

HANDBOOK FOR

A CHRISTIAN CELEBRATION OF THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES (SUKKOT)

by Ken Behrens - ©1983 Teruah Ministries - Updated 7/2010

INTRODUCTION

Since the earliest days of the human race, even before God made His presence known to Abraham, people have always considered the time of Harvest to be an especially sacred time, to be celebrated with joy and thankfulness to the Creator for His abiding love, in spite of our continued sinfulness. It was this tradition that Yahweh made law for the Israelites when He instituted the Feast of Tabernacles, or Sukkot. (Lev. 23:33-44; Deut. 16:13-15.)

Down through the centuries, the principles of trusting dependence on God, joyful thankfulness in His Providence, and making Him the Guest of Honor at the harvest party were constantly re-emphasized as the Hebrew nation grew. (Neh. 8:8-18). Many of the most important happenings of Jewish history center around the Feast of Tabernacles. (Lev. 23:43; II Chron. 5:3; The fall of Jerusalem, The Rededication of the Temple that is celebrated at Hannukah, these last two from the Apocrypha, Baruch 1:4 and II Maccabees 10:6, respectively.)

As the prophets began to look toward the Messianic Age, it became clear that the ATTITUDE of Tabernacles was to be the sign by which God's people were to be known in the final days. (Zech. 14, especially vs. 16-19).

The New Testament is full of symbolism which further proclaims the Feast. Our Lord and Brother, Jesus, took special care to insist that He was the fulfillment of Tabernacles, and that our celebration of Him was to bring forth a new order of healing, forgiveness, and unity in the Holy Spirit. (John 7:37 - 8:20). The Book of Revelation indicates that it is this feast that we shall be celebrating when Jesus returns (Rev. 7:9-17).

Tabernacles was THE FEAST of the Israelite year. It was an almost perfect blend of the theology revealed on Sinai and expounded by countless generations of rabbis with the grass-roots genius for partying and "making merry before the Lord." (Songs 1:4 and half the book of Psalms.)

It is our feast, too. Tabernacles is a way to bring the hope of joy that we shall one day share together in Glory a little more into our lives today. (Photos below: left, Dancing in the Sukka, Upstate NY, circa 1985; right, Mike & Annette Althouse, 2005 celebration at Dove Christian Fellowship, Intl., Hamburg, PA.)



The History of Tabernacles

According to Jewish legend, it began with a command of God. From before creation, God wrote His Word in heaven, carved in white fire onto black fire. God never does anything without a plan. It was this Word, later to be revealed to Moses at Sinai as the first five books of the Bible, that He followed as His blueprint for the universe.

From all eternity, God willed a cycle of growth and celebration of harvest, and gave it as a command to all creation. In fact, the Jewish legends tell us that whenever men on earth refuse or forget to celebrate the Feast, God makes certain that the angels celebrate it in heaven.

The early Christians, having first been Jews, celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, since it was the main feast of the Jewish year. Francis of Assisi, the late medieval monk, is shown in a portrait celebrating the feast. Charles G. Finney, the great evangelist, was led by a direct infusion of knowledge by God to accept salvation during the Feast, in a booth he had built in the forest.

Except for these two, as far as we know, no Christian celebrated Tabernacles from about 90AD until 1981, when the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem began a Christian celebration, paralleling that of the Israeli nation. Spontaneously, from 1982-86, God began inspiring Christian groups, more or less unknown to each other, to begin studying and celebrating the ancient feast.

Today, there is a worldwide movement, with several major ministries sponsoring large regional gatherings, and offering teachings, materials catalogs, and workshops. Many smaller churches and ministries also hold celebrations. My wife Anna and I, through our teaching and music ministry, Teruah Ministries, have been holding the Feast wherever people have wanted to celebrate it, since 1983.

People today are very much out of touch with the ancient Jewish farming and harvest customs underlying the theology of Tabernacles. In spite of the growing movement of restoration in our time, most people still need some background information in order to fully appreciate the potential of the Feast for Christianity. While the other two feasts, Passover and Weeks, are well known in their “fulfilled” versions of Easter and Pentecost, the third Feast requires some introduction.

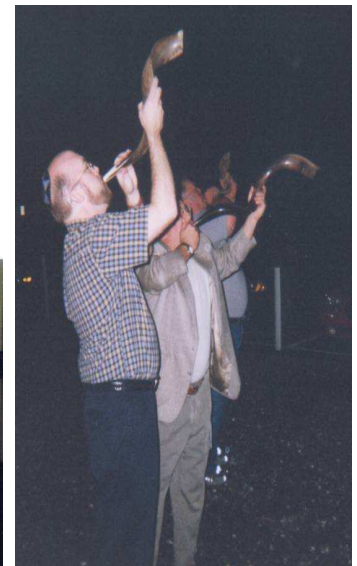
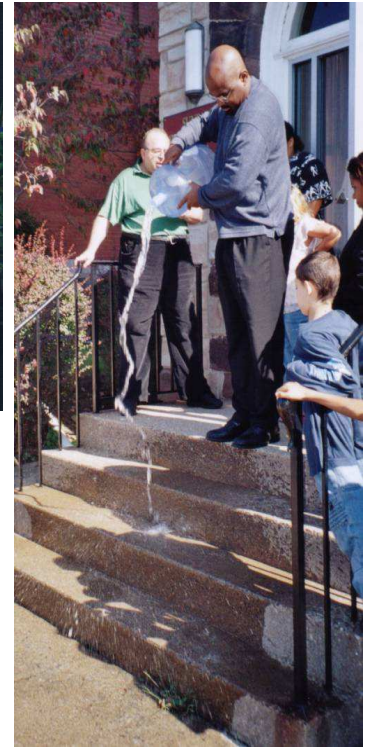
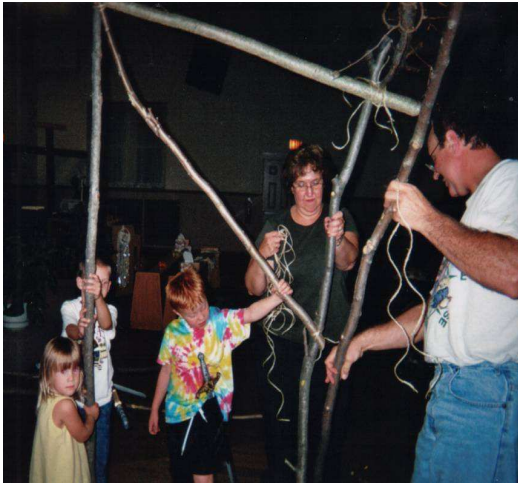
That is why we have prepared this booklet. It is based on the Bible, of course, and on the great Jewish commentaries (Talmud and Midrashim), and upon our own experience and inspiration from the Holy Spirit, as well as the experience of the Christian community with over 25 years of celebration.

We are always open to any insights the Holy Spirit may give you about Tabernacles which you would like to share with us. We can be reached at (302) 424-1277 or online at kenbehrens@netcarrier.com.



Photos: left, Hosanna Procession, Crossroad Christian, Dover; Paul & Sue Kofchock of Beit Simcha, Allentown PA, lead Israeli Folk Dance at Dove Christian Fellowship, in Hamburg, PA.

Pictures from past Sukkot Celebrations: First Row, left to right, booth building, booth decorating, water pouring, Hamburg PA Dove Christian Fellowship. Second Row: Lulav Waving led by Pastor Anthony Wallace, Crossroad Christian Church, Dover, DE; “Mom” Rosemary Wallace and Alycia, Dover. Third Row: Sukkot at Redeeming Love Church, Upstate NY; Worship Dance team, Dover; shofar blowing.



CHAPTER ONE - THE HARVEST

Harvest has been a holy time since the days of ancient Egypt. Most pagan people pray at the harvest to thank their “gods” for food, and to pray for rain and good crops next year. They also celebrate and party, as they gather in the crops.

In Israel, knowledge of the True God made everything special in many ways. Each crop had an important meaning for the nation as a community. The figs were a universal sign of healing (Is. 38:21) and of abundant fruitfulness (Mark 11:13-14; Zech. 3:10). The grape, pressed into wine, was the symbol of joy (Ps. 104:15). And the olive was the source of oil, symbol of brotherly concord (Ps. 133) and anointing for ministry (many places), healing (James 5:14), and light bearing (Zech. 4).

Also, each act of celebration had a special meaning:

The harvest was to be a prefigure of the Harvest of Nations (Num. 29; Talmud Tractate Sukka, on the number of animal sacrifices);

Thanksgiving was also for God’s law (tradition of Simchat Torah); and
The prayer for rain was a prayer for God’s grace to fall upon the whole earth (Tractate Sukka, on Palm service).

Several other celebrations were added during the history of Israel, and Jesus changed each of them to make them special for us.

We will discuss each in turn.

CHAPTER TWO - THE BOOTH

The booth, or tabernacle, is called “sukka” in Hebrew (pronounced Soo Kuh). Many booths are called “Sukkot” (plural). The feast is called “Chag Sukkot” (the Ch is hard, like in ‘Christ’), or simply “HaChag” (The Feast), since it was the biggest feast, and focal point of the year.

“Tent” is an uninformed translation, and causes confusion. In most places where your Bible says “tent,” it is translating the word “ohel,” or cloth camping tent, which is a different concept altogether. So, in this booklet, we will always call it a “booth” or “sukka.”

A booth was used during harvest time, since the work was done by hand and had to be done quickly, while the crops were ripe. There was no time to go home each night, so the whole family camped out in a makeshift, rectangular hut of tree branches during the time of harvest, usually for a week or so.

In Israel, the sukka was the promise of God’s care and a symbol of His continuous Providence. After all, they had escaped from Egypt only by trusting God, and their survival in the desert was probably due to many nights spent in sukkot. So, a proper sukka was always made of natural materials found growing wild (Tractate Sukka ch. 2) and, although it was big enough to shield the family from the heat of the sun (Rev. 7:16), it had no roof, so that they could always see the stars and remember God’s greatness (Ps. 8) and realize their dependence on Him.

In the opening paragraph of the Gospel of John (1:14), Jesus is presented as becoming flesh and “dwelling among us, and we have seen His glory,” using the Greek word for “dwell,” “skena,” which in Hebrew is the “Shekinah” glory, and is also the Greek word for the Feast of Tabernacles. The early Christians taught that it is the “dwelling” of Christ that produces the “glory” of Christ in the church. By learning to dwell in Him, as He dwells in us, and becoming His booth as He in our brothers and sisters becomes ours, we learn to rest in Him, and allow His glory to shine more and more with each passing year.

The materials used for construction were special (Lev. 23:40). In correct translation they were: Date Palm, from the desert; Myrtle, from the swamps; Citron, from the fields; and Willow, from the brooks. Thus was every area of the Promised Land represented.

They also represent the two types of giftedness a person was given by God and could share with others: Date Palm, food, the gift of bearing worthwhile fruit; Myrtle, sweet smell, the gift of sweet words about God; Citron, both food and scent, a combination of both of the gifts mentioned above; and Willow, having neither food nor scent, but delicate and necessary.

It took all four, woven together, to construct a usable booth. The lesson is clear. Only by sharing our lives and accepting all people in the Body of Christ, regardless of how gifted they are or are not, can we hope to withstand the heat of the sun (purifying fire) and gather in the harvest of souls. This lesson is from the Talmud, and goes back to 2 centuries before the time of Jesus. It is said to be based on Zechariah.

Then the Jews decorated the booth with pictures from home, children’s drawings, flowers, gourds, flowers, fruit, etc. The array of thousands of booths on a hillside must have been a truly glorious sight!

Because most of the United States lacks the citron (a small fruit shaped like a sweet lemon), and the date palm and myrtle, we use the following substitutions in our Tabernacles celebrations: Date palm, cattails (universal food source); Myrtle, pine branches; Citron, sumac cluster or other fruit or fragrant flower; Willow, willow branch, strong for bracing.

The Talmud says that the time from Rosh Hashannah (Jewish New Year) until Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) is reserved for the act of building the booth. Most Christians, however, having once and for all been made new, and having already been atoned for by Jesus’ sacrifice, build theirs whenever it is convenient, from a week before to the day before the celebration.

The ideal, of course, would be to take the whole week off, build the booth on the first day, and celebrate all week long. In today’s demanding world of work and family obligations, however, American celebrations usually run for one day or over a weekend. Those who travel to Israel, however, get to experience Tabernacles for a whole week.

CHAPTER THREE - CELEBRATION

Hebrew has at least seven words for joy. For example, there is the joy to be blessed (Yatob); the joy of the heart (Chadawah); gladness (Sason); and rejoicing (Masos). All of these are the result of something God does TO us. It is sad, that the only meaning of joy in English is “the result of God’s work in us.” It is sad because so many Christians seem to act like they aren’t joyful until and unless they perceive that God is doing something good for them at that moment.

The Hebrew language is the only language in history created specifically for a people to talk about God. When we study Hebrew, we learn that our English idea of joy is incomplete. The four words for joy above show that the Bible knows that we can have joy because of what God does for us, but it also knows that we cannot **DEPEND** on that kind of joy, as these four words are seldom used. Instead, the Bible's use of the other three words show that we can be **COMMANDED**, no matter how we feel, or what we are thinking about, to : dance for joy (Gil); act in joy (Simchach); and shout for joy (Teruah). In other words - to celebrate!

The last word, Teruah, which is also the name of the note blown by the shofar that signals the New Year and the beginning of the feast, has another meaning as well. Since "ruach" means "spirit," "teruach" means "to be a sign of the Spirit" in each other's lives, or to "share the Spirit" with each other.

"Joy" in Greek (the New Testament language) is "chara." "Thankfulness" is "charis," and the spiritual gifts are "charismatic." And it is these gifts given by the Spirit, which are brought to fruition, as we learn to act in joy by celebrating with our brothers and sisters, regardless how we feel. In the coming trials of these last days, it is this ability to ignore our feelings and walk by God's commandment of joy that will sustain us until the end.

CHAPTER FOUR - LITURGIES (also called "para-liturgies" or "services")

Tabernacles consisted of five prescribed communal celebrations, liturgies, para-liturgies or services (the term depends on the reader's denomination). They are:

1. Sacrifices
2. Palms
3. Light
4. Water
5. Torah

Our sacrifice is no longer one of bulls and rams, of course, but of praise thanksgiving and a donation for the poor (Neh. 8:10). It is a sacrifice that we come prepared to give, both in attitude and in visible form. In preparation for the Feast, we should be praying over and meditating on God's Word, remaining open to the Spirit as to what He would have us share with our brothers and sisters on the day we gather (I Cor. 14:26). In this way, the feast will each year be a harvest of the unique growth God has given us in the past year.

The last day's liturgy of Simchat Torah means "rejoicing in the Word of God," and the Jews celebrate it by adding an extra day to the Biblically-mandated seven days of the Feast. This day, celebrated at home, would be an excellent way to rest and reflect and to prepare for the winter's rest to come.

CHAPTER FIVE - PALMS

Palm-waving and "Hosanna" usually recall Palm Sunday and the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. At least, that is most Christians' experience. But what Jesus was doing when He came into town on a donkey was fulfilling the words of Zechariah 9:9. The crowds, remembering Zech. 14:16-19 and

recognizing Jesus as their Messiah, gathered and waved palms and began celebrating the Palm Liturgy (which we call “Lulav Waving”) of the final day of Sukkot right then and there.

During Tabernacles, the palms (actually one each of the palm leaf, myrtle, citron, and willow, tied together in a bundle) are waved in the six directions - north, south, east, west, up and down (where they are pounded on the ground) with prayers for the knowledge of God to come to all nations. They are waved that the gift of God may travel on the wind to all people. Our gift, of course, for all the directions, is the Word of God, who is Jesus.

The Jews believed that their prayers were answered, too, since they reduced the number of animals sacrificed each day (Num. 29). They felt that, as nations came to the knowledge of the True God, further sacrifices to atone for their sins were unnecessary (Tractate Sukka). During our celebrations, we pray that Jesus may transform all people, that they may come to a saving knowledge of The Lord.

The cry “Hosanna” means “Save Us (O Lord),” and is the response to a sequence of prayers used in a procession, like the ancient litanies used in the early church. We call ours the “Hosanna Procession.”

CHAPTER SIX - LIGHT

Each night, to remind themselves of the prophecy that in the End Times there would be no night, giant torches were lit in Jerusalem. Young men carried and juggled lit torches though the night, merrymaking as teenagers of today might do. Jesus’ statement in John 8:12 is intended to make Sukkot a never-ending attitude among His followers. His repeating of the statement again in John 9:5 is nothing other than a command to us to keep the Light of His life and Word shining through us and share it with a world in darkness. It is this we remember in the Liturgy of Light.

Our ministry creates the Tabernacles teachings and celebrations around the needs and schedules of those attending. We have not, therefore, been able to include the Light Liturgy very often in our celebrations, as we usually conclude the Feast well before dusk.

CHAPTER SEVEN - WATER

The Talmud says that unless one has seen the water procession of Sukkot, one has never seen joy. And indeed, it should have been so. What greater thing is there to celebrate than the knowledge that one day Jesus would come and dwell in our praises, and begin in us a spring of living water that would flow to the ends of the earth? (Zech. 14:8-9; Ezech. 47:1-12; Rev. 22:1-5) It will be the final act of sanctifying creation.

What a joy it must have been to go up the mount to the Temple to the celebration music (Psalm 122), and watch as the priest poured from the divided pitcher (water from one side, and newly-pressed wine from the other) as the people shouted for him to lift it “higher, higher!” This prefigured Jesus, lifted high on the cross, pouring out both Blood and Living Water from His own heart when they lanced His side. What an honor, and what a joy, that He has chosen us to lift Him high through lives of grateful praise, sharing His saving Blood and Living Water with the world.

How far the symbol of water had come from the concept the pagans had held. They had thought only of giving water to the earth as a “magic spell” to make the rain. The Israelites joyfully watered the whole earth to let the future harvest grow ready for the return of the Master Harvester. It is the Harvester Himself who poured out from the pitcher of His own Body (John 19:34) the water and blood of the final harvest that we now celebrate until He returns.

CHAPTER EIGHT – THE ONCE AND FUTURE FEAST

Easter happened nearly 2000 years ago; Pentecost barely a few weeks later. The joyful harvest gets ever closer, as we wait – never knowing exactly when. Tabernacles has always been a prophetic feast. The Midrash Rabbah on Genesis 33:17 says Jacob started it, and the Book of Jubilees (which almost made it into the Bible) says he got the idea from Abraham. And neither Abraham nor Jacob had much but prophecy to go on (Heb. 11:9). Zechariah (Ch. 14) prophesied in terms of Sukkot. And Rev. 7:15-17 can be nothing other than a pledge of Tabernacles.

So Sukkot will be our never-ending celebration. In prophecy, in prayer, in celebration, we keep the Feast each year. And what else can we hope for to bring us through the hard times that certainly lie ahead for all creation (Amos 5:18-27) unless we build an indestructible booth of relationships throughout the Body of Christ?

Tabernacles is prophetic. It is not, and can never be, regimented. The command of joy makes that impossible. Sukkot must and will remain forever new, forever fresh, forever different, because it is forever us, as God made us to be. Us – the myrtle. Us – the willow. Us – the citron. Us – the date palm. Each year grown different, and each year taller. Each year a pledge to weave our lives into one in prophetic expectation – a booth of living together lives of justice and goodness (Amos 5:24), ready when the Harvest Master calls (Luke 10:2). So, united by praise and prophecy, we may stand ready to announce the time of forgiveness (John 8:1-11), sight (John 9) and healing (Acts 27:1-28:10) to all!

LIST OF SOURCES

Our sources include:

The *Tractate Sukka* is one volume of the encyclopedic work called the *Talmud*, which is available on the Internet (at Sacred-Texts.com) or which may be consulted at any synogogue. *The Midrash Rabbah on Genesis* is a single volume, which any synogogue library should have. The *Book of Jubilees* has been most recently published in the two volume *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* edited by Charlesworth, but there are many older versions at any good college or seminary library, as well as at several Internet sites.

Tabernacles Scripture passages, in chronological order:

Genesis 33:17 – started by Isaac

Amos 5:26. The original manuscripts were too badly worn for correct translation. Scholars now prefer: “Though you offered sacrifices...and lived in Tabernacles, now, because of Molech, etc...”

Leviticus 23:33-43

Numbers 29:12-38

Deuteronomy 16:13-17

II Chronicles 5:3 - the Temple was dedicated during Sukkot

Nehemiah 8

Ecclesiastes - the book read by the Jews at Sukkot

Isaiah 16:10 - speaking of pagan celebrations for comparison

Zechariah 14 and related passages in all the prophets

John 7, 8, 9 - Jesus’ renewal of the Feast

Acts 27-28 - under imprisonment

Revelation 7 - verse 9 gives it away

Suggested Psalms:

Ps. 67, 81A, 104, 118, 147

Ps. 65

Ps. 24, 100, 122, 125

Ps. 68, 72, 87, 98, 117

Ps. 84, 91