

SUKKOT





We would love to include your voices, ideas, dreams, artwork and your brilliant Torah in upcoming newsletters.

UPCOMING DATES & DEADLINES

please send contributions by the following dates

CHANUKAH: DEC 28, 2022

TU BI SHVAT: JANUARY 15, 2023

PURIM: FEBRUARY 13, 2023

You can also send us writing that is not directly related to the Holidays!



Submissions can be sent to
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

WHO WE ARE

Shalom aleichem, friends—may peace and wholeness find you!

We are writing to you on behalf of Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network. Matir Asurim literally translates as “The One Who Frees Captives.” This phrase from Jewish liturgy refers to God’s power to act for freedom and humanity’s ability to manifest godliness through working for freedom. We are a group of advocates, Jewish clergy, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration.

We have been meeting regularly since Tevet 5781/January 2021, guided by the questions: What are incarcerated Jews experiencing? What support do incarcerated Jews need that is not being met? We know that many Jewish communities have not done enough to support people inside and people impacted by the prison system.

Since we began meeting, we have started a penpal program and have been creating these holiday mailings, and have been working on building and deepening our relationships with you. We are really glad to be building community with you, across and beyond prison walls.

We would really love to get your input about how these mailings can be the most supportive to you, and we would also love to include your brilliance and wisdom in future holiday mailings! There is a feedback form, so you can let us know what you want to be receiving in these mailings, and a penpal interest form, if you would like to sign up to be a penpal. If you have any writing (short essays, reflections, poetry, drawings, etc) related to any of the Jewish holidays or Jewishness in general, please feel welcome and invited to send us your submissions so that they can be included in future mailings.

All of the filled out forms can be sent to us at:
Matir Asurim: Jewish Prisoner Care Network
PO Box 18858
Philadelphia, PA 19143

SUKKOT

3rd of Tishrei, 5783 ~ September 28, 2022

Welcome to zman simchateinu, the season of joy in all its fullness! Sukkot completes the cycle of the Yamim Nora'im, the season of awe that helps anchor the Jewish calendar and ushers in the new year. After celebrating the potential that comes with beginnings on Rosh Hashanah, spending time reflecting and restoring relationships on Yom Kippur, we enter into the vulnerable joy of Sukkot.

Rabbi Alan Lew, z"l, teaches in his book *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*:

"In the sukkah, a house that is open to the world, a house that freely acknowledges that it cannot be the basis of our security, we let go of this need. The illusion of protection falls away, and suddenly we are flush with our life, feeling our life, following our life, doing its dance, one step after another."

"And when we speak of joy here, we are not speaking of fun. Joy is a deep release of the soul, and it includes death and pain. Joy is any feeling fully felt, any experience we give our whole being to. We are conditioned to choose pleasure and to reject pain, but the truth is, any moment of our life fully inhabited, any feeling fully felt, any immersion in the full depth of life, can be the source of deep joy."

May this season of joy reach each of you in big and small ways, and may you feel the fullness, openness, and depth that Sukkot invites us into.

With blessings for tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom, justice, compassion and peace,

Chava, Laynie, Sarit, Cece, Val, Meli, Callie
and all of us at Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People



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cover artwork:

"Sukkot Decorations" by Jessica Tamar Deutsch, a New York based visual artist.

NOTES ON THE FLEETING SIMCHA OF SUKKOT

Chava Shapiro

I have loved Sukkot for as long as I can remember. I love the festive nature of the holiday. I love building a slightly wonky shack in the yard and taking all the meals in it. I love visiting in the sukkah with friends and family. I love the way it coincides with the turning of the seasons and the arrival of Autumnal signs, like shifting afternoon sunlight and crisper morning air. Even now that I live in the Sonoran desert, a much warmer climate, I notice and appreciate these subtle shifts of season that beautifully line up with the High Holidays.

Growing up I was told that building a sukkah was to remind us of when the Israelites lived in sukkot for the 40 years they were in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Yet, this isn't quite right.

Like most things we hear as children, I was offered a tragically simplified version that left out some of the most inspiring aspects of the Jewish practice. I assume that somewhere along the way people thought that children wouldn't have the attention span or maybe the spiritual interest to dig into the spectacular nuances of Jewish holidays and observations, so we were given lighter and quipier versions. The problem I have encountered since is that the lighter, simplified, and frankly duller version is what stuck in most of our minds and turned many of us off to a tradition that is much richer and deeper than we had been offered.

A year ago I listened to a *shiur* (Talmud & Torah lecture) with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (z"l) as Sukkot was approaching. That lecture changed everything I had previously known about the holiday and deepened it for me.

R' Sacks said the words "Sukkot is a commentary on Kohelet and Kohelet is a commentary on Sukkot," and truth be told I had to pause and look up what he

was even talking about. It is custom among Jews of Ashkenazi descent to read Sefer Kohelet, or Ecclesiastes, on the Shabbat of Chol Hamoed or Shemini Atzeret.

Maybe you remember this text best from its use in the 60's pop song "Turn, Turn, Turn," written by Pete Seeger. The tune reminds us that there is a time or a season for everything. The pop song version has a more joyful or hopeful ring to it than when we encounter the text head on:

הֵבֵל הֵבֵלִים אָמַר קִהְלֵת הֵבֵל הֵבֵלִים הַכֹּל הֵבֵל:

Utter futility!—said Koheleth—Utter futility! All is futile! [JPS Translation]

The word *הֵבֵל* / hevel is commonly translated as vanity or futility. But, a more precise translation might be vapor or breath. The word appears five times in the verse above and a total of thirty-eight times in Kohelet, a relatively short book. R' Sacks offered a translation of hevel as fleeting breath. Kohelet is presumably written by King Solomon, a man who couldn't have wanted for anything materially, and he tells us that we can have everything and none of it matters—the whole of our lives is nothing more than a fleeting breath.

Why are we called to read such existential despair during *zman simchateinu*, the time of our joy, the festival of Sukkot? Why are we wrestling with mortality when we're literally commanded by the Torah to dwell with joy in our Sukkah? This feels like a contradiction within the observance of the holiday.

In the five books of Torah the word *simcha* (joy) is mentioned 16 times. Simcha appears in the book of Kohelet 17 times. Amidst existential despair and long explorations of the futility of our human lives we hear about joy more times than in all five books of Torah combined. What can be said of this? R' Sacks reminds us that "simcha lives in the moment." We cannot overcome our mortality, the pain of our lived experiences, the trials of a human life through accumulating material possessions or even great wisdom. What Kohelet offers us is the simple truth that *simcha* arrives like a fleeting breath, it comes and goes even amidst suffering or despair. We conquer the pain of our mortality and futility through joy.

"Sukkot is about knowing that life is insecure." R' Sacks *shiur* on Sukkot and Kohelet brought me to a deeper understanding of this holiday. We inhabit temporary dwellings every day of our lives—our human bodies are fragile and flawed. At Sukkot we are commanded to revel in our insecurity by dwelling in a structural manifestation of it. The roof is shoddy, leaving us fully vulnerable. We don't even have four walls to keep us out of the wind, rain, or cold. Sukkot invites us to embrace our fragility and to find *simcha* nevertheless.

Again and again Hashem calls us to lean into impermanence and insecurity. In Leviticus 25:23 Hashem tells the people that they will never truly own the land to which they are headed because they are sojourners and strangers in temporary residences. Sukkot commands us to build a temporary residence and to be joyful. Sukkot also demands of us to remember who we are, where we came from, and who we owe it to:

We are a people who find joy in our fragility because everything is *hevel*, fleeting breath, and we are Divinely blessed to experience it.

**“SUKKOT IS
ABOUT KNOW-
ING THAT LIFE IS
INSECURE.”**

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

A SOMATIC REFLECTION ON DWELLING IN THE SUKKAH IF YOU DON'T HAVE A SUKKAH TO DWELL IN

Kristin Waters

[Note: Somatics describes any practice that uses the mind-body connection to help you survey your internal self and listen to signals your body sends. These practices allow you to access more information about the ways you hold on to your experiences in your body. Somatic practitioners believe this knowledge, combined with natural movement and touch, can help you work toward healing and wellness.]

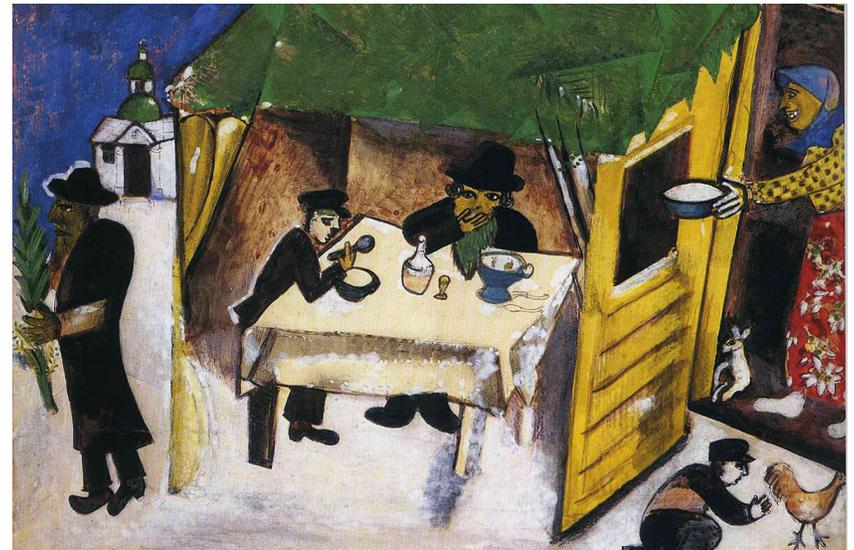
Visualizations invite choice and possibility. The body does not care whether you are imagining reality or not. The body responds to what we imagine. So take all the time you need to find a place to sit down, making any adjustments to bring support and comfort to your physical body.

With your eyes opened or closed, sense into the details of where outside you'd like to build and decorate the sukkah. What do you see or hear that brings you to this place? Gather branches in your hands for the roof. Imagine who you'd like to join you. Sense for their kind eyes meeting yours. Feel into the festivities. Enjoy the sounds and smells. Invoke your five senses as you stay here as long as you wish. You can always return to the present moment and feel for your feet on the ground or your back against something firm before returning to the sukkah. As you linger there in your imagination, pay attention for how your body responds to the invitation. Eat your meals and take your rest there as well.

Can you see the stars at night? Can you feel the breeze in the shade? No one can take this space from you. Dwell here as often as you choose.

Where do you hold a sense of what is important to you? Perhaps you'll want to bring a hand to a particular area like your heart or diaphragm. There is all the oxygen you need to breathe right now, as you take a moment here to recognize and support what matters to you. Locate a sense of joy or gratitude. Give it a color. Extend an invitation for it to soften and have more space to spread out.

Meet any other longings that come forward with kindness. Offer honor towards the hard parts. Let them have expression through movement in your physical body. Allow your hands to find the top of your thighs and alternate pressing one hand into your leg and then the other. Or let your feet receive what's underneath them, and alternate engaging the leg muscles in one leg, releasing them, and then doing the same on the other side, back and forth for a few moments. Then welcome the feelings and sensations that come along with being held inside to find a place to rest. Give them a sound. Join them in the direction they want to go, and allow those parts that work so hard to conserve energy for a moment. Invite an image of flowing water to whatever arises for you during this week-long celebration.



"The Feast of Tabernacles" by Marc Chagall

SUKKOT RITUAL

Loon Liebling

The inner journeying of the High Holidays ends with Sukkot, the Ingathering Holiday. I like to think of Sukkot as the deep breath after a month of churning, praying, and begging the Compassionate One to hear our prayers. During Sukkot, we are commanded to build a Sukkah, a temporary structure with at least two and a half sides and a roof of *schach*, organic materials that create shade but must leave space to see the stars. The Torah says, “You shall dwell in Sukkot (temporary booths) for seven days so that you will know with every fiber of your being that your ancestors dwelt in booths during their sojourn in the wilderness when they were leaving Egypt.” Traditionally this was the time when our people were gathering the very last of the harvest before the seasons shifted, and when people eat their meals in the Sukkah, the air is thick with change.

Sukkot is a holiday traditionally associated with deep joy. Just as we are tasked with atoning and confronting our brokenness during the High Holidays, we are instructed to feel joy during Sukkot. This shows us that our joy lives in direct relationship with the depth of feelings that we can experience during the High Holidays- the more we can search within ourselves, feel the grief and the longing and the emptiness and the sorrow, the more capacity we have during Sukkot to feel our joy.

Rabbi Alan Lew says:

“And when we speak of joy here, we are not speaking of fun. Joy is a deep release of the soul, and it includes death and pain. Joy is any feeling fully felt, any experience we give our whole being to. We are conditioned to choose pleasure and reject pain, but the truth is, any moment of our life fully inhabited, any feeling fully felt, any immersion in the full depth of life, can be the source of deep joy.”



"Sukkot Decorations" by Jessica Tamar Deutsch, a New York based visual artist.

What does it mean that any moment of our life when we are truly present with our whole being is one that brings joy? What does that say about the moments of suffering we experience? And Sukkot is a holiday that embodies the temporality of not only the seasons but of the Jewish people, of wandering in diaspora and constantly changing our inner and outer senses of home. What does this say about joy? Perhaps there is a holy joy in change. Perhaps the very temporality of our bodies, of one's prison cell, of the prison system, of our lives, is the source in which we can pull from to feel our aliveness and find that joy, that feeling fully felt. It is only within this exact present, spacious moment that we can follow what is asked of us during this time, that we can feel joy. The following ritual is based on traditional Sukkot practice and is an invitation to bring our bodies into this dance of change and joy.

During Sukkot, many Jews use four species of plants as spiritual tools to connect to the holiday. These four species are the willow, the palm, the myrtle, which together create a *lulav* (a bundle of the three plants together) and the *etrog* (a yellow citrus fruit with a fragrant smell). These four objects are waved in a particular direction and order. There are many interpretations of what these four species represent and why they are waved. For folks in prison and many folks outside of prison, it is not possible to get a physical *lulav* and *etrog*. This is a ritual that helps us to connect to the joy of temporality using our bodies.

bodies as lulavs: a sukkot ritual

Loon Liebling

First, we say the blessing of the lulav:

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, וצונו על נטילת לולב:
*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu ruach ha'olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu al netilat lulav.*

Blessed are You, Source of Change, Mover of time, who has sanctified us with your instructions concerning the waving of the lulav.

Then we add:

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם, שְׁהַחַיֵּנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַּר הַזֶּה:
*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu ruach ha'olam shehehiyanu v'kiyemanu
v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You, Source of Compassion, Divine Breath of the Universe, who has given us life, sustenance, and allowed us to reach this holy special moment.

This ritual gives instructions to move our bodies. All of our bodies move differently. If standing or sitting does not work for you, use the directions as a guide to move your eyes, your pinky toes, your attention. There is no wrong way to move.

Stand or sit upright as you are able, feeling your feet firmly on the floor.

Put your hand on your heart. Close your eyes and imagine a favorite smell, perhaps from a sweet childhood memory. Breathe deeply in and out, opening your palms and taking your hands in a circular motion three times out in front of you, as if you are drawing in the smell and letting it immerse you. Stay there as long as you'd like, breathing in and out.

Open your eyes and turn to your right. Take in your surroundings. Perhaps you know every inch of where you are, but for this moment imagine it is your first time seeing it. Look all the way around, taking in the dust motes and the cracks in the walls and all the small details of this temporary dwelling. Take it in slowly, letting the light fall into your eyes. Check in with your feelings. What does this space bring up for you? Be with your feelings tenderly, allow yourself to fully feel them.

Take a deep breath, turn around, and look behind you. Take a deep breath. Imagine all that has conspired to bring you here to this present moment. Shake your body, wiggling in shoulders, your toes, your torso- any part of your body that wants release. Pay close attention to the sensations of the movements your body is making. Shake as little or as long as your body needs. Stay with the physical feelings, wiggling your toes often to connect to the ground.

Find stillness and turn to your left. Stretch your body out, reaching your hands far above your head, letting your spine stretch. Stand or sit as upright as possible and feel your backbone, starting at the base of your back and holding you up all the way to your neck. Allow yourself to feel held by your own spine. Take in what it means to have your own back. Imagine that your ancestors and Hashem are also your back. Soak in all of this support.

Look up and whisper a prayer to Hashem. Let it flow naturally, there is no right language or structure you must follow.

Finally, bend down to the floor if you are able and put your forehead to the earth, or stay where you are and feel the ground beneath your feet. Again, soak in the experience of being held by the earth. How do you feel? Let yourself feel it fully, held by your spine, the earth, Hashem, and this ritual.

We give thanks to the land that holds us despite everything, to the constant of change and our bodies' abilities to tell us how we feel. We give thanks to movement in all its forms, and to the way time moves in a spiral around us, immersing us in the joy of temporality. May we know a time beyond this moment and beyond prison walls. A time where we can welcome each other in temporary Sukkot and feel the breezes of the winds of change together.



OCCUPY SUKKOT'S PRAYER FOR AN UNBALANCED WORLD

[Rabbi Ellen Lippmann shared this bracha in 2011 in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street where a sukkah was built by Jewish participants.]

For the newly or long-time homeless, the sukkah provides shelter.

For those in danger of losing homes, the sukkah is a fragile home that nonetheless stands firm.

For those who have lost jobs, the sukkah offers a bountiful table for all, old and young.

For those whose neighborhoods have been decimated, the sukkah is a center and a place of welcome.

For those who bend under the growing limits of aspiration, the sukkah lets us see the stars.

For those whose dreams are shattered, the sukkah offers sunlight through green shade, and requires nothing of those who sit but to bask in it and be renewed.

As we gather the winds of change from the east, north, west and south, may heaven and earth join to re-right the world.

This Sukkot, may we find ways to re-right the unbalanced world, to re-write the story of liberation and harvest, and to re-rite the rituals of this ancient modern festival.

ZMAN SIMCHATEINU

Sukkot is known as z'man simchateinu, the time of our rejoicing. It can be difficult to locate joy amidst the grief or pain that can fill our lives. In this poem, the author suggests that perhaps the secret to simcha (joy) is appealing to the Divine and listening attentively. Perhaps joy is the simple acts of listening and noticing with our full attention.

for joy

Alden Solovy

Listen with your eyes
And hear with your heart:
In every grief, there is blessing...
In every joy, there is hope...
In every love, thanksgiving...
In every thought, wisdom...
In every breath, renewal...
In every moment, a choice,
To stay bent in sorrow,
Or to lift ourselves in songs of praise
To G-d Most High.
To dance with Miriam.
To dream with Jacob.
To laugh with Sarah.
To greet angels with Abraham.
To argue with heaven on behalf of earth.

G-d of the seen and unseen,
Creator of light and darkness
Author of justice and mercy,
Give us the courage and strength to choose a life of service,
Guided by Your loving hand.
A life of song and dance,
Gentleness and peace,
Honor and grace,
Kindness and understanding.

Blessed are You, Adonai our G-d, You love joy and service.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו, אוהב שמחה ושמחה בתקון העולם.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, ohev simchah v'samei'ach b'tikun ha'olam.



"Ushpizin" by Jay Smith (they/them), an illustrator based in Western Massachusetts.

FROM OUR FRIENDS AT EMOR: THE INSTITUTE FOR BOLD JEWISH THOUGHT

Emor: The Institute For Bold Jewish Thought (a project of T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights) seeks thinkers, artists, activists, and the curious to engage in an interdisciplinary dialogue about Jewish perspectives on the ideology and lived realities of individual liberty in its new zine, *Freedom*. *Freedom* will be a platform for unique and unconventional conversations about Judaism, democracy, and the world.

Submission Guidelines: Submissions must be direct responses to the question: "What can Judaism teach us about freedom and democracy?" Submissions to *Freedom* are open to individuals aged 18 and over. Please note that submission to *Freedom* does not guarantee publication. The deadline for *Freedom* submissions is December 1, 2022. If your submission is accepted for publication, *Freedom* will award you an honorarium.

Each submission must include:

- Full legal name and prison ID #
- Preferred Author Name (if relevant) with a short biography (4-5 sentences)
- The title of your piece and date of submission
- Your current facility, including mailing address

Written Media: Written submissions for *Freedom* may take form in poetry, prose, creative nonfiction, fiction, memoir, and academic or non-academic essays. Submissions should be no longer than 900 words. *Freedom* reserves the right to make standard editorial corrections to spelling and transliteration of Hebrew words for all written submissions. In addition, written pieces may be edited to correct punctuation and improve sentence structure, so long as the meaning of the sentence is not changed.

Other Media: Submissions of visual media should be no more than two pages and must be accompanied by a short explanation of original content and how it directly answers the question "What can Judaism teach us about freedom and democracy?"

Submissions may be sent to:

T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
 Attn: Emor
 266 W. 37th Street Suite 803
 New York, NY 10018



Matir Asurim is looking for art or images to accompany our holiday mailings. Offerings might include: illustrated prayers, *Birkhat Ha'bayit* (house blessing), blessings of protection, interactive art, coloring pages, comic strips, shvitim (meditative images of the name of Hashem), illustrated depictions of Torah, and other treasures.

Please include a brief (2-3 sentences) description of your work.

Honorariums will be provided for selected artwork.



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