

Tishrei

Embracing Joy

Materials Needed

- 4 pieces of paper per person (or 1 piece of paper divided into 4 sections)
- Writing utensils
- Optional background music for letter writing
- Comfortable space for meditation
- A lulav and etrog would enhance the space (but are not required!)

Framing

There is a time to plant and a time to reap. A time to work... and a time to reflect together in community. And, of course, there is a time to rejoice! Now is that time.

Sukkot, a harvest pilgrimage holiday, starts on the full moon of Tishrei. We celebrate, rest, love each other, and honor the Torah's commandment that we will "dwell in booths (sukkahs) to remember our ancestors, freed from slavery."

During Sukkot, we honor that life is temporary, and that every once in a while we need to come together to delight in the peace we already have. Sukkot is sometimes referred to as *Z'man Simchateinu* — the season of our joy!

After Sukkot, we arrive at the last holiday of Tishrei: Simchat Torah, literally "rejoicing of Torah." We're completing the annual cycle of Torah readings, and embarking on a new year of continued learning, reckoning, and meaning-making with our sacred text.

It sounds scholarly, but it's certainly not stuffy! At Simchat Torah, we go to our sanctuaries and party — it's traditional to drink alcohol, eat candy, dance, shout, and, yes, learn.

On Simchat Torah, we celebrate our love of learning, of questioning, of discovering, and of signing up for another journey in search of our Divinity. On this day, we start anew the ritual of passing on the story of our people. It's a happy time. What better way to let out all that joy than on the dance floor?

Essential Questions

What are you rejoicing in? What simple joys do you want to become more aware of?

Objectives

In this session, we want learners to:

- **Feel:** Joy in our hearts and spirit.
- **Know:** Stay open to joy to ground your spirit in the new year.
- **Do:** Celebrate the cyclical year.

Score

0:00 - 0:05	Grounding Question
0:05-0:10	Opening the Space
0:10-0:25	Part I: The Four Species Journal prompts and discussion
0:25-0:40	Part II: Letter from an Ancestor Reflection
0:40-0:50	Part III: Embodied Experience Embodying the Four Species
0:50-0:55	Part IV: The Personal Download
0:55-1:00	Closing the Space & Learner Takeaways

Texts and Activities

Grounding Question — 5 minutes

Go around the circle:

Invite everyone to share their name, pronouns, and how they are feeling 1) physically, 2) emotionally, and 3) spiritually (one word for each, for example: "I'm Sarah, I go by she/her. Physically I feel energized, emotionally I feel sentimental, and spiritually I feel curious"). You, as the facilitator, can go first in order to model this to the group.

Then, in pairs or in a group:

How can you open yourself up to more joy this year?

Opening the Space — 5 minutes

Welcome learners

Then, introduce this week's session and share the Essential Questions. Here's an example:

Our High Holy Day healing journey begins with introspection and culminates in joyful dance. First comes the cleansing work of the Days of Awe from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. We excavate the year's regrets and unfinished tasks. We make needed apologies and repair. We forgive others and ourselves, and we accept forgiveness.

Then comes Sukkot, often called z'man simchateinu, our Time of Joy. We enjoy our harvest of accomplishments and share hospitality with guests. The season ends with Simchat Torah when we celebrate the texts that weave us together.

During the Days of Awe, we move into wellness by embracing our human imperfections. We accept our existence as mortal, vulnerable, imperfect beings who can't possibly know everything—who will mess up and start over in relationship with one another and with G-d.

During Sukkot, we expand wellness by celebrating everything that daunted us in the Days of Awe. For the week of Sukkot, we live in temporary dwellings, open on one side and open to the sky. We rejoice in our human fragility, calling in guests, protecting ourselves with community. We experience our vulnerability as an opportunity to care for and feed one another — to give hospitality. Our needful mortality is the very condition for our rejoicing.

Then, we arrive at the holiday of Simchat Torah. For a year, we have been reading the Torah, the five books of Moses, all the way through. On Simchat Torah we read the very end, the bittersweet story of Moses' death — how he leaves the world with his heart's desire not quite attained, left for the next generation.

Then we spiral back to the beginning. We read Bereishit, the creation stories in the very beginning of our Torah. We return to when the world was new and people were created in the image of G-d — “tov meod,” very good. We go back to the garden, lush and green, where everything is possible.

Adapted from *From Days of Awe to Sukkot - Our Path to Well-Being* By Rabbi Robin Podolsky

What are you rejoicing in? What simple joys do you want to become more aware of?

Part I: The Four Species— 15 minutes

Introduce Activity 1

(Adapted from *Connecting to Nature and Wholeness During Sukkot* by Relli Siegel)

Sukkot is a holiday where we are invited to spend time outside. It's about connection to nature, taking the time to be, and connect — to oneself, dear friends, and family. Alongside our beautiful Sukkah decorations, delicious food, and beloved guests, we bring the four holy species to be a part of these special seven days. Also known as *arba'ah minim* in Hebrew, the Torah specifies four species to bring together on Sukkot. The four species are: lulav (branches of palm trees), etrog (citron), hadasim (myrtle branches), and aravot (willows) (Leviticus 23:40).

What do the four species symbolize?

- **Etrog (Citron)** *The heart, the place of true understanding and wisdom. In our tradition, there is great emphasis on the perfection of the Etrog, its purity, and the importance for it to be whole with the perfect Pitam. The Pitam is the tip of the Etrog that can remind us of a woman's breast, a source of nurturing.*
- **Lulav (Palm)** *The center frond of a palm tree. Tall, flexible, and often referred to as the backbone, the Lulav represents uprightness and dignity.*
- **Hadas (Myrtle)** *The eyes, vision, and insight. In some traditions, the Hadas represents enlightenment.*
- **Arava (Weeping Willow)** *The service of our lips, our prayer. The Arava is flexible, bends with the wind, and represents our soul connection to spirit.*

Another beautiful way to think of the 4 species is through learning and good deeds. Taste represents learning. Smell represents good deeds. The Etrog has both taste and smell; the Lulav has taste but no fragrance; the Hadas has smell but no taste and the Arava has neither. Each represents a different type of human. Some have both learning and good deeds; some have one without the other, and some have neither. But with that, we know that the species are not to be held alone, but to be bound together.

Activity 1: Where do you recognize each of the four species in your life?

You will need a pen and 4 pieces of paper.

Each piece of paper is dedicated to one of the species. After you read the questions below, take the time to write down your answers. These are only for you. You can share it all, some of it, or none. It is your choice.

Guiding Questions:

- What parts of you are the Etrog? What is whole and perfect right now in you? What is the uniqueness of your Etrog? What is sacred in your heart?
- What parts in you are the Lulav? What is your backbone? Where are you standing tall as well as being flexible?
- What parts in you are the Hadas? What do you see about yourself that provides you with some clarity about your inner world?
- What parts in you are the Arava? What is your inner prayer? Where are you being flexible and moving with the winds of life? Where are you letting the flow guide you without resistance?

Now ask: How does embracing them all together make you feel stronger? How do you feel when they are each by themselves? How would you like to feel?

Sharing

Invite each person to share one thing that resonated with them most during this exercise. Did they find something surprising?

Closing Ceremony

- Fold your papers into small squares.
- Place the 3 papers that represent the Lulav, Hadas, and Arava together in the left palm of your hand, and the one that represents the Etrog in your right hand.
- Put both hands close to one another in a prayer position in front of your heart, holding them together.

Take a moment to honor your hard work, and rejoice in feeling and knowing all parts of you are needed to be whole—the fragrant ones, the bending ones, those who have no smell or taste, and for your beautiful heart that brings them all together.

If you like, as you hold the palms of your hands together, say this blessing in your heart or out loud: *I honor all parts of me; each of them is a piece of my wholeness.*

Part II: Letter from an Ancestor - 15 minutes

Transition to Activity 2

At Simchat Torah celebrations the world over, children march around synagogue sanctuaries following the Torah scroll. Many will be formally welcomed into their Jewish learning with a special ceremony called Consecration (hear the word “sacred” in there?), accompanied by proud parents and grandparents and other equally kvelling adults.

Whether you've marched behind a Torah or not, you're presently engaged in Jewish learning by virtue of reading these very words. In this community, you're taking time to welcome this ancient tradition into your head, and hopefully into your heart. Who among your ancestors sits in the crowd, cheering you on? Who would be proud of you for engaging in Jewish learning and finding meaning for yourself within it?

Activity 2: Letter Writing

Write a letter to yourself from a proud and delighted ancestor. Imagine how they would feel to know that you're exploring your spirituality, and what they'd have to say about your link in this chain of transmission. Take a step back from whatever criticisms of yourself you unearthed and discarded on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Today, see yourself through the loving eyes of your ancestors.

Reflection Questions (either to guide your writing or to discuss in groups)

- What are your favorite stories or books from Jewish tradition?
- Is there something in Jewish tradition you want to explore more this coming year? What will that be?
- What does it mean for you that the Torah is not only something to study, but something to dance with?
- Do you have a Hebrew name? If so, reflect on where that name comes from, either in your family or in the Torah. If not, what might you want your Hebrew name to be?

Transition to Embodied Practice: Embodying the Four Species

As we've seen, the four species represent elements of our own inner being. They also connect to our physical bodies — heart, spine, eyes, and lips. The activities below deepen our understanding of the four species and allow us to bring the joy of Sukkot into our bodies and our interpersonal connections.

Part III: Embodied Experience— 10 minutes

Activity 3: Embodying the Four Species

Lulav & Etrog Meditation

Set a timer for 5 minutes, and read this script aloud to your group:

Find a comfortable seated position, or any restful position that is comfortable for you. If it feels good, close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a deep breath, then release.

Bring to mind the *lulav*, the palm, and its sturdy, upright structure. Feel the structure that your spine gives to you. Roll your shoulders up, back, and down to release tension.

When we “shake the lulav” on Sukkot, we are symbolizing flexibility in the spine, and flexibility to navigate life's transitions in general. Take a few moments to explore gentle swaying, circular motions, twists, and spirals to loosen your spine. (pause) Thank your spine for the length and flow it allows.

Now, bring to mind the vibrant yellow *etrog*, the citron, and its symbolism of the heart. Set your palms gently on your heart-space. Connect with the gentle rhythm of your heartbeat, a steady reminder of the life force within you. (pause)

Feel each heartbeat harmonize with your breath, drawing in the essence of Sukkot, a harvest festival of abundance, joy, and unity. (pause)

With each inhale, envision your heart filling with the overflowing blessings of Sukkot.

As you exhale, let this joyous energy radiate throughout your entire being. (pause)

With each breath, immerse yourself in the abundant joy and unity of Sukkot, unifying all parts of yourself in a harmonious embrace of wholeness and connection. (pause)

Now, take a moment to express gratitude for this experience of tapping into your heart's joy and unity. With a final deep breath, allow your eyes to softly open.

Hadas & Arava Blessing Practice

In this brief partner meditation, find a partner and sit facing each other. Set a timer for 90 seconds, and enter into a silent, shared gaze. The almond shape of the myrtle leaves (*hadas*) resembles an eye. Take this time to truly see and appreciate the goodness and beauty in each other. Look beyond external appearances, recognizing and acknowledging the unique

qualities and positive aspects within your partner. Through this visualization practice, may you witness the divine spark within each other.

(If anyone in your group is visually impaired or blind, those partners can use this time to sit in silence together, energetically sensing each other's divine spark and inner goodness.)

Once the 90 seconds are up, deepen this practice with a blessing. The willow leaves (*arava*) resemble the lips. Offer your partner well-wishes with an intentional blessing. For example, "May you experience joy this Sukkot!" You can make these blessings as personal as you wish! Feel the joy in both giving, and receiving blessings.

Closing the Space — 5 minutes

*This is your opportunity to share YOUR Torah (i.e. your personal sense of mission/instruction/wisdom) on this topic. You've just led the learners on a journey to develop their own understanding on this topic - now they get to hear your perspective.

Learner Takeaways — 2 minutes

* This is your opportunity to "check for understanding" and hear what has landed with the learners.

Ask learners to share something they are taking away from this session: something new they learned, something they hadn't previously considered, or something someone said that really resonated with them.

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