

The Season of Rejoicing

Contributed by Rebecca Secrest
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On Monday, September 23, Rabbi Daniel Thomson led a discussion in the Crow's Nest about the Jewish festival of Sukkot, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles. His talk was scheduled close to the holiday, which begins on September 26 and continues for seven days until October 3. Rabbi Thomson leads Sh'ma Yisrael synagogue in Williamsburg, and he has spoken at LSSU before, particularly during the important Jewish holidays of Passover and also during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The beginning of Sukkot is described in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible, in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy) as well as numerous places throughout the rest of the Bible. As recounted in these texts, the Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years before finally reaching Israel. During these forty years they lived in tents called "sukkot" (the plural of "sukkah"). During the festival of Sukkot Jewish synagogues and individual families are required to construct sukkot, (modern sukkot can be any three walled temporary structure with branches for a roof). In Israel, they are required to eat their meals and sleep within their sukkah for all seven days of the holiday in celebration of the Divine protection that their ancestors experienced in the desert. Outside of Israel, because of varying climates, people have the option to eat their meals and may spend the night, weather permitting. Sukkot is a very joyous holiday, compared to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, for instance, which immediately precede Sukkot and are times dedicated to introspection and the making of personal resolutions. Many Orthodox Jews also believe that the Messiah will come during Sukkot, and that he will be born in a sukkah. Rabbi Thomson taught that this was fulfilled in Yeshua (Jesus). This gives another level of anticipation and significance to the holiday. It is so joyous that the Hebrew title is Zeman Simkhateinu, or The Season of Our Rejoicing.

Another commandment, or mitzvah, (Leviticus 23:40) during Sukkot is the mitzvah of etrog and lulav. An etrog is a Middle Eastern fruit (citron) that resembles the lemon, and the lulav is comprised of three types of leafy branches bound together, composed of palm fronds, willow, and myrtle. The etrog and lulav are waved about and a blessing is recited.

Rabbi Thomson said that one of his goals is to "build bridges and forge bonds between Jews and Christians", so it follows that he has a very open attitude regarding who may celebrate Jewish festivals. He emphasized his belief that since Jewish holidays are called God's holidays in the Bible, then anyone who has a belief and a trust in the God of the Bible should feel free to celebrate them.

The rabbi finds the Jewish festivals to be very beautiful experiences because "they build layer upon layer, and every year one can learn more from them". If anyone is interested in hearing one of Rabbi Thomson's interesting presentations, he will be back for Hanukkah later this year.