

Sitting in the *Sukkah* – How Many Days?

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What's wrong with this picture?



That's obvious, you say; it's the math. We all know that the festival of Sukkot lasts for seven days, not eight. As we read in Leviticus 23:41-42:

וְחִגַּתְּם אֹתוֹ תֵּתָּהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים בְּשָׁנָה חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי תִּחְגְּלוּ אֹתוֹ : בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת :

You shall observe it [Sukkot] as a festival to Adonai for seven days in the year...
You shall live in booth seven days; every Israelite citizen shall live in booths.

And if we're commanded to eat/dwell in the *sukkah* for seven days, it follows that we *don't* eat there on the eighth day. As Rambam puts it in his *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Shofar v'Lulav* 6:11 (and see *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 666):

גמר מלאכול ביום השביעי בשחרית לא יתיר סוכתו, אבל מוריד הוא את כליו ומפנה אותן מן המנחה ולמעלה

When one has finished eating on the morning of the seventh day [of the festival] one does not take down the *sukkah*, but one removes his eating utensils [to the house] from *minḥah*-time onward.

The eighth day, as we know, is Sh'mini Atzeret, the closing festival day of the Sukkot celebration but a separate holiday in its own right. On the night of Sh'mini Atzeret we eat in the house, not in the *sukkah*. In fact, there's a good argument that we're *forbidden* to eat in the *sukkah* on Sh'mini Atzeret, lest we give the impression that we are adding an extra day to the festival and violating the instruction not to add or detract from the *mitzvot* (see Deuteronomy 4:2 and 13:1).¹

So the math is (apparently) wrong, and if you bought this t-shirt you should demand your money back.

Except...

While this is the observance in Eretz Yisrael, in the Diaspora, the tradition differs. Here's what we read in *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 668:1:

ליל שמיני... בחוצה לארץ, אוכלים בסוכה בלילה וביום, מפני שהוא ספק שביעי, ואין מברכין על ישיבתה, ומקדשין ואומרים זמן.

On the night of Sh'mini Atzeret... in the Diaspora one eats in the *sukkah* night and day, because there is a possibility (*safek*) that this is the seventh day. One does not recite the blessing for dwelling in the *sukkah*, and one recites *she'heḥyanu* when saying Kiddush.

The issue here is *s'feika d'yoma*², the “doubt” that exists (or at one time may have existed) over the proper date on the calendar. It's a long but familiar story (see Talmud, *B. Beitzah* 4b). The messengers sent forth from Jerusalem to inform the scattered Jewish communities that the new month had been declared on such-and-such a day could not reach all those communities prior to the onset of the festival, either Sukkot or Pesach, each of which begins on the fifteenth day of its month. Therefore, communities lying beyond the two-week radius that the messengers could attain decided to observe *yom tov*, the first day of those festivals, for two days, that is, counting fifteen days from *both* of the days when Rosh Ḥodesh (the New Month) could have been declared. This means that the day we *think* is Sh'mini Atzeret, the eighth day, when we are not

¹ Isserles, in *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 666, mentions this possibility.

² This is also the reason why the traditional Torah readings for *Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot* in the Diaspora include the sacrifices for each day of the festival and for the previous day (see Numbers 29). We're just not sure which day it is! See *Shulhan Arukh Oraḥ Hayyim* 663.

obligated to dwell in the *sukkah*, may in fact be the seventh day of Sukkot, when that obligation still holds. How do we act in the face of this doubt? The traditional *halakhah* arranges (as it often does) a compromise, spelled out in that passage from the *Shulhan Arukh*. We eat in the *sukkah* on Sh'mini Atzeret, on the chance that this is really the seventh day of Sukkot, but we don't recite the blessing for dwelling in the *sukkah* (which we recite at all meals we consume there)³, on the chance that this is really the eighth day, that we are no longer "commanded" to dwell in the *sukkah*, and that the blessing would be a *b'rakhah l'vatalah*, an inappropriate invocation of God's name.

So we *do* sit / dwell in the *sukkah* for eight days. You can keep the t-shirt.

Except...

We really *do* know what day it is, and the reason that the Talmud gives for holding on to the old custom of a second day of Yom Tov is no longer valid. At least, that's the argument we make in progressive *halakhah* for restoring the original one-day observance of the festivals. (See [here](#) for a fuller discussion.) And the traditional *halakhah* is aware of this, too. After all, it has us recite all the appropriate first-day *yom tov* blessings ("Who has commanded us to dwell in the *sukkah* / take the *lulav* / eat *matzah*, etc.) on a day that, if we're serious about *s'feika d'yoma*, might not be *yom tov* at all. The fact is that we *do* know what day it is, so there's no rationale (at least, no rationale that's *rational!*) for acting as though we don't.

Moral of the story: Jews who observe one day of *yom tov* should eat in the *sukkah* for seven days and *not* eat in the *sukkah* on Sh'mini Atzeret.

So maybe you should gift that t-shirt (after washing it!) to a Jewish friend who still holds to *s'feika d'yom* and observes a second day of *yom tov*. (Or maybe we could design a progressive halakhic version that reads "7" rather than "8"?)

³ אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציונו לישב בסוכה / ... *Marukh attah... asherkid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu leishev basukkah* (... "who has commanded us to dwell in the *sukkah*).