

Ushpizin: Our Sukkah Guests

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On the eve of the holiday, one should go to the sukkah and bring a chair with a nice covering on it as a remembrance for the seven holy and exalted guests. The covering is similar to the one we place on Elijah's chair on the day of a circumcision and it states in the holy Zohar that if one does not set up a chair, he doesn't come. It has always been [the tradition of] God fearing people to set up a dignified chair for the seven holy and exalted guests. Each night, when in the sukkah, one should recite with purity "Enter guests ..."

Chida, Moreh B'Etzbah no. 9 (289)²

אור החג הקדוש ילך לסוכה ויצוה להביא
כסא ומעיל מפורש על גבה לזכר שבעה
אושפזין עלאין קדישין מעיל דוגמא
שעושים ביום המילה כסא לאליהו הנביא
זכור לטוב וכתוב בזוהר הקדוש דאי לא
מתקנין לה כסא לא אתי. זאת היתה
להחרדים לדבר ה' להזמין כסא כבוד
לשבעה אושפזין עלאין קדישין וכל לילה
יאמר בפה צח בסוכה "עולו אושפזין וכו'".
חיד"א מורה באצבע סי' ט' אות רפ"ט

In order to comprehend and appreciate this unique concept of *ushpizin* (Aramaic for “guests,” rooted in the Latin word “hospice”), we must begin with a metaphor about ourselves. When we think about ourselves as people, perhaps we should view ourselves as amphibians, as strange as that may sound.³ Amphibians are creatures that live on both land and water; hence, they earn their name, which derives from ancient Greek, meaning two modes of existence. While we don’t often think about our lives this way, we too have two modes of existence. We live in a physical realm with objects and places we can see and touch. We also live in another realm, one that is quite different, but just as real and perceptible as the physical world. This second realm is comprised of thoughts, feelings and experiences—concepts that are not measurable in size or weight—but are very real in our lives. Our connections with family and friends and our dreams and fears fill this realm, which we can call the spiritual world. This world is one that transcends physical boundaries. In our view of life as Torah Jews, it is in this second realm that we consider ourselves truly alive, for that which sustains our existence is the energy of our soul, a transcendent connection to Hashem. According to the Talmud (*Shabbat* 113b-114a), our physical body is just a cloak (*levush*) for the true self, the soul (*neshama*), which is an eternal Divine spark.

¹ I would like to thank *Avi Mori*, Mr. Etzion Brand; Professor Leslie Newman and Mrs. Andrea Polster for their help with the article.

² Chida is the acronym for Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, the 18th century Rabbinic luminary, who authored scores of works on all aspects of Torah.

³ This idea is presented and developed by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in his work *Simple Words*, in the chapter entitled “Spirit and Matter.”

This basic principle of Judaism explains much of our practice that may seem odd to the onlooker. When we clasp a palm branch, some twigs, and a citron on a morning in October and wave them around, it might seem unusual from the perspective of the physical world. Yet this action, according to the Talmud (*Menachot* 62a) is primarily focused on the spiritual world, and its impact is difficult to measure in the physical world. This is true for all mitzvot. Similarly, in the same light we can appreciate countless Talmudic stories and teachings, which speak of realities that are completely foreign, or perhaps incredible to us. The sages of the Talmud lived their lives with an acute awareness and sensitivity to the spiritual realm. They experienced this spirituality in a way far beyond our understanding, which is why it can be challenging to connect with or appreciate the lives they led.

Perhaps now we may begin to understand why, according to the Chida's description above, one would arrange a chair in one's sukkah for guests that aren't visibly present. The Chida is referencing the welcoming of special spiritual guests to our sukkah. These guests are real; however, they exist in a spiritual, not physical, realm.

This presents us with many questions. What does it mean that there are unseen guests in our sukkah? Who are they? Why are they present and why specifically on Sukkot? If we cannot detect them, of what significance is it to us that they are present?

Guests in Our Sukkah

Let us begin with a general appreciation of welcoming guests on Sukkot. *Hachnasat orchim* (welcoming visitors) is a basic mitzvah of *chesed* (kindness) all year round and has increased significance during all of our holidays, not just Sukkot. The Rambam (*Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:17) teaches that one cannot experience the true joy of any Torah holiday without opening one's gates to welcome the underprivileged and downtrodden, providing them food and nourishment. Yet the practice of welcoming guests on Sukkot is unique. On one level, it can be traced to an allusion in the book of Zechariah (3:10):

On that day, said God, the Lord of Hosts, each person will call his friend under the grapevine and under the fig tree.

Zechariah 3:10

בְּיוֹם הַהוּא, נֵאָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת, תִּקְרְאוּ, אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ--אֶל-תַּחַת גֵּפֶן, וְאֶל-תַּחַת תְּאֵנָה.

זְכַרְיָה ג':

Historians note that during this period of Sukkot, the holiday of gathering, when farmers had concluded their harvest and were sitting beneath their vineyards and trees, was a time when they invited guests.⁴ It is also fitting to fulfill the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* during Sukkot, for this mitzvah was the hallmark of Avraham Avinu and in many ways, the Sukkah represents and reflects the tent of Avraham.⁵ Hence legends abound of Chassidic Rebbes who insisted on

⁴ See "The Ushpizin in our Sukkah" by Professor Yom Tov Levinski in *Sefer Hamoadim*, volume four, p. 115; see also "On the Custom of Ushpizin that is Customary on the Holiday of Sukkot" by Zecharia Green in *Mechkerei Chag*.

⁵ The holiday of Sukkot reflects the *middot* of Avraham Avinu. The 70 *korbanot* of Sukkot, which are connected with the 70 nations of the world, is one example of the universal character of this yom tov, as explained by Rabbi Shlomo Goren in his essay, "The Universality of the Holiday of Sukkot" in *Torat Hamoadim*; this universalistic view is closely associated with our understanding of Avraham Avinu's embracing relationship to the rest of the world of his time. This openness and love of Avraham ("Avraham *ohavi*" in Yeshaya 41:8) also correlates with the notion of

inviting guests and encouraged others to do so. Perhaps this is why, according to the *Sefer Yesod Veshoresh HaAvodah*, we invite spiritual guests to our sukkah: to strengthen our fulfillment of the mitzvah of inviting ordinary people, especially those who are less fortunate:

He sits in the shade of the sukkah and the holy ones who reside in the heavens, our holy forefathers, come to reside with him in the shade of the sukkah. They rejoice with him when he gives some of his bread to the poor and destitute, proper people who follow the Torah. He will bring the impoverished to his home and they will take the portions of those holy and exalted guests (ushpizin) and from their blessing, this God fearing individual will be blessed with seven blessings.

Yesod VeShoresh HaAvodah 11:13

והוא יושב בצל סוכה וקדושי משכני
עליון האבות הקדושים באים
להתלונן עמו בצל סוכה והם שמחים
עמו כשנותן אז מלחמו לדלים
אביונים הגונים בעלי תורה, ועניים
מרודים יביא ואסף אותם הביתה והם
יקחו חלקם של הני אושפיזין עלאין
קדישין ומברכתם יבורך גבר ירא ה'
שבעה ברכות.
יסוד ושורש העבודה יא:יג

Spiritual Guests

The well-established origins of the practice of inviting spiritual guests can be traced to several passages in the *Zohar*, which appear in *Parshat Emor*. The *Zohar* describes that when people reside in their sukkah, they are joined by spiritual guests:

R. Abba said: Avraham, five righteous people and King David, establish their residence with him. This is what is stated "You shall dwell in Sukkot seven days." It states "seven days" and not "during those seven days" [a hint to the seven spiritual spheres] ... A person must rejoice each day and greet the guests who reside with him with a joyous countenance.

Zohar, Emor no. 276

אמר ר' אבא אברהם וחמשה צדיקייא
ודוד מלכא שוין מדוריהון עמיה הדא
הוא דכתיב בסכות תשבו שבעת ימים,
שבעת ימים כתיב ולא בשבעת ימים ...
ובעי ב"נ למחדי בכל יומא ויומא באנפין
נהירין באושפיזין אלין דשריין עמיה.
זהר, פרשת אמור אות רעו

According to this teaching, there are seven guests who arrive in our sukkah. These are spiritual guests of obviously great meaning and historic significance. The notion of seven great Jewish leaders is referenced in a verse in Micha:

And this will ensure peace. If Assyria will come into our land or trample on our palaces, we will stop them with seven shepherds and eight officers.

Micha 5:4

והנה זה, שלום; אשור כּי-גבוא בּארְצֵנוּ, וְכִי יִדְרֹךְ
בּארְמְנוֹתֵינוּ, וְהִקְמֵנוּ עָלָיו שְׁבַע רְעִים, וְשִׁמְנָה נְסִיכֵי
אָדָם.
מיכה ה:ד

Here, as in the Maoz Tzur poem, we refer to our seven great leaders specifically as shepherds. They guide their flock—the Jewish people—with the devotion, sensitivity and sense of purpose of a shepherd. Yet we may still wonder why we specify seven leaders from among the countless spiritual giants of our history. Why not six or eight? Perhaps, if we understand the significance of the number seven, we can appreciate why we refer to seven spiritual guides and why tradition has identified exactly these individuals.

Sukkot as a time of *teshuvah meahava*—return to Hashem with love, after the Yamim Noraim that are characterized by return with awe.

Seven

In life and in Judaism, the number seven is ubiquitous and has great significance. On a universal level, much of our existence is framed in patterns of seven, including the number of days in a week, notes of the common musical scales and the popular colors of the rainbow. In Torah life, patterns of seven appear in the mitzvot of Shabbat, *shemittah* and *sefirat haomer* as well as *minhagim* such as *hoshanot* and *hakafot*. This number is a nexus between the physical universe and the spiritual realm; both are governed by the same framework of seven. The root of these patterns, according to tradition, is a manifestation of seven Divine energies that power our world; they reflect different dimensions of life and aspects of our personalities. Hashem provides us with seven different energies that, when manifested in their ideal balance, create true accord between matter and spirit in our world. These qualities are referred to as: *chessed* (love), *gevurah* (restraint), *tiferet* (harmony), *netzach* (dominance), *hod* (submissiveness or empathy), *yesod* (continuity and foundation) and *malchut* (kingship). We allude to these Divine aspects in our daily tefillah, when we cite a Biblical verse:

Yours, God, is the greatness (chessed), the power (gevurah), the harmony (tiferet), the dominance (netzach) and the glory (hod) for everything is in the heavens and the earth (yesod). Your, God, is the kingship (malchut) and You are exalted as head above all.

Chronicles I 29:11

לְךָ ה' הַגְּדֹלָה וְהַגְּבוּרָה וְהַתְּפָאֵרֶת,
וְהַנְּצַח וְהַהוֹד, כִּי-כֹל, בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ:
לְךָ ה' הַמְּמֹלָכָה, וְהַמְּתַנַּשֵּׂא לְכֹל
לְרֵאשׁ.
דְּבַרֵי הַיָּמִים א' כ"ט י"א

Here, we acknowledge that Hashem is the source of all the seven aspects of our life.

Even the beginnings of a simple understanding of any of these *middot* or *sephirot* (aspects or dimensions) require a full exploration and study.⁶ However, for our purposes, we can note that while every individual contains all seven of these diverse aspects, different people emphasize various *middot* to varying degrees. Even one individual may, at times, employ a greater measure of love than restraint and at other times emphasize fortitude more than magnanimity.

While this is true on an individual level it is also true on a national level. There are leaders who capture, develop and reflect the essence of a particular *middah*; they model this ideal in their lives and in their actions. We, their disciples and spiritual heirs, learn from their example and incorporate the aspects of these *middot* into our lives. Therefore, we understand why we are visited by seven historic leaders, who serve as timeless models, exemplars of the seven qualities and sources of their energies in our lives. Our tradition identifies them as Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef and David.⁷

The following chart illustrates the unique characteristics of each of the *ushpizin*:⁸

⁶ For an explanation and introduction to these concepts, see “Lesson Twenty One” in *Flames of Faith: An Introduction to Chassidic Thought* by Rabbi Zev Reichman.

⁷ Although the Gemara (*Sukkah* 52b) relates the seven shepherds in the verse in Micha to seven other figures in Tanach.

⁸ The Biblical verses that parallel the seven attributes are found in many siddurim according to the seven circuits of *Hoshanot* on Hoshana Rabba. The seven verses of blessings each of the leaders manifests and represents in our world is developed in the *Sefer Hatodaa* (pp. 120-121) by Rabbi Eliyah KiTov.

Leader	Source of blessing	Divine attribute	Source for attribute
אברהם Avraham	אב המון גויים <i>A father of many nations.</i> (Bereishit 17:4)	חסד Love	כי אמרתי עולם חסד יבנה <i>For I said, the world is built on kindness.</i> (Tehillim 89:3)
יצחק Yitzchak	והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ <i>And I bless the nations of the world through your progeny.</i> (Bereishit 22:18)	גבורה Restraint	לך זרוע עם גבורה תעז ירך תרום ימינך <i>Yours is the arm with power, Your hand is strengthened, Your right arm is raised.</i> (Tehillim 89:14)
יעקב Yaakov	יעבדוך עמים וישתחו לך לאומים <i>Nations will serve you and states will bow to you.</i> (Bereishit 27:29)	תפארת Harmony	תתן אמת ליעקב חסד לאברהם <i>Give truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham.</i> (Micha 7:20)
משה Moshe	יצב גבולות עמים למספר בני ישראל <i>He set the borders of the nations according to the numbers of the Jewish people.</i> (Devarim 32:8)	נצה Dominance	נעימות בימינך נצה <i>The pleasures are in Your right hand for eternity.</i> (Tehillim 16:11)
אהרן Aharon	כשמן הטוב על הראש יורד על הזקן זקן אהרן ... כי שם צוה ה' את הברכה חיים עד העולם <i>Like the good oil on the head that runs down the beard, the beard of Aaron ... for there, God has commanded blessing and life forever.</i> (Tehillim 133:2-3)	הוד Submission or Empathy	ה' אדונינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על השמים <i>God, our master, How mighty is Your name in all of the land, Who places Your glory on the heavens.</i> (Tehillim 8:2)
יוסף Yosef	ויוסף הוא השליט על הארץ הוא המשביר לכל עם הארץ <i>And Joseph is the ruler of the land, he is the provider for all people of the land.</i> (Bereishit 42:5)	יסוד Continuity or Foundation	צדיק ה' בכל דרכיו וחסיד בכל מעשיו <i>God is righteous in all of His ways and pious in all of His actions.</i> (Tehillim 145:17)
דוד David	אף אני בכור אתנהו עליון למלכי ארץ <i>I will make him the firstborn, the supreme leader of the kings of the world.</i> (Tehillim 89:28)	מלכות Kingship	לך יהוה הגדלה והגבורה והתפארת, והנצח וההוד, פי-כל, בשמים ובארץ: לך ה' הממלכה, והמתנשא לכל לראש <i>Yours, God, is the greatness, the power, the harmony, the dominance and the glory for everything is in the heavens and the earth. Your, God, is the kingship and You are exalted as head above all.</i> (Divrei Hayamim I 29:11)

Our Ushpizin

Perhaps now we can understand the concept of *ushpizin*. On Sukkot, we leave the comfort of the homes we have built for ourselves in the physical world and focus on living our spiritual lives with greater focus, having just completed the realignment process of the Yamim Noraim. During this time, we live in the shade of Hashem, taking in the rays of spiritual light. According to Rabbi Eliezer (*Sukkah* 11b) our sukkah reminds us of the clouds of glory, with which Hashem enveloped us during our sojourn in the desert. According to tradition, there were seven clouds surrounding us completely on all sides, above and below, with the seventh paving the way ahead of the camp. The seven clouds reflected the seven energies into the desert camp and continue to do so as we sit in the sukkah.

Each day, we enjoy all seven aspects of this light, personified by the seven spiritual guests in our sukkah. Yet each day of Sukkot is unique and has one guest that receives special attention, because each day of Sukkot has its own unique character and sanctity. This idea is expressed in the Talmud which explains why we recite a full Hallel each of the seven days, while on Pesach, we only recite full Hallel on the first of the seven days (outside Israel we recite it on the first two days):

Why do we recite [full] Hallel on each day of Sukkot, and on Pesach, we don't recite it each day? On Sukkot there is a unique sacrifice each day and on Pesach, the same sacrifice is offered each day.

Arachin 11a-11b

מאי שנא בהג דאמר' כל יומא, ומאי שנא בפסח דלא אמרינן כל יומא? דהג חלוקין בקרבנותיהן, דפסח אין חלוקין בקרבנותיהן.
ערכין יא.-יא:

The fact of a distinct number of *korbanot* on each day is a manifestation of the individuality of each day, a uniqueness that requires its own recitation of full Hallel and its own guest in our sukkah.

Today, practices vary regarding the tradition of *ushpizin*. Some designate a special chair, as mentioned in the Chida above. Others light special candles in the guests' honor, a practice recorded in the commentary of the *Shaarei Teshuva* to *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 625). Most who observe this tradition are careful to invite the *ushpizin* with a declaration; one such text is found in the *Siddur Beit Yaakov* of Rabbi Yaakov Emden (page 453):

Enter, exalted and holy guests, enter exalted and holy fathers and sit in the shade of the exalted Faithful One. Enter Abraham the compassionate and with him, Isaac who was bound on the altar and with him, Jacob, the complete one, and with him, Moses the faithful shepherd and with him, Aaron the holy priest, and with him, Joseph the righteous one and with him David the king and messiah. You shall dwell in Sukkot, dwell exalted guests, dwell, dwell, my faithful guests, dwell.

עולו אושפיזין עלאין קדישין עולו אבהן עלאין קדישין למיתב בצלא דמהימנותא עלאה. לעול אברהם רחימא ועמיה יצחק עקידתא ועמיה יעקב שלמתא ועמיה משה רעיא מהימנא ועמיה אהרן כהנא קדישא ועמיה יוסף צדיקא ועמיה דוד מלכא משיחא. בסוכות תשבו תיבו אושפיזין עלאין תיבו תיבו אושפיזין מהימנותא תיבו.

Whatever one's specific practice regarding the tradition of *ushpizin*, the concept is profound and relevant. Whether one contemplates the specific middah of a specific spiritual guest on a given day, or studies the relationship between this guest and the holiday of Sukkot in general, *ushpizin* can help connect us with a more meaningful experience of the mitzvah of Sukkah specifically, and our relationship with Hashem in general.