

When the Holiness Lifts

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 2 October 2026

Sukkah Wood, the Seven Days, and the Holy Things We Are Allowed to Put Down

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For seven days the boards and branches of the sukkah are holy. You may not pull a slat off the wall to kindle a fire or take a decoration down to use it elsewhere. And then, on the evening after the chag (in Israel, tomorrow night, when Shabbat and Simchat Torah end together), the same wood goes back into the storeroom, the palm fronds go to the curb, and the willows beaten this morning on Hoshana Rabbah are tucked away for a different purpose months from now.

The Torah lets holiness rest on ordinary things for a set time — and then lets it lift. That is a lesson a people needs at least as much as the lesson of building.

The Name rests on the sukkah

The Talmud states it plainly. *Atzei sukkah asurin kol shiv'ah* — the wood of the sukkah is forbidden for other use all seven days (Sukkah 9a). The source is a verse: *chag hasukkot shiv'at yamim la'Hashem* — the festival of booths, seven days, to Hashem (Vayikra 23:34). Just as the Name of Heaven rests on the festival offering, the Talmud says, so it rests on the sukkah.

The decorations share that standing. Fruits hung from the schach, the pictures on the walls, the lights — once they have been set aside for the sukkah, they may not be taken down and eaten or used for the length of the chag (Beitzah 30b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 638).

This is not a small claim. The same cheap planks that sat in a garage for eleven months now carry, for a week, something like the standing of an offering. A string of paper chains made by a six-year-old is, for seven days, part of a structure *la'Hashem*.

Then it ends

But the holiness has a term. The verse says seven days, and the Sages read the limit as seriously as the sanctity. When the chag ends, the wood returns to being wood.

The Talmud draws a distinction that governs the aftermath. There are *tashmishei kedushah*, objects that serve holiness itself — the mantle of a Sefer Torah, tefillin, mezuzot. These are never simply discarded; when they wear out, they are buried. And there are *tashmishei mitzvah*, objects used to perform a mitzvah — the sukkah, the lulav, the shofar, tzitzit. These, the Talmud says, *nizrakin*: they may be thrown away once their use is over (Megillah 26b).

The halakhah adds a qualification of respect. One does not use them for something degrading. Worn tzitzit are not thrown into filth, though they need no burial (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 21:1). The lulav is not trampled. The Rema records the custom of putting away the Hoshana Rabbah willows for the baking of matzot, so that one mitzvah passes its last use to another (Orach Chaim 664:9); many keep today's willows to feed the fire that burns the chametz on Erev Pesach. The etrog becomes jam, or a spice for Havdalah.

But the principle stands. The objects of the week were instruments. They were holy in their use. When the use ends, they are released.

Instruments are not idols

This is a quiet safeguard against one of the oldest temptations in religion: to treat the instrument as if it were the Source.

A lulav that must be kept forever becomes a relic. A sukkah that can never be dismantled becomes a shrine. The Torah refuses both. It lets these things become fully holy — so holy you may not take a nail from the wall — and then it tells you to put them down. The holiness was never in the wood. It was in the command, and in the days, and in the One who asked to dwell with His people for a week.

Tonight the eighth day makes the point from the other side. On Shemini Atzeret we leave the booth. In Israel it is also Simchat Torah, and we dance with the Sefer Torah — an object that is *not* put away as waste when it grows old, but buried like a person. The festival ends by showing us the difference: the booth was an instrument of the mitzvah; the scroll bears holiness itself.

What a people learns from the storeroom

Covenantal thought insists that the institutions of a people are a *keili* — a vessel — and never the Source. That sentence is easy to say. The end of Sukkot teaches what it costs.

It means that the structures we build for holy purposes can be fully honored while they serve, and still be taken down when their term ends. It means that a people can be devoted to its instruments without worshipping them. It means we do not tear a slat off the sukkah on the third day because we are cold, and we do not refuse to fold it up after the eighth because we are sentimental.

A generation that cannot put its instruments down will end up serving them. A generation that never lets holiness rest on anything ordinary will never have a sukkah at all. The Torah asks for both disciplines, in order: build and sanctify; then release with respect.

After the chag

When the chag is over tomorrow night, take the sukkah down gently. Stack the boards. Wrap the decorations for next year. Put the willows somewhere you will find them before Pesach. Let the palm fronds go.

Nothing holy has been lost. The Name that rested on the wood for seven days has not been dismissed; it has simply finished the week it came for. It will come again next Tishrei, onto the same planks, when we build again.

Kid-table

1. For all seven days we do not take anything off the sukkah to use for something else.

2. The Torah says the sukkah is “for Hashem” for seven days.
3. After Sukkot, the sukkah and lulav are not holy anymore in the same way — we may put them away.
4. We still treat them with respect; many save the willows for Pesach, to bake matzot or to burn the chametz.
5. A Sefer Torah is different: it is always holy, and we never throw it away.

Sources

- Vayikra 23:34 — <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.23.34>
- Sukkah 9a — <https://www.sefaria.org/Sukkah.9a>
- Beitzah 30b — <https://www.sefaria.org/Beitzah.30b>
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 638 — https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh,_Orach_Chayim.638
- Megillah 26b (*tashmishei mitzvah* and *tashmishei kedushah*) — <https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.26b>
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 21:1 — https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh,_Orach_Chayim.21.1
- Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 664:9, with the Rema — https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh,_Orach_Chayim.664.9

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