

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 often 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 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 changes as our fortunes waxed and waned. Covid was the newest challenge. Like our ancient ancestors, we were unable to gather together as usual. And like them, we had to find new ways to maintain cohesion and some semblance of normalcy. But fortunately for us, a whole array of modern media was available, which thanks to creative minds and willing hearts, has been serving us well. Because 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. In fact, this has been so successful that many of the virtual communities that came together during Covid – including ours – are growing. 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 people have become adept at making creative liturgical choices. My personal variation includes much communal participation. I love davening *with* people, not *at* them. 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. This year, in addition to sitting in a real sukkah, we can enjoy a whole cornucopia of virtual sukkot, sharing Sukkot traditions and recipes with people all over the world. After all, Sukkot is *Chag haAsif* – the Festival of Ingathering, i.e., our harvest festival. Ideally, we should eat all our meals in the sukkah and try to live there all week, but living as far north as we do, this is obviously impossible. But if we eat at least an olive-sized piece of bread in the sukkah, we have fulfilled the *mitzvah*. Once again, we adapt. Another way we adapt is to strive to live in harmony with nature, something we humans have sorely neglected for much too long. In order to have good harvests, we must have adequate rain. On Sukkot HaShem determines how much rain will fall during the winter, which is the main rainy season in Israel. Sacrifices in the Temple always included wine libations, but on Sukkot there was a special ceremony for water. Water is so important that from Musaf on the last day of Sukkot until Musaf on the first day of Pesach, we add the words *mashiv ha-ruach u’morid ha-geshem* (Who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall) to the Amida prayers. And in the summer months we say *morid ha-tal* (Who causes the dew to fall). Each of these changes is accompanied by a beautiful prayer sung by the *Chasan*: On Pesach *Tal* (Dew), and on Sukkot *Af-Bri* (Rain). We cannot exist without water, but we also cannot exist in the water. We have always lived between the twin perils of drought and flood, and this year’s tragic extremes have made it painfully obvious that we humans have not been good stewards of our precious earth. The beginning of the second paragraph of the *shema Yisrael* (Deuteronomy 11:13-17) warns us that if we blindly follow the false gods of our own desires, we will eventually make our earth uninhabitable. Our climate is indeed changing, largely due to human arrogance and ignorance. *Af-Bri*, the “rain angel,” makes this abundantly clear. Among other things, *af* means anger, countenance, and nose. This is the word for HaShem’s anger in Deut. 17! And *bri* stands for health, creation, and creativity. *Af* is always extreme: drought or flood; a face that reflects fury, indifference, or ecstasy; the stuffy nose of a head cold, or a nose so dry it bleeds. *Bri* is balance and equilibrium. In the prayer we beseech HaShem to remember Abraham, Isaac, Jakob, Moses, Aharon, and the 12 tribes, and for their sake to not withhold the water, but because of their righteousness to give abundant rainfall. It is noteworthy that we insert *mashiv ha-ruach u’morid ha-geshem* or *morid ha-tal* between the first and second parts of the *amida* – between the *chessed*, the kindness and openheartedness of Abraham and *gevurah*, the power of HaShem. We pray for balance in nature, and in ourselves. In the middle of the city it is difficult to see how nature changes in response to diminishing or increasing light during the months immediately following the autumn and spring equinoxes. Because I live in a farming village next to fields and forest, I am blessed to see it all in glorious detail. Now, as days grow shorter and the growing season ends, animals – including us – gather food for the winter. Foliage changes from green to a whole palette of autumn colors that fade into shades of brown as leaves and stems wither and rejoin the earth. And in six months tiny green shoots will emerge from the brown earth, responding to the increasing light with a burst of new growth. Our Jewish calendar follows the cycles of the seasons, teaching us to be aware that we depend on the earth for our sustenance. As we celebrate Sukkot virtually and/or in person, let us be grateful for the earth’s bounty, and mindful of the earth’s fragility.

Shabbat shalom and chag Sukkot sameach!