

# NEVER COME EMPTY HANDED

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

*Why are guests so integral to Sukkot?*

## The Terrible Guests

Some of you might remember the movie Ushpizin, about a young Jewish couple who unknowingly harbor two escaped convicts in their Sukkah. These two convicts were lowly and crass and they tormented their hosts throughout their stay. Yet, the young couple accepted the abuse with patience and humility. Then, the two commit the gravest offense. They used their host's thousand shekel Etrog as lemon for a salad. The kind host forgave them for this too and in the end, the couple was blessed with a child in the merit of their incredible hospitality.

The name of the movie, Ushpizim, comes from the Zohar which states that on Sukkot, the seven 'Shepherds' of the Jewish people join every Jew in his Sukkah and act as their Ushpizim (guests). These shepherds are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Josef and David.

Many Jews have the custom to welcome the special Ushpizim to their Sukkah before sitting down to eat. Since these seven great men act as guests on Sukkot, it's also customary to invite as many guests as possible to our Sukkah during the holiday.

## The Problem

Someone once asked me why there is a special stress on having guests on Sukkot, when *Hochnosas Orchim*, welcoming guests, is a mitzvah all year round. As we say in the morning blessings, "these are the things that have no limit... welcoming guests." This is a mitzvah we should strive to fulfill everyday!

For example, the Talmud states, "In the days of the Temple the Altar atoned for one's sins. Today one's table atones for his sins." Rashi explains that by having guests at one's table, one achieves atonement. In other words, hospitality is in place of the sacrifices - and sacrifices were done every day of the year, not only

on Sukkot.

On Shabbat, having guests is also important. When I was in yeshiva in 770, every Shabbat my newlywed friends would beg me to grace their Shabbat table (mainly because their wives had warned them not to come home for the meal without a guest!)

Having guests on holidays is even more important. Maimonides writes that when one is enjoying the holiday meal he is obligated to feed the stranger, the poor and the widow. "One who bars his door and eats the festive meal alone with only his family has not eaten a festive meal at all - he has eaten a peasant's meal!"

So the mitzvah of having guests is for every day. Abraham best demonstrated the importance of welcoming guests when G-d came to visit him after his circumcision. When Abraham saw the three 'men' approaching from afar he left G-d's presence and ran towards them inviting them into his tent to rest and to refresh themselves.

Imagine leaving G-d alone in the living room to attend to other guests! Would any of us do such a thing to the President or even the boss, let alone G-d Himself! At best we'd offer to pay for the newcomers' hotel. But either way, we'd never leave a distinguished guest alone!

Abraham did the exact opposite. Abraham, a prophet who appreciated the value of a revelation more than any man in his day, left His presence to attend to his guests.

So, why is Sukkot more connected with guests than any other time?

## **Who Are the Guests?**

It is indeed true that we must welcome guests every day of the year. The difference is that on Sukkot we are the guests. For one week we are 'out of our element', without the comfortable armchair, without the comfortable cushions - it's just not our place. We are the guests in the Sukkah.

Why would G-d want us to be guests in our own homes for a week?

G-d wants to remind us that we are all guests in his world. A week spent in the

Sukkah is meant to drive that point deep into our hearts and minds.

What lessons can we learn from being guests in G-d's world?

**a.** No matter how many times a guest is invited to a friend's table he is never sure that he will be invited again. He knows that he depends on the host's decision and that he must not take his friend's hospitality for granted. We need to thank G-d for every additional day He allows us to benefit from His hospitality.

**b.** A guest is always punctual. He arrives at the house exactly on time. He shows up for dinner exactly on time as well. A Jew in G-d's world must always remember that he has to be on time. He must recite the Shema on time in the morning and at night and she must remember to light the Shabbat candles on time and so on.

**c.** If a guest spills something on the floor, he is so embarrassed that he wishes the floor would open and swallow him up. He immediately falls to the floor and cleans up the mess, apologizes a thousand times and sends a carpet cleaning crew the next day to remove the stain he made.

Sometimes we spill red wine on G-d's snow white carpet. A sin leaves a terrible stain on one's soul. We must be ready to recognize the problem and do our best to make amends.

**d.** Most importantly, a guest never comes empty handed! Some bring flowers, others a dish or a nice bottle of wine, but to come empty handed is terrible etiquette!

My friends, we knock on G-d's door every day. We pray for health and prosperity in abundance. However, before we knock on that door we must ask, "What can I bring to the table? What am I willing to do for Him?" Some will give more and some less, but not to reciprocate G-d's hospitality at all is not an option. No one comes empty handed!