



THIS MONTH IN OUR REFORM JEWISH HERITAGE – OCTOBER 2017

REFORM JUDAISM BROUGHT NEW MEANINGS TO SUKKOT AND SIMCHAT TORAH

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As the High Holy Day season continues and concludes with the Festivals of Sukkot and Simchat Torah during the first weeks of October, we can reflect on the distinctive new meanings that Reform Judaism brought to these observances in the course of its development. Reform's characteristic recasting of the significance of many traditional celebrations, shifting the emphasis from ritual symbolism to a focus on explicit ethical messages, found particular expression in its interpretation of the Festival of Sukkot. While reaffirming the historical link to the wanderings of our ancestors in the wilderness following the Exodus, the early Reformers added two additional layers of significance to the festival. The ancient agricultural symbolism of Sukkot, as a celebration of the ingathering of the fall harvest, had been largely lost in the centuries when Jewish life had been centered in the urban centers of Europe, cut off from the rhythms and cycles of planting and reaping that were at the heart of the Biblical consciousness. The Emancipation from the confines of the Ghetto in the 18th century, and the experience of the frontiers of America, both combined to reconnect Jewish consciousness to the land – an encounter that would eventually critically shape the emerging resettlement of the Land of Israel as well. The reclaiming of the fall

seasonal harvest theme was particularly significant for the American Reform Movement, which identified with the shared ideals and Biblical roots of the pioneering spirit embodied in the Thanksgiving Story.

The second major interpretation that Reform brought to Sukkot was the ethical extension of the harvest symbolism. Rooted in the Torah's "Holiness Code" of Leviticus 19, with its call for the equitable sharing of the bounty of the harvest, the original liturgy that the early Reformers composed for the Festival emphasized the concept that Sukkot's ultimate message was one of economic justice. This powerful moral challenge of the Festival is lyrically – and forcefully – expressed in the special readings for this holiday from the Union Prayer Book:

FOR THE SABBATH DURING SUKKOT

The stars in their courses and the changing seasons tell of God's infinite might. In these autumn days, the waning summer and the falling leaves bring no sadness into our hearts. The season begins in joy with the bountiful gifts of God's unfailing goodness. We behold the fruits of tree and vine and gather to celebrate the harvest, the joyous festival of Sukkot.

The structures of stone and steel that our hands have wrought may make us boastful of human strength; but the fruits of field and orchard re-awaken our thoughts of the Eternal One. When, on this festival, we bring into this house of prayer the products of soil and sunlight, our thoughts turn to the miracle of the seed, the mystery of growth, the refreshing rain and the ripening sun. We learn anew that it is God who blesses our toil wherever we labor. All that we have comes from the Eternal One.

God, Your bounty provides for all human needs if only we would be wise and generous in the sharing of Your blessings. Teach us to use Your gifts for the well-being of all people. Let there be no famine or scarcity in any household or any land. As soil, rain, and sun unite to do Your will, so may all humankind become united that we may live together in mutual blessing. Spread over us the tabernacle of peace and unity, now and forevermore. Amen.

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