

Sukkot

- a Jewish response to the harvest

Abi Purkis writes about the harvest festival from a Jewish perspective

As the evenings start to draw in, and we begin to move into the penultimate season of the year, thoughts turn towards the up and coming harvest festival. Historically the harvest is a time of gathering in crops to sustain the domestic and agricultural wellbeing of the land through the winter months. Running parallel to this is the religious significance of this annual rite, a time of thanksgiving to God. From a religious perspective, a harvest festival has been in place since Biblical times, but what can the ancient Jewish roots of Abrahamic faith tell us about the significance of the harvest and its influence on modern observance.

Within the Jewish calendar the harvest goes by the name *Sukkot* literally meaning 'booths'. Like many societies in the Ancient Near East, the Israelites observed many agricultural festivals as a means of thanks to God for a bountiful crop. During Biblical times, Sukkot became the celebration of the summer harvest also going by the name *Chag HaAsif* the feast of ingathering. As noted by Rabbi Pete Tobias, Israelite society was one almost entirely dependant on the earth's bounty. There was a need to gather the harvest swiftly and the religious impulse to offer gratitude to God- Sukkot, satisfies this impulse. Evidence of such religious practices taking place can be found in the book of Exodus: "At the end of the year, when you gather in your produce from the fields" (23:16).

As one of three Pilgrim festivals in the Jewish year, common practice would involve a portion of the Israelites crop being brought to the Temple in Jerusalem as a sacrifice to God. After the destruction of the temple in 70CE, sacrificial worship ceased, yet the symbolic meaning of this offering to God has remained.

Nowadays tinned produce and household goods are collected by communities and distributed amongst local charities and good causes. However within Judaism, Sukkot has further religious significance. It commemorates the forty years of wondering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt. During Sukkot, Jews are commanded to build and temporarily live in booths: "You shall dwell in booths for seven days" (Leviticus. 23:42).

The booth symbolises the make-shift shelters used by the Israelites in the wilderness, and acts to remind Jews of how God provided for them, and continues to do so. Even today, Palestinian farmers build temporary shelters in order to protect their crop and maximise their time in the field...

Whatever your faith, may this time of year be for you one of joy and abundance, thanksgiving and peace.

