

A Different Kind of Shelter

A Catholic Reflects on the Festival of Sukkot

I will always remember the month I spent in the Australian bush on an [Outward Bound](#) course. No tents. Just creative use of a plastic sheet became my dwelling at night. That and a desert-hut sojourn in the Negev stand out as unforgettable experiences. Close to nature, stripped of all 'creature comforts' and technological securities, I couldn't help but be confronted by my human vulnerability and the great spiritual questions surrounding my existence. Little wonder that educational and vocational organisations will include such experiences in their formation programs.

Which raises the question: for parishes in the city and suburbs, should parishioners be encouraged to undertake an annual camping trip as a regular spiritual practice (modified to cater for various levels of physical ability)? Can you imagine this, say, as part of sacramental preparation? *Leave all the conveniences of your home. Come away, outdoors. Live simply. Gaze into the night sky and, like Abraham, listen to your God.*

The idea is not fanciful. In fact, a similar idea in more sophisticated form is already embedded in the liturgical calendar of Jewish communities: the festival of *Sukkot* (Hebrew: 'booths'). Every year in September/October, many Jewish households build a *sukkah* (a hut or temporary dwelling with four walls and a roof of branches) in the vicinity of their homes. During the seven days of the Sukkot festival, they leave their houses and spend time in these porous, fragile dwellings; a physical reminder of their vulnerability and dependence on God for gifts of shelter, food, warmth, protection.

Originating in ancient harvest celebrations, Sukkot recalls the biblical story of the Israelites' desert wanderings.

"You shall live in booths for seven days...so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 23:42,43).

During Sukkot many Jews eat their meals in their *sukkah*, and some sleep there as well. In this way they recall the nomadic lifestyle of their ancient ancestors and the constant care of their God.

Sukkot is a joyous festival that inspires a serious attitude of faith. As one Jewish author puts it, "Sukkot is a reminder not to become entombed in our homes, a reminder of a different kind of shelter made of openness and faith. It is a reminder of the long time ago when we followed the Lord into the desert, and painfully learned the meaning of trust."¹ Hospitality and outreach to the homeless are also important to the practices of Sukkot.

The meaning of Sukkot involves more than a humanitarian ideal of simple living. It maintains a critical connection with the verse: *'I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God'* (Lev. 23:43). At its heart, Sukkot is about identity; it calls a chosen people to remember their origins: in the active, liberating movement of the Lord God in history. This is why the trappings of wealth are so dangerous. They can lead to complacency, a forgetting of who one really is in the sight of God.

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¹ Michael Strassfield, *The Jewish Holidays* (New York, 1985).

LIGHT OF TORAH



Photo: Light of Torah study session, held in a Rabbi's sukkah.

How might Sukkot inspire Christian spirituality practices at this time of year?

Give thanks for the gifts of shelter, protection.

Offer hospitality, especially to someone in need. Give financial support to an outreach for the homeless.

Eat outdoors. Dine under the stars in your backyard; enjoy a coffee under a morning sky. Draw close to God in nature.

Read Scripture from Exodus and Numbers and ponder the stories of the Israelites on their wilderness journey. Tell your own story, or that of a friend or family member who has known exile or wandering; perhaps as a refugee or immigrant.

Be happy. Resist becoming entangled in your worries and cares. Trust God enough to be able to smile, laugh, enjoy life's blessings.