



An Explainer for Community Leaders and Elected Officials:

Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, & Simchat Torah: A Trio of Fall Festivals

What are Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simchat Torah?

These three holidays form a connected series of fall festivals in the Jewish calendar:

1. **Sukkot** (סוכות, pronounced "soo-KOHT"): A seven-day festival beginning five days after Yom Kippur. Also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Booths.
2. **Shemini Atzeret** (שְׁמִינִי עֶצְרֵת, pronounced "shuh-MEE-nee ah-TZEH-ret"): Literally "Eighth Day of Assembly," this one-day holiday immediately follows *Sukkot*.
3. **Simchat Torah** (שִׂמְחַת תּוֹרָה, pronounced "seem-KHAT toe-RAH"): Meaning "Rejoicing with the Torah," this holiday celebrates the completion of the annual Torah reading cycle. In Israel and in Reform Judaism, it's combined with *Shemini Atzeret*; elsewhere, it's observed the day after.

While distinct, these holidays are often seen as a unit, with *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah* serving as a joyous conclusion to the *Sukkot* period. In 2024, *Sukkot* begins at sundown on October 16th and ends at nightfall on October 23rd, *Shemini Atzeret* begins at sundown on October 23rd, and *Simchat Torah* (when observed distinct from *Shemini Atzeret*) begins at sundown on October 24th.

Holiday Themes:

Sukkot is a harvest festival, expressing gratitude for nature's bounty. This agricultural aspect intertwines with historical remembrance, as the holiday commemorates the Israelites' journey through the wilderness after the Exodus. Sukkot also emphasizes joy, and, paradoxically, human vulnerability, reminding us of our dependence on divine protection. This juxtaposition of joy and vulnerability creates a unique spiritual experience, fostering both celebration and humility.

Shemini Atzeret, while connected to *Sukkot*, carries its own distinct themes. The holiday's name, meaning "Eighth Day of Assembly," suggests lingering in God's presence after Sukkot's seven days. It's seen as an intimate conclusion to the festival season, where God keeps the Jewish people for one more day of closeness. A central theme is the prayer for rain, marking the transition from Israel's dry season to its rainy winter, symbolizing life and sustenance for the coming year.

Simchat Torah is characterized by high levels of joy centered around the Torah. Its primary theme is the celebration of the conclusion of the annual Torah reading cycle and its immediate renewal. This practice embodies the continuous nature of Torah study and its central role in Jewish life. The holiday also emphasizes the accessibility and relevance of Torah to all Jews, regardless of age or scholarship level, promoting a sense of communal ownership and participation in this sacred text.

Holiday Customs:

Sukkot is rich in distinctive customs. The most visible is the construction and use of the *sukkah* (soo-KAH), a temporary outdoor shelter reminiscent of the dwellings used by the Israelites in the wilderness. Jews are commanded to "dwell" in the *sukkah* for seven days, which typically involves eating meals there and, for some, sleeping in it. Another key custom is the use of the "Four Species" or *Arba'at HaMinim*: the *lulav* (palm branch), *etrog* (citron), *hadas* (myrtle), and *aravah* (willow). These are held together and waved in six directions during prayers, symbolizing God's omnipresence. Many communities also symbolically invite biblical guests such as Abraham, Moses, and King David into the *sukkah* each night, a practice known as *ushpizin*.

Shemini Atzeret, while immediately following Sukkot, has its own unique practices. The most significant is *Tefilat Geshem*, the prayer for rain, which marks the beginning of the rainy season in Israel. This solemn prayer contrasts with *Sukkot's*

joyous atmosphere. Unlike during *Sukkot*, the *lulav* and *etrog* are not used on *Shemini Atzeret*, and many communities cease eating in the *sukkah* (though practices vary). In many Sephardic Jewish communities (Jews of Spanish or Portuguese descent), there's a custom of eating stuffed foods to symbolize an abundance of blessings for the coming year.

Simchat Torah is celebrated with exuberant dancing and singing during *hakafot*, joyous processions where congregants parade Torah scrolls around the synagogue. All Torah scrolls are removed from the synagogue's ark (where they are kept) for these processions, emphasizing the Torah's centrality to the community. Another key custom is the reading of the very end of Deuteronomy immediately followed by the beginning of Genesis, symbolizing the cyclical nature of Torah study.

October 7th Commemoration:

It's important to note that in 2023, the October 7th attacks in Israel occurred on *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*. This has created a complex emotional landscape for many Jewish communities as they approach these normally joyous holidays. Many synagogues will have increased security presence at this time.

Many communities are grappling with how to appropriately commemorate both the traditionally celebratory nature of Simchat Torah and the painful anniversary of the attacks. Community leaders should be sensitive to the range of emotions these holidays may evoke in 2024 and beyond.

How to Participate:

- **Extend Greetings:** "Chag Sameach" (חַג סָמֵאךְ, pronounced "KHAG sah-MAY-akh," meaning "Happy Holiday") is appropriate for all three holidays.
- **Visit a Sukkah:** Many synagogues and Jewish organizations build community sukkahs that are open for visits during Sukkot. It's always an enjoyable experience to gather with others for a meal in one!
- **Attend a Simchat Torah Celebration:** Many synagogues and communities hold public celebrations for Simchat Torah.
- **Recognize the Holidays:** Consider communications highlighting the values of joy, gratitude, and community these holidays represent, while also acknowledging the complexity surrounding the October 7th anniversary.
- **Be Mindful of Scheduling:** Observant Jews refrain from work during the first two days of Sukkot, as well as Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Most Jews do work on the intermediate days of Sukkot, but are required to eat their meals in the Sukkah.

Have questions? Want to connect to local Jewish institutions?

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