Camping out: Celebration of sukkot

by Lauren F. Winner in the October 18, 2005 issue

Wander through a Jewish neighborhood or past a synagogue in late October and you will see a hut (often referred to as a booth). It will probably be less than 30 feet tall and made of plywood, with three walls. It will be decorated with leaves, gourds and bunches of grapes, possibly strung with lights. The roof will be translucent (you can see at least a few stars if you stand in the hut at night). There's sure to be a picnic table or a card table set up inside. The hut will be a little flimsy; it might sway if the wind gets too vigorous. It will, to the uninitiated, look strange.

The hut, called a *sukkah* in Hebrew, is a sign that the eight-day festival of Sukkot has arrived. Like many Jewish holidays, Sukkot has a dual purpose: it is simultaneously a historical festival and an agricultural festival. It recalls the 40 years during which the Israelites, wandering in the desert after being freed from Egyptian slavery, lived in temporary huts. In commemoration—and reenactment—of that desert wandering, Jews build and decorate huts. Traditionally, families eat their holiday meals in the huts, and sometimes even sleep in them.

The agricultural piece of the holiday revolves around giving thanks to God for an abundant harvest. Following Leviticus 23:40, Jews gather together a palm branch, pieces of willow and myrtle, and a citron. On each day of Sukkot (except the Sabbath) Jews recite a special blessing and shake the four items in six directions. This *bensching lulav* ("blessing of the palm branch") allows Jews to embody their praise of the God whose bounty extends over all the earth.

For much of American history, few American Jews observed Sukkot. Sukkot has the misfortune of following right on the heels of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the Jewish New Year and Day of Repentance, respectively—holidays that are the pinnacle of the Jewish calendar. After the drama of the two High Holy Days, folks are saturated with celebration. Preparing for Sukkot is like gearing up for an eight-day pageant immediately after Christmas and New Year's Eve.

American Jews fell away from observing Sukkot not just because of holiday burn-out. Many Jewish immigrants worried that building huts on their lawns and waving

strange wands of palm and myrtle would make them stand out. As historian Jenna Joselit has summed up, “This autumnal festival rendered Jewishness much too visible, distinctive and quirky.” In an effort to make the holiday a bit quieter and more respectable, Rabbi Samuel Harrison Markowitz in 1958 suggested that Jews build mini-sukkahs. Rather than eating in a hut outside, Jews could nod to the holiday by placing a sukkah centerpiece on their dining room table or breakfront.

American Jewry has changed since Markowitz wrote. Perhaps as part of the general return to traditional practice that has marked Reform and Conservative Judaism over the past decade, more American Jews seem to be celebrating Sukkot—building a sukkah, inviting friends for a sukkah dinner, rolling out the sleeping bags and camping out in their holiday hut.

The revival of Sukkot has something to teach all of us. It not only recalls the story of the Israelites in the wilderness but teaches its own lessons about dependence and certainty. It teaches that security comes not from McMansions, but from God. It teaches that the things that appear most stable are flimsy, and the things that sometimes seem shaky are trustworthy indeed. In the words of 19th-century German rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, “The building of the tabernacle teaches you trust in God. . . . You know that whether men live in huts or in palaces, it is only as pilgrims that they dwell; both huts and palaces form only our transitory home. You know that in this pilgrimage only God is our protection.”

I, for one, am glad American Jews did not embrace Rabbi Markowitz’s suggestions about building small, tasteful sukkahs. I am glad this holiday entails big, curious huts poking into America’s civic space. Because real Sukkot, the oh-so-public Sukkot, affords everyone—not only the Jews who build the huts—the chance to reflect on what truly makes us secure.