanging porch, balcony, or tree is invalid. The shade inside **the booth** must come only from the booth and nothing else.

Sixth, there are no restrictions on the materials for the walls, so they could be made of metal, wood, canvas, brick or stone.

Seventh, **the sukkah** must have at least two complete walls. It may have three and as many as four. The fourth may be left completely open. When it is built against a house outside, one or more walls of the house may be used as walls for **the booth** as well.

Eighth, there is no maximum size of **the booth**, but there is a minimum requirement. It must be big enough to hold one person and one table.

Ninth, **the booth** must be no lower than 37 inches and no higher than 36.5 feet because one must be aware that they are sitting in a booth. The rabbis, as they often did, decided in their infinite wisdom, that any higher than 36.5 feet, the person would no longer feel like they were sitting in a **booth**.

Tenth, decorations emphasized the esthetic. The walls may be decorated with pictures, tapestries, or flowers. The roof may be decorated (but not composed of) with fruits, nuts, apples, grapes, and pomegranates, but these are not to be eaten for the entire week.

Since **Sukkot** has so many rich spiritual lessons associated with it, we would expect to find some important reference to it in the B'rit Chadashah. Not far into the gospel accounts of the life of **Yeshua**, we find the first powerful reference to **Tabernacles**. As **John** relates the special background of **Messiah**, **he** openly declares the divine nature of **Christ**. **The Word** was not only **with God in the beginning**, but this **Word** is the very manifestation of **God Himself (John 1:1)**! This **Word**, as **John** calls **Him**, was manifested to the world in a very special and tangible way: **The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. We looked upon His Sh'khinah glory, the Sh'khinah of the Father's one and only Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).**

Yeshua of Nazareth is more than just a good rabbi or an intriguing philosopher. According to the Bible, **He** is the visible manifestation of the **God** of creation! Yet, did you notice the metaphor **John** employs to describe this incarnation of **Messiah**? **The Word tabernacled** (Greek: *skene*) **among His people**. In other words, as **John** sought to describe **the Messiah's** first coming to **His people**, the most obvious picture was the holy day of **Sukkot**, the holy day that celebrated the dwelling of **God**!

There were two key ceremonies associated with Sukkot during the Second Temple period. The first is the drawing out of **the water**. **The source of this tradition is not in the Bible, but in the Oral Law, although they tried to base it on Numbers 29:17-19 and Isaiah 12:3, which said: With joy you shall draw water**. The location where the water was drawn from the Pool of Siloam, and the place where the water was poured on the southwest corner of the bronze altar, because it is where the grooves which drained the blood of the sacrifices were located. The pouring out of the water in **Judaism**, was a symbol of the outpouring of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** in the last days (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Gb - Jesus Teaches at the Feast of Booths** and **Gp - On the Last and Greatest Day of the Feast**).

The second key ceremony is the lighting of the lights. There were huge lampstands, each one with four golden cups, set up in the Court of the Women. These lights would then be lit toward sundown **and the rabbis taught that there was not a courtyard in all Jerusalem that was not lit by the lights emanating from the Temple Compound**. The lighting of the lights was followed by dancing and juggling with fire torches. The Jews believed the lights were a symbol of **God's Sh'khinah glory** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Gr - I AM the Light of the World**).

The Messianic Significance: Sukkot will be fulfilled by the establishment of the messianic Kingdom. But during the life of **Messiah** there were two misapplications of **Sukkot**. The first time was at the Transfiguration (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Gb - Jesus took Peter, James and John Up a High Mountain where He was Transfigured**). When **Yeshua** was transfigured, Peter suggested that he be allowed to build three booths: one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for **Yeshua**. This was a proper response. The Jews believed that when **the Messiah** came, **His** Kingdom would begin. Knowing the TaNaKh very well, **Peter** also knew that the messianic Kingdom was the fulfillment of Sukkot. The Bible says that the Dispensation of Grace (see my commentary on **Acts Am - The Dispensation of**

Grace) was a mystery to the righteous of the TaNaKh (**Ephesians 3:1-13; Colossians 1:26**). In the Bible a mystery is something that was once hidden, but now is revealed. So while Peter was correct in his theology, his timing was off. He did not know that the Feast of Passover must be fulfilled before the Feast of Weeks can be fulfilled. **Peter** did not understand that **Christ** had to die before the Kingdom could be established. In other words, Passover had to be fulfilled before **Sukkot** could be fulfilled.

The second misapplication of the Feast of Weeks was during the Triumphal Entry (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ It - Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem as the Passover Lamb**). The actions of the people both by what they said and what they did showed that they also expected the Kingdom to be established at that time in fulfillment of **Sukkot**. According to **John 12:12-13**, they broke off palm branches, which is in keeping with **Sukkot**, but not with the Passover, which is what they were celebrating. Furthermore, according to **Matthew 21:8-9** and **Mark 11:8-10**, they cried out, **Hosanna in the highest** and **Hosanna to the Son of David**. Like **Peter**, they did not understand that Passover had to be fulfilled before **Sukkot** could be, and the Passover could only be fulfilled by the death of **Messiah**.

During the messianic Kingdom it will be obligatory upon all the Gentile nations to send a delegation up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. In the Dispensation of Torah (see the commentary on **Exodus Da - The Dispensation of Torah**), it was obligatory for Jews only, but during the millennial Kingdom, for a thousand years, it will be obligatory for every Gentile nation. If a nation fails to send a delegation to observe this **feast** then they will be punished by drought (**Zechariah 14:16-19**).

Just as **the Feast of Booths** was a time of rejoicing following the affliction of Yom Kippur, even so the messianic Kingdom will be a time of rejoicing following the afflictions of the Great Tribulation. What a celebration there will be as the children of **God**, both Jews and Gentiles, celebrate this feast at that time. Amen. Come, **Lord Yeshua!**

The Feast of Passover was fulfilled by the death of **Messiah**, **the Feast of Unleavened Bread** was fulfilled by the sinlessness of **His** sacrifice, **the Feast of First Fruits** was therefore fulfilled by the resurrection of **Christ's** life, **Shavu'ot** was fulfilled by the birth of the Church, **the Feast of Trumpets** will be fulfilled by the Rapture of the Church, **the Day of Atonement** will be fulfilled by the Great

Tribulation, and **the Festival of Booths** points to the messianic Kingdom.

A Practical Guide for Believers in Messiah: The central element for the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles is the booth we call **the sukkah**. While you may want to use the rabbinic description as a guideline (**see above**), you should not forget the freedom to construct this **booth** as you want. As with all the biblical holy days and customs, **the sukkah** is a “shadow” of the greater lessons of the coming **Messiah (Colossians 2:17)**.

Building **the sukkah** can be an exciting and educational family project. Whether it is a shack on the side of the house or a free-standing structure, the hut can be constructed by anyone who wants to help. The outer frame can be assembled from various materials that, in turn, can be fortified with the traditional palm branches or leaves. For this reason, **Sukkot** is a great time to trim up the yard as well! Children will love to add their cut out paper fruit, leaves, or Bible verses.

As previously noted, traditional Jews begin constructing their sukkah immediately after breaking the fast of Yom Kippur. Many Messianic Jews and Gentiles follow this custom by inviting people over for a “Sukkah Decorating Party,” and planning for the upcoming holy days begins in earnest.

As the fifteenth day of Tishri begins, a holiday dinner is prepared. The table is set; although, being outside in **the Sukkah**, it will probably have a less formal atmosphere. Since this holiday is to be a reminder of the forty-year camping trip in the wilderness, the dinner will probably feel more like an outdoor picnic than a formal meal. But as with all the Jewish holidays, we start with the blessings over the fruit of the vine and challah bread.

A special emphasis will be the *ha-Kavod* (processionals), in which the people march around the sanctuary waving *the lulav* (closed fond of a date palm tree) and recounting the Hallel (Praise) Psalms 113-118.

These elements of the inner in **the sukkah** continue for eight days of the festival, while the synagogue services are usually convened only on the first two. To really get into the spirit of the holy day, the family might want to sleep in **the sukkah** under the stars, weather permitting.

As mentioned before, the seventh day of the festival has much spiritual significance for believers in Yeshua. However, as we reach **the eighth day**, we come to a

special holiday, the Eighth Day of Assembly (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Gp - On the Last and Greatest Day of the Feast**). As mentioned in **Leviticus 23:26**, this day is to be set aside as a Shabbat and a holy assembly.

As if all these festivities aren't enough, the Jewish community has added an additional ninth day to Sukkot called *Simchat Torah* (Rejoicing of the Torah). As its name implies, this day celebrates the revelation of **God** as symbolized in the Torah scroll. It's a time of tremendous joy, with dancing and lively music.

A central part of the service is the reading from the last chapters of **Deuteronomy** and the start of the yearly cycle of reading the parashah every Shabbat all over again with the first chapters of **Genesis** (see my commentary on **Deuteronomy Af - Parashah**). Although rabbinic Judaism celebrated this holiday in the Middle Ages, believers in **Yeshua** can surely affirm the idea behind it. **God's** Word is good and should be revered. It is even to be joyously celebrated! How much more so for believers of **Yeshua Messiah**.

With the close of *Simchat Torah*, we reach the end of the high-holy-day season. What wonderful truth is evident! What a complete picture of **God's** plan for redeeming faithful **Jews** and **Gentiles** unto **Himself**. Sometime soon the shofar will sound and announce the regathering of believers from all over the world in the rapture. The seven-year Great Tribulation will follow this. But in the last three days of the Great Tribulation, the **Jewish** leadership will realize that they have rejected **the Messiah** and call out for **His** return (see the commentary on **Revelation Ev - The Basis for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ**). Then **Yeshua Messiah** will return for the second time to the earth. This, in turn, will lead all believers into the joyful celebration of the Kingdom of **God** at **Sukkot**. May we be ready to dwell in that holy habitation with our **Kosher King**.¹⁶¹