



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

SUKKOT, SHEMINI ATZERET AND SIMCHAT TORAH IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

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WHAT ARE SUKKOT, SHEMINI ATZERET AND SIMCHAT TORAH?

Sukkot, also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or the Feast of Ingathering, is a biblical Jewish holiday celebrated each year on the 15th day of Tishrei, the first month of the year in the Jewish calendar. Sukkot is one of the three biblically based pilgrimage holidays known as the “shalosh regalim.”

Sukkot commemorates the forty-year period during which the Jewish people wandered in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Sukkot is also commemorated as a harvest festival, marking the end of the agricultural year.

In 2021, Sukkot will begin at sunset on September 20 and end on the evening of September 27. The two holidays of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah mark the conclusion of Sukkot.

Shemini Atzeret means the “Eighth Day of Assembly” that brings the seven-day Sukkot period to an end. According to Jewish tradition, Shemini Atzeret signals the beginning of a special prayer for rain, which is included in the regular weekly prayers until Passover.

Simchat Torah means “Rejoicing with the Torah” and marks the end of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and the beginning of the new cycle. It is a joyous holiday that celebrates the Jewish love of Torah and study.

In 2021, Shemini Atzeret begins at sunset on September 27 and is immediately followed by Simchat Torah, which begins at sunset on September 28, and ends after nightfall on September 29.

Simchat Torah is generally celebrated on the same day as Shemini Atzeret in Israel and among Reform Jewish groups. These two occasions are observed as two separate days among many Jewish communities outside of Israel.

How are they observed?

Sukkot

The word "sukkot" means "huts" or "booths" and refers to the temporary dwellings that Jewish people lived in during the period of wandering following the Exodus from Egypt.

The festival of Sukkot lasts for seven days. During this time, Jews are encouraged to spend as much time as possible within a sukkah, a temporary shelter similar to the fragile dwellings the Israelites lived in during their 40 years of travel after the Exodus, often sharing meals and sleeping in it overnight. These dwellings are often made of wood, canvas, aluminum siding or sheets. Located under the open sky, the sukkah is made up of at least three walls and the roof must be made of raw organic material such as palm branches, bamboo, corn stalks, or leafy tree overgrowth. It is also customary to decorate the interior of the sukkah with hanging decorations and artwork.

Another key observance during Sukkot involves the Four Species or "arba minim" which represent the blessings of nature. The four species include a citrus fruit similar to a lemon known as "etrog", as well as palm, willow, and myrtle branches. The branches of the plants are bound together with dried palm leaves and are collectively known as the "lulav." On each day of the festival, Jewish worshippers recite a special prayer over the Four Species known as "Hoshanot" and wave the Four Species in six directions – north, east, south, west, forward and backward – to symbolize the ever-present power of God.

The first day of Sukkot is similar to the Sabbath where work is forbidden. Many followers will light candles in the evening and share festive meals with loved ones, including challah dipped in honey. The second through seventh days of Sukkot are called "Chol HaMoed." During this time, all activities that are needed for the holiday, such as buying and preparing food, cleaning the house, and traveling and family outings, are permitted. Activities that interfere with relaxation, such as laundering, mending clothes, engaging in labor-intensive activities are not permitted. Every morning as part of the prayer service, observers recite a collection of prayers of praise known as the "Hallel".

The seventh day of Sukkot is known as "Hoshana Rabbah" or the "Great Supplication." This day is marked by a special synagogue service in which seven circuits are made by worshippers holding their Four Species and reciting prayers. In addition, a bundle of five willow branches is beaten on the ground.

Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

On Shemini Atzeret, or the "Eighth Day of Assembly", people may leave their sukkah and eat their meals inside the house. Shemini Atzeret features the prayer for rain and a good harvest for the coming year. Observers recite prayers for rain and Yizkor, the prayer to remember the souls of the departed.

The highlight of Simchat Torah is the "hakafot," held on both the eve and the morning of the festival, in which attendees march and dance with the Torah scrolls while circling the synagogue's sanctuary seven times.

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During the Torah service, the concluding section of the fifth book of the Torah, D'varim (Deuteronomy), is read, and immediately following, the opening section of Genesis, or B'reishit, is read. This practice represents the cyclical nature of the relationship between the Jewish people and the reading of the Torah.

On both holidays working, driving, writing, or switching on or off electronic devices are prohibited. Cooking and carrying outdoors are permitted (unless it is also Shabbat).

These are very general guidelines, and practices of the faith differ by community and affiliated congregation. Every effort should be made to accommodate these requests for religious observances.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

- 1 Get Educated.** Ensure staff who supervise self-identified Jewish colleagues are aware of these holidays and how they can be supportive.
- 2 Intentional Planning.** Where possible and appropriate, avoid booking meetings and scheduling events during these holidays.
- 3 Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, they may want to swap shifts to observe these holidays. From September 23 – 27 (exclusive of Shabbat), the restrictions on technology and travel are lifted, so most will likely come to work as normal, but may ask for flexibility to accommodate some of the observances still in place during those days.
- 4 Be thoughtful.** To wish someone “Happy Holidays,” you can say “Chag Sameach!” [khahg sah-MAY-akh]
- 5 Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Jewish colleagues may take time off during these holidays, but they may still observe in various ways.