

Every Guest Was Once a Stranger

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 25 September 2026

The Ushpizin, the Road, and a People Seated on Land That Is Not Its Own Invention

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Tonight, as Shabbat begins, the first of the seven guests enters the sukkah. The Zohar calls them *ushpizin ila'in*, the exalted guests: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, Yosef, and David. By custom, each night one of them leads and the others accompany him. In Israel this year Avraham comes on Shabbat, and David on Hoshana Rabbah.

We usually introduce them by their greatness: the father of faith, the bound son, the one who wrestled, the lawgiver, the priest, the provider, the king. All true. But read their lives again and something else stands out. Every one of the seven was, at some decisive hour, homeless.

The guests we invite into a temporary hut are men who knew the road.

Seven biographies of displacement

Avraham begins with an uprooting: *lech lecha* — go from your land, your birthplace, your father's house (Bereishit 12:1). Decades later, standing before the children of Chet to buy a grave for Sarah, he introduces himself with the phrase that defines him: *ger v'toshav anochi imachem* — I am a stranger and a resident among you (Bereishit 23:4). The father of the covenant had to purchase a burial cave.

Yitzchak, the one patriarch who never leaves the Land, still lives in it as a sojourner. In famine he is told *gur ba'aretz hazot* — dwell as a stranger in this land (Bereishit 26:3). In Gerar his wells are stopped and quarreled over, and he moves on, and moves on again, until he names a well Rechovot: now there is room.

Yaakov flees his brother with a stone for a pillow (Bereishit 28:10–11) and spends twenty years in another man's house. His message home sums it up: *im Lavan garti* — I sojourned with Lavan (Bereishit 32:5).

Moshe names his first son for his condition: Gershom, *ki amar ger hayiti b'erez nochriyah* — for he said, I have been a stranger in a foreign land (Shemot 2:22). The lawgiver of Israel wrote Torah as a man who had lived on a Midianite's hospitality.

Aharon walks forty years through the wilderness and dies on the way, at Hor HaHar, at the border, not yet inside (Bamidbar 20:22–29). The priest who made atonement for a whole people never had a house in the Land.

Yosef is sold by his brothers and says in an Egyptian prison, *gunov gunavti me'erez ha'ivrim* — I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews (Bereishit 40:15). Even his bones wait in a coffin for the Exodus (Shemot 13:19).

David, the king whose night closes the chag, spends his youth running: to the cave of Adullam (I Shmuel 22:1), to the hideouts of the wilderness, to Tziklag among the Philistines (I Shmuel 27). The man who founds the dynasty of Jerusalem learned the country from its caves.

Why these guests, in this house

The sukkah is the Torah's instruction to leave the permanent house for a temporary one: *basukkot teishvu shiv'at yamim* — in booths you shall dwell seven days — *l'ma'an yeid'u doroteichem ki vasukkot hoshavti et b'nei Yisrael* — so that your generations will know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of Egypt (Vayikra 23:42–43).

Once a year, a settled people is commanded to remember that it was once unsettled, and that its settlement is a gift. The guests fit the house exactly. They are not visiting dignitaries condescending to a hut. They are men who would recognize the hut. They have slept under less.

The Torah turns that memory into law more than once. *V'atem yeda'tem et nefesh hager, ki gerim heyitem b'ereetz Mitzrayim* — you know the soul of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Shemot 23:9). *Va'ahavtem et hager* — you shall love the stranger (Devarim 10:19). The memory of homelessness is not nostalgia. It is a source of obligation.

The land under Heaven

There is a verse that belongs at this table more than any poster of the seven faces. In the laws of the Jubilee, the Torah says why land in Israel may not be sold in perpetuity: *ki li ha'aretz, ki gerim v'toshavim atem imadi* — for the land is Mine; you are strangers and residents with Me (Vayikra 25:23).

That is Avraham's own phrase — *ger v'toshav* — now spoken by G-d about the whole people, in its own land. Israel dwells in the Land fully, lawfully, by covenant. And still it dwells as a guest of the Owner.

This is the covenantal alternative to two errors. One error says a people with a history of exile can never be truly at home, and must apologize for its house. The other says a people finally at home owns its house absolutely, answerable to no one. The ushpizin refute both. They were strangers, and their descendants are home. The home is real, and it is held under Heaven — a residency with obligations to the One who grants it and to the stranger who knocks.

A sovereign people that remembers it was once a guest governs differently. It builds walls and also leaves a gate. It defends its home and also knows what it is to have none.

How to seat them

In practice this changes very little and everything. Say the invitation each night. Name the guest. But when you name him, tell the children one sentence of his road: Avraham buying a grave, Yaakov with a stone for a pillow, Moshe naming his son for being a stranger, David in a cave.

Then look around the table. The Torah's festival list already includes *the stranger, the orphan, and the widow who are within your gates* (Devarim 16:14). The best way to honor seven men who knew the road is to have at least one person at the table who is, this year, far from home.

The guests of the sukkah were strangers. The booth is where their children remember it — and remember that the house, too, belongs to Heaven.

Kid-table

1. All seven holy guests had to leave home at some point in their lives.
2. Avraham called himself “a stranger and a resident” — even in the Land.
3. We leave our house for a hut so we remember that G-d gave us our home.
4. The Torah says: you know how a stranger feels, so be kind to strangers.
5. Invite someone who is far from home — that is how we honor the guests.

Sources

- Zohar, Emor (the exalted guests)
- Bereishit 12:1; 23:4; 26:3; 28:10–11; 32:5; 40:15
- Shemot 2:22; 13:19; 23:9
- Vayikra 23:42–43; 25:23
- Bamidbar 20:22–29
- Devarim 10:19; 16:14
- I Shmuel 22:1; 27

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