

Sometimes it seems that history is variations on a theme. A major theme for us is communal religious practice, and like our ancient ancestors, we have been forced by events beyond our control to create a whole new series of variations. During the turbulent time leading up to the final destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, synagogues were gradually being established to serve as new centralized locations for worship that took place at the same time the offerings were being presented in the Temple – a sort of proto-livestream to give people the feeling that they were actually there. Gradually, an innovative system of prayer replaced the old system of sacrifice. Our ancestors were able to take this form of worship with them wherever they went, creating many new and beautiful variations as they formed communities all over the world. Without this essential innovation, Judaism would not have survived. Out of the ashes of the old order arose the rich liturgy that has sustained us for nearly 2 millennia, undergoing many innovations as our fortunes waxed and waned. Covid is the newest challenge. Like our ancient ancestors, we have been unable to gather together as usual. And like them, we have had to find new ways to maintain cohesion and some semblance of normalcy. But fortunately for us, we have a whole array of modern media at our disposal, which thanks to creative minds and willing hearts, is serving us well. Livestreaming is one option, and there are many wonderful services to choose from. But since we Jews enjoy being active participants and interacting with others, Zoom and Co. have rapidly become our most popular virtual synagogues, making it possible for people all over the world to come together for worship and fellowship. Now, time zones are our greatest challenge, but adaptable as we Jews are, we have adjusted to quirky things like *mincha* at midnight and Chanukah parties at noon. In this variation on the theme, quality takes precedence over quantity, and with some 18 months of experience, people have become adept at making creative liturgical choices. My personal variation includes much communal participation. I love davening *with* people, not *at* them, something the pandemic has severely curtailed – unless it's done online, participants safely at home. We can mute our microphones, or we can make what I like to call a “holy cacophony.” There is something irreplaceably precious about hearing each other's voices while singing and davening, latency, and other internet challenges notwithstanding. Sukkot is here again, and huddling together in a small sukkah with people from several different households is still not advisable – not to mention singing, and passing the *lulav* from hand to hand. Virtual sukkot are still the best option for many of us, and we have a huge array of choices from all over the world. One of the central themes of Sukkot is the joy of hospitality: “And you shall rejoice in your Festival – you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are within your cities.” (Deuteronomy 16:14). And in doing so, we can evoke an innovation of Isaac Luria in 16th century Safed: Welcoming the *ushpizin* into our sukkah. *Ushpizin* is the Aramaic word for *guests*, the 7 supernal “shepherds of Israel” mentioned in the Zohar, the 13th century foundational book of Kabbalah. Like the days of Omer counting between Pesach and Shavuot, each day of Sukkot is associated with one of the 7 lower *sephirot*, attributes of HaShem, and each day has its corresponding *ushpizin*. Recently their female counterparts have been added, with many variations on this theme. Here is one of them for you to ponder as you sit in your virtual sukkah with far-flung friends and new acquaintances from around the globe:

- Day 1: *chesed* (love, compassion) – Abraham / Sarah
- Day 2: *gevurah* (discipline, judgment, restraint) – Isaac / Miriam
- Day 3: *tiferet* (balance, beauty, harmony) – Jacob / Dvorah
- Day 4: *netzach* (victory, endurance) – Moses / Hannah
- Day 5: *hod* (splendor, but also humility) – Aharon / Avigail
- Day 6: *yesod* (foundation, connection) – Joseph / Huldah
- Day 7: *malchut* (kingship, royalty) – King David / Queen Esther

In another delightful innovation, my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Rebecca Kushner, has created a practical idea for an edible *lulav*: Leek, Italian kale, carrot or beet greens, and a lemon. Tie everything but the lemon together. Go outside, or at least open a window and breathe deeply. Hold the bundle in your right hand and the lemon in your left, put them together and recite the *Shechiyanu*. Then shake the edible *lulav* in all directions. Afterward, you can make a stew, adding lentils and whatever else strikes your fancy. Put it in your favorite bowl and bring it into your virtual sukkah to enjoy with your friends. Someday the pandemic will be behind us, but many of the innovations it has spawned have the potential to enrich our services with new, delightful variations on the theme of communal religious practice. The future is full of possibilities, and thanks to our innovative minds and collaborative spirits, we have a whole new treasury of ideas to ease our way through the next crisis. That is how we continue to survive.

Shabbat shalom and chag Sukkot sameach!