

Celebrating the Gifts of Life
Shemini Atseret Yizkor 5769
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I am incredibly happy when I am in the kitchen chopping and sautéing, stirring and preparing meals for family and friends. Some of it is the energy release of chopping, some of it is the multi-sensory experience of smell, touch, sound and sight. I love reading my cookbooks, planning the menus, making the guest lists and sitting and enjoying yummy food.

This is one of the reasons I love Sukkot so much. For me it is the time when I *have the time* to cook and enjoy creating menus with the foods of the season. On Yom Tov you can cook and one of the culinary traditions of Sukkot is to use the vegetables and fruits that are being harvested now, such as apples and squash. Stuffed vegetables and stuffed pumpkins are my favorite. I think the food is supposed to be stuffed and we are supposed to be stuffed as part of the celebration of the harvest and preparation for the lean months of winter.

As I was reading Barbara Kingsolver's meditation of harvesting and Thanksgiving celebrations in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, I kept thinking of Sukkot.

She writes: "...holidays are symbolic...providing the dotted lines on the social-contract treasure map we've drawn up for our families and nations. As pageantry goes, what could go more to the heart of things than this story of need, a dread of starvation, and salvation arriving through the unexpected blessing of harvest? Even feigning surprise, pretending it was unexpected and saying a ritual of thanks, is surely wiser than just expecting everything so carelessly."

Kingsolver is speaking of Thanksgiving, but also makes a natural connection between the celebration of the harvest and the expression of gratitude.

Nowadays, when we have become so disconnected from the earth and the agricultural cycles, the festival of Sukkot is both jarring and eye-opening. The bounty of the harvest is right in front of us on the bimah. It almost magically appeared in the sanctuary, as the food magically appears on our table. How many of us know—or how many of our children or grandchildren know—how a pumpkin grows, or a carrot, or a potato, or a pomegranate, artichoke or asparagus.

Sukkot is calling us to remember where our food comes from and to whom we must express gratitude. Yes, the farmer, the laborer, the wonderful artists who created this display, but above all else, we thank God.

The Malbim, a 19th Century Russian rabbi and Torah commentator, connected the harvest with the lesson of humility when he taught this on Sukkot:

"Future generations should not be overconfident at the time of the harvest, when their houses are full of good, and think that this world is their purpose and the focus of their life... [God's message to us when we are commanded to dwell in sukkot is this:] They should appreciate that I commanded the Israelites to dwell in sukkot, and should realize that this world is a guesthouse and a temporary dwelling. Thus they leave their permanent dwelling for a temporary dwelling, which is what the sukkah hints at, as the sages have written."

Malbim is teaching us that Sukkot is not just about the celebration of plenty. We cannot just focus on the gifts of the earth, the overflowing dishes at our tables, but we must remember that our lives are about more than the material, physical world. Our lives are made richer by the spiritual life that we nurture, the family bonds that we cultivate, and the relationship with God that is lost when we are only self-indulgent.

Sukkot is supposed to teach us humility in the face of the harvest. If we start to become “overconfident” that we can take care of ourselves, that we don’t need help from anyone, on this earth or in heaven...then we are told, go sit in the sukkah, remember that this world is temporary, it can not give you everything, there are other gifts—the gifts of the spirit. We do not control everything, we *can not* control everything. And, even when it seems that we have successfully mastered the juggling act, here comes Sukkot to remind us—there is a God in heaven. We are in need of God’s protection, God’s comfort and support, the spiritual sustenance of our soul that comes from the religious life, the spiritual life, a life of prayer, study and good works.

The Malbim is also calling to our attention our own existence. Not only is the harvest temporary, the earth will soon be cold and bear hardly any fruit...but our stay on this earth is temporary. “*olam ha-zeh milon orhim, v’dirat arai.*” This world is only a guesthouse and a temporary dwelling.” Our time on earth is fleeting.

Shemini Atseret is really an odd holiday of Sukkot. You don’t have to dwell in the Sukkah, you don’t pick up the lulav and etrog or have hoshanot....Why is it a part of Sukkot? What could it be here for, other than as a transitional day between Sukkot and Simhat Torah?

Shemini Atseret, with the Yizkor service, is here to teach us this important lesson of Sukkot. We must appreciate the gifts of the life, the gifts of the earth, the blessings with which God showers us everyday...and we must remember, we will not always be here to celebrate them, nor will our loved ones. As we remember those who have been taken from us by death, old age, illness, or tragedy, we remember the lessons of their lives. How they lived their lives and celebrated their gifts—or did not. How they expressed their gratitude for their blessings, nurtured their family, created festive tables overflowing with food, cultivated a life filled with learning, loving and joy—or did not. Either way we can learn from our loved ones.

As we remember those who have died, we can celebrate the many gifts they left us, the many ways they influenced us, the many ways our relationships with them made us who we are today.

And, as we celebrate this eighth day of Sukkot, as we take an account of all the blessings in our lives and the important people who have made our lives rich, let us remember to stay humble. Let us remember to express gratitude while we can. Let us remember to enjoy life while we can. And, let us remember to thank God, even when we don’t fully understand, but because we need to be a part of something greater than ourselves.

May all those remembered this morning be remembered for blessings.

May our loved ones inspire us to live rich, fruitful, meaningful lives.

May we treasure the gift of life and the gifts of our loved ones.

And let us say: Amen.