

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Sukkot and Simchat Torah

Booths hung with carpets and lanterns, a chair set aside for honored guests, and joyful processions with Torah scrolls in silver cases.

WHEN

Sukkot begins on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, five days after Yom Kippur, usually in late September or October.

WHAT IT IS

A seven day harvest festival. Families eat in a *sukkah*, a temporary booth recalling the shelters of the Israelites in the desert.

SIMCHAT TORAH

"Rejoicing in the Torah." Right after Sukkot, communities finish reading the Torah and begin it again, with singing and dancing.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

The chair of the guests, Hoshana Rabbah night study, Torah scrolls in standing cases, and honors that differ from rite to rite.

Sukkot is both a memory and a harvest. The Torah asks Jews to live in booths for seven days to remember the Israelites' journey through the wilderness, and the holiday also marks the gathering of the year's crops, which is why it is called the Festival of Ingathering. Across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, Jewish families built their booths in courtyards, on rooftops, and inside their homes, and dressed them in the textiles, lanterns, and fruit of their own lands. The season ends with Simchat Torah, when the Torah scrolls leave the ark and the whole community dances.

The days of the festival

- **The sukkah.** A booth with at least three walls and a roof of cut branches, laid loosely enough to see the stars. Families eat their meals inside, and some sleep there too.
- **The four species.** Each morning except on Shabbat, worshippers hold the *lulav* (palm branch), *etrog* (citron), myrtle, and willow, and carry them in processions in the synagogue.
- **Hoshana Rabbah.** On the seventh day, worshippers circle the synagogue seven times and beat willow branches. The day came to be seen as the final sealing of the judgment of the High Holidays. Since the thirteenth century, many Jews have stayed awake the night before, reading Deuteronomy and Psalms, a custom later shaped, probably by the mystics of Safed, into a special order of study.
- **Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.** In Israel they fall on the same day, the 22nd of Tishrei. Elsewhere, Simchat Torah is celebrated a day later.

A chair for the guests

A teaching in the Zohar says that seven honored guests, the *ushpizin*, visit the sukkah: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David, one leading each night. In Sephardic custom, an ornate chair covered with fine cloth is set in the sukkah, holy books are placed on it, and the host declares it the chair of the ushpizin.

In Moroccan homes, a small chair for the prophet Elijah, padded with Moroccan pillows, holds the family's Sukkot books. Some families read mystical texts each night from the book *Hamad Elohim* in honor of that night's guest.

Simchat Torah: dancing with the Torah

A holiday with Babylonian roots. Reading the whole Torah in one year was originally the custom of the Jews of Babylonia, today's Iraq, while the Land of Israel followed a three year cycle. Most Jews adopted the annual cycle by the eighth century, and by the eleventh century its completion had become the festive day of Simchat Torah.

Hakafot. The scrolls are taken from the ark and carried around the synagogue in seven joyful circuits, the *hakafot*, with songs and liturgical poems special to each community. In Israel, many towns hold "second hakafot" outdoors on the night after the holiday.

Torah in a case. In many Middle Eastern communities, including Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Yemen, the scroll is kept in a *tik*, a hard case of wood, often covered in silver or velvet, that opens to reveal the scroll. The scroll is read standing upright. A Torah case at the Skirball Museum in Cincinnati, made in Bombay in the Indian Iraqi style, is embossed with the Ten Commandments.

The honors. The person who reads the last lines of Deuteronomy is the *Hatan Torah*, "bridegroom of the Torah," and the one who begins Genesis is the *Hatan Bereshit*. The Yemenite and Egyptian rites traditionally had one honoree who did both, while other Middle Eastern communities added a third, the *Hatan Me'onah*. In some communities the honorees were showered with candy, and sometimes the honor went to a young man who had recently married.

A night of study

A visitor to Baghdad in 1871 described the community gathering on the night of Hoshana Rabbah to read through the whole Hebrew Bible, the Zohar, and the Mishnah. Afterward, the synagogue's Torah scrolls, which he estimated at about 400, were set out in cases covered with silver and gold.

Many Moroccan families, too, keep an all night study on Hoshana Rabbah, often in the sukkah. In Marrakesh the night was sweetened with pastries, fruit, and mint tea.

Community by community

Morocco

Many families decorate the lulav with golden threads, line the sukkah with colorful fabrics and gold ribbons, and light it with bronze or copper lanterns. Cookbook author Claudia Roden describes rooftop booths draped with rugs, brocades, and silk shawls. A favorite Sukkot song is *Sukkah ve Lulav*, a poem by Rabbi Moshe Adahan of Meknes.

Sources: Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals; JNS

Iraq

Families built large booths in their central courtyards, covered with woven mats, hung with fruit, and lit with colored glass lanterns, where extended families often gathered together. Recordings made in 1959 preserve the Baghdadi poems sung during the hakafot.

Sources: Unpacked; Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre

Kurdistan

The *Saharane* was once a spring festival in Kurdistan, similar to the Newroz celebrations of the region. In Israel, Kurdish Jews now hold it every Sukkot. The largest gathering, in Jerusalem, has drawn about 13,000 people, and Muslim Kurds increasingly join in.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Yemen

Some families built the sukkah on a rooftop, roofed with date palm branches and decorated with pomegranates and citrus. Others built it in part of the house beneath a removable section of roof, using stalks from the wheat set aside for Passover matzah.

Sources: JNS; Unpacked; Encyclopaedia Judaica

Ottoman Sephardic (Rhodes)

On the island of Rhodes, the sukkah was decorated with palm branches, myrtle, fruit, colored paper chains, and embroidered tapestries. *Biscochos*, Sephardic cookies, were hung alongside the fruit.

Source: JNS, citing the Rhodes Jewish Museum

Bukhara (Central Asia)

Bukharian Jews roofed their booths with willow branches and hung wreaths of willow and wildflowers at the entrance. A photograph in the Library of Congress shows a Bukharian family in their sukkah around 1900, the father holding an etrog and lulav.

Sources: JNS; Library of Congress, via Arutz Sheva

India

Jews from Baghdad who settled in India in the late eighteenth century brought their Torah cases with them. In Cochin, families built booths of bamboo and woven coconut palm leaves and invited neighbors and friends to share meals.

Sources: Skirball Cincinnati; JNS; Unpacked

Foods of the season

Stuffed foods symbolize the bounty of the harvest: carrots filled with rice and meat in Syria, onions stuffed with rice and pomegranate in Lebanon, stuffed artichokes across the Middle East and North Africa, couscous with vegetables, and dates filled with nuts.

Sources: JTA; Ritualwell

Common misconceptions

- **"Sukkah decorations are paper chains."** Many communities used carpets, embroidered fabrics, lanterns, and fresh fruit.
- **"All Sephardic Torah scrolls stand in cases."** The hard case is a Middle Eastern tradition. Moroccan communities and the Spanish and Portuguese Jews usually dress the scroll in a cloth mantle.
- **"Simchat Torah comes from the Bible."** The Bible describes Sukkot and the eighth day. Simchat Torah developed in the Middle Ages.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Terms vary. Many Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, and Yemenite Jews identify as Mizrahi, while many Syrian and Moroccan Jews use Sephardic, which refers to Jews of Spain and Portugal and is also used for those who follow Sephardic prayer customs.

Words to know

Sukkah *Hebrew*

A temporary booth where families eat during Sukkot.

Sekhakh *Hebrew*

The roof of cut branches or plants that covers the sukkah.

Arba minim *Hebrew*

The four species: palm, citron, myrtle, and willow.

Ushpizin *Aramaic*

"Guests." The seven biblical figures welcomed into the sukkah.

Hoshana Rabbah *Hebrew*

The seventh day of Sukkot, with seven processions and willow branches.

Hakafot *Hebrew*

The circuits made with the Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah.

Tik *Hebrew*

A hard Torah case used in many Middle Eastern communities. Plural *tikim*.

Hatan Torah *Hebrew*

"Bridegroom of the Torah," honored with reading the end of Deuteronomy.

Hatan Bereshit *Hebrew*

"Bridegroom of Genesis," honored with beginning the Torah again.

Saharane *Kurdish*

A Kurdish Jewish festival, celebrated in Israel during Sukkot.

Bringing Sukkot to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare Sukkot with harvest festivals in other cultures, and discuss why so many traditions give thanks for the harvest.
- Study the sukkah as architecture: how did families in Baghdad, Marrakesh, Bukhara, and Cochin build with the materials around them?
- Look closely at a museum object, such as the Skirball's Bombay Torah case, and ask what it tells us about migration.
- Teach about the four species and the hakafot, but do not have students wave a lulav, recite blessings, or reenact a procession.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Decorate the school sukkah in a Moroccan, Iraqi, or Bukharian style, and set aside a chair of the ushpizin with holy books.
- Learn the Moroccan song *Sukkah ve Lulav* or listen to Baghdadi hakafot recordings.
- Hold a Hoshana Rabbah night of study, with mint tea and pastries as in Marrakesh.
- Invite families to share how their communities honored the Hatan Torah and Hatan Bereshit.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Where did our family build its sukkah? What hung from the roof? What did we eat?
- Read *An Etrog from Across the Sea* together with young children.
- Cook a stuffed vegetable dish from a community other than your own and share it in the sukkah.
- Record an elder's Sukkot and Simchat Torah memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a festival about temporary shelters have special meaning for communities that later had to leave their homes?
- How did families in different places use local materials and crafts to make the same commandment their own?
- What does it mean that a community finishes reading the Torah and begins again on the very same day?

Learn more

Watch and listen

"Mi Yiten MiTziyon": Simchat Torah poems for the hakafot, Baghdadi tradition (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre, 1959 recording)
jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/node/24402

Simhat Torah Songs from the Collection of James Levy (Hebrew University; Western Sephardic songs from Gibraltar, including Ladino)
jewish-music.huji.ac.il/index.php/en/playlist/23736

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

An Etrog from Across the Sea, by Deborah Bodin Cohen and Kerry Olitzky, illustrated by Stacey Dressen McQueen (Kar-Ben, 2024). A Sephardic family in colonial New York, inspired by the life of Luis Moses Gomez.
pjllibrary.org/books/etrog-from-across-the-sea/if01817

The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York, by Claudia Roden (Knopf, 1996).
discover.hsp.org/Record/marc-ocm34984360/Description

A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, by Herbert C. Dobrinsky (Yeshiva University Press, 2011). Syrian, Moroccan, Judeo Spanish, and Spanish and Portuguese customs. For teachers.
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-treasury-of-sephardic-laws-and-customs-the-ritual-practices-of-syrian-moroccan-judeo-spanish

Explore online

My Moroccan Succoth, by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals)
jewishideas.org/article/my-moroccan-succoth

From Yemen to Bukhara: The many ways Jews celebrate Sukkot (JNS)
jns.org/opinion/michael-freund/from-yemen-to-bukhara-the-many-ways-jews-celebrate-sukkot

The Ushpizin (Chabad.org)
chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4485/jewish/The-Ushpizin.htm

Hoshana Rabba (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)
jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hoshana-raba

Bridegrooms of the Law (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)
jewishvirtuallibrary.org/bridegrooms-of-the-law

Tik (Case) and Torah (Skirball Cincinnati)
csm.huc.edu/2019/09/10/tik-case-and-torah

Demystifying Sephardic and Ashkenazic Torah Cases (The Jewish Link)
jewishlink.news/demystifying-sephardic-and-ashkenazic-torah-cases

The Jews of Kurdistan: How Kurdish Jews Became Israeli (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/global-judaism/kurdish-israeli-jews-kurdistan-saharane

The Simchat Torah Morning Service (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/the-simhat-torah-morning-service

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the Encyclopaedia Judaica (via Jewish Virtual Library); Rabbi Daniel Bouskila (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals); JNS; Chabad.org; Skirball Cincinnati; The Jewish Link; the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; Kahal Joseph Congregation; Unpacked; ReformJudaism.org; Britannica; My Jewish Learning; JTA; Ritualwell; and Arutz Sheva. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.