

The Sukkah in Modern Jewish Literature and Culture

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/sukkah-modern-jewish-literature-and-culture>.

Introduction

A sukkah is a temporary building in which Jews traditionally dwell during the holiday of Sukkot, as commanded in the book of Leviticus (23:42-5): "You shall live in booths [*sukkot*] seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God." In Jewish cultures, the sukkah represents and manifests the idea of home and domestic space, while also symbolizing the danger and possibility of homelessness. It is often taken to be a symbol for the transience and fragility of Jewish existence and of life itself. This kit explores representations of the sukkah in modern Jewish literature and culture.

Subjects

Art, Jewish Holidays, Literature, Religion, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- Teachers may find it instructive to read more about the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. *Seasons of Our Joy* by Arthur Waskow offers a succinct overview of the holiday. Teachers may also wish to consult *Sukkot 101* from the website My Jewish Learning.
- For further exploration of the concept of the sukkah, teachers may turn to Miriam Lipis, "A Hybrid Place of Belonging: Constructing and Siting the Sukkah" in *Jewish Topographies*, ed. Julia Brauch and Anna Lipphardt (2008), pp. 27-41.
- Those interested in learning more about Moritz David Oppenheim may wish to consult Samantha Baskind and Larry Silver's book, *Jewish Art: A Modern History* (2011).
- For those wishing to learn more about Sholem Aleichem we recommend Jeremy Dauber's *The Worlds of Sholem Aleichem* (2014) or his short essay from *Pakn Treger*, "Why Read Sholem Aleichem?" They may also wish to turn to www.sholemaleichem.org, a website that contains information and links to further resources on the author.

Resources

1: Painting, Moritz Daniel Oppenheim's "Sukkot," 1867.

German-Jewish painter Moritz Daniel Oppenheim (1800-1882) was perhaps the most famous Jewish artist of the nineteenth century, the first Jewish artist to connect with modern artistic currents and to receive classical training. He painted for and within non-Jewish German spheres, and yet did not convert to Christianity, and in his work he often depicted German Jews as they negotiated between German and traditionally Jewish cultures and practices.

This painting depicts a middle class Jewish family celebrating the festival of Sukkot in Frankfurt. The family sits in the sukkah for a meal while two blonde children, likely non-Jews, look on with curiosity. A maid outside the sukkah serves food to the family. The sukkah appears to be a modern domestic space, in which the family can maintain their bourgeois values and lifestyle, even as it is also an artifact of traditional Jewish observance.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: What elements of traditional observance are present in this depiction? What elements are not present, and why do you think this is the case? Where do you see examples of the family's prosperity in the painting? What role do the non-Jewish boys play in the painting? What conclusions do you think they are drawing about Jewish people and Jewish religious practices from what they see?



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Teachers may also wish to refer to this [lesson plan](#) about the painting from the National Library of Israel.

Source: Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, "Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) (Das Laubhütten-Fest)," 1867. Oil on canvas. 25 7/16 × 22 in. The Jewish Museum, Gift of the Oscar and Regina Gruss Charitable and Educational Foundation, Inc.

2: Drawing, Solomon Joseph Solomon's "High Tea in the Sukkah," 1906.

Solomon Joseph Solomon's drawing of Dr. Hermann Adler, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, in his sukkah, illustrates turn-of-the-century Jews' adaptation of Jewish and British customs. Jews with uncovered heads and ladies wearing elegant hats celebrate together with the Chief Rabbi, bringing the British custom of high tea into the Jewish custom of eating in the sukkah.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: To what extent is it important that this event is occurring in a sukkah, as opposed to some other space? How would you experience the drawing differently if it were "High Tea at a Jewish Social Club" instead? Why? Can you think of contemporary instances where traditional religious practices and secular rituals are merged either seamlessly or with some tension?

Have your students compare this painting to Oppenheim's painting in resource #1 above. Are there similar concerns of class on display? Do the participants seem to be celebrating the holiday in similar ways? What message do you think each artist aims to relate about the identity and practice of the Jewish community he depicts, and about the meaning of the holiday?

Source: Solomon Joseph Solomon, "High Tea in the Sukkah," 1906. Ink, graphite, and gouache on paper. 16 1/8 × 12 in. The Jewish Museum, Gift of Edward J. Sovatkin.

3: Song and lyrics, "A sikele, a kleyne," performed by Beyle Shaechter-Gottesman, circa 1980.

Based on a poem by Avrom Reyzin, this song was popularized and folklorized, and was widely known and sung throughout the Yiddish-speaking world.

This version is performed by Beyle Shaechter-Gottesman, a poet, songwriter, singer, and advocate for Yiddish, who was born in Vienna, raised in Chernovitz, and who spent much of her adult life in the Bronx.

Suggested Activity: Compare the sukkah described in this song to the sukkahs in Oppenheim's and Solomon's artwork in this kit. How are the sukkahs physically similar and different? What functions does the sukkah serve in each? What are the socio-economic class considerations at play in each? What does each painting and what does the song express about the degree to which Jews felt comfortable, safe, and integrated within their societies? Invite your students to write their own song about a sukkah, thinking about what the sukkah symbolizes for them.

Source: "A sikele, a kleyne," folksong. Performed by Beyle Shaechter-Gottesman, circa 1980. Lyrics translated by Itzik Gottesman. Courtesy of Itzik Gottesman and the Center for Traditional Music and Dance's Yiddish Song of the Week blog: www.yiddishsong.wordpress.com. October 5, 2010. <https://yiddishsong.wordpress.com/2010/10/05/a-sikele-a-kleyne-performed...>

4: Short story excerpt from Sholem Aleichem's "Really a Sukkah," 1903.

This story by the classic Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem is told from the perspective of a child whose family's fortunes change suddenly, forcing them to sell their home. They ask Moishe, a town know-it-all, to build them a sukkah, and he promises that he will be successful. Really Moishe's signature trait, and the source of his nickname, is his praise of everything using the emphatic "really." Sholem Aleichem undercuts Really Moishe's optimism, however, when his "really a sukkah" ends up being unstable and collapsing during the celebration of sukkot, demonstrating with hilarity how flimsy and precarious the good things in life actually are.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss the following questions: What does Moishe's defense of his sukkah mean? Is there something more authentic, more "really" a sukkah, about a sukkah that is unstable rather than permanent? Why does Moishe refuse to see how slipshod his own work is? How is this representation of a humble sukkah similar to or different from the representation in the folksong in resource #3 of this kit?

Source: Sholem Aleichem, "Really a Sukkah!" trans. Aliza Shevrin in *Holiday Tales of Sholem Aleichem* (Mineola, NY: Charles

Scribner's Sons, 1979), 1-9.

5: Short story excerpts from Kadya Molodowsky's "The Shared Sukkah," 1957.

Kadya Molodowsky (1894-1975) was a Yiddish poet, writer, teacher of Yiddish and Hebrew, and editor. In this story, from her collection *A House with Seven Windows*, Molodowsky offers a criticism of the insertion of status and social class into Jewish ritual, even as she idealizes the celebration of Jewish holidays in the Jewish Eastern Europe of the past. In the story, two families who live next to one another build sukkahs that share a wall. One family is much wealthier than the other. When the poorer family becomes wealthy, they build a large sukkah to share with the wealthy family, and the two wealthy families eat together. At the story's end, the narration hints that the children of the two families are potential spouses for one another, now that they have a shared status.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to discuss the following questions: What is the role of wealth in the building of a sukkah (here and in other excerpts in this kit)? Have students note the irony in the competitive and materialistic way the children talk about a holiday that centers on a simple, temporary dwelling. How do Khinke's feelings change from the first excerpt to the second? Why do they change? What do you think Molodowsky is saying about the role of socio-economic class in Jewish religious practice? Do you find humor in these excerpts?

Source: Kadya Molodowsky, "The Shared Sukkah," in *A House with Seven Windows*, trans. Leah Schoolnik (Syracuse University Press, 2006), 176-181.

6: Memoir excerpt from Farideh Dayanim Goldin's "My Iranian Sukkah," 2009.

Farideh Dayanim Goldin is a memoirist whose writing reflects on her experiences growing up in a prominent Jewish family in Shiraz, Iran, her Western education, and her immigration to America. In this passage from a personal essay, Goldin compares her experiences building sukkahs in Shiraz and in Virginia, and expresses the displacement she feels as she tries to recreate the practices of her youth in an American land and American Jewish culture in which they do not easily belong.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: In what ways do sukkahs differ across Jewish cultures, and what is consistent? Why does the author try to recreate an Iranian sukkah in Virginia? Why does she say she prefers the Virginian model, in which the sukkah is vulnerable to poor weather and may fall? In what ways is this sentiment similar to the folksong Beyle Shaechter Gottesman sings in resource #3 of this kit?

Source: Farideh Dayanim Goldin, "My Iranian Sukkah" in *Where We Find Ourselves: Jewish Women Around the World Write about Home*. Ed. Miriam Ben-Joseph and Deborah Nodler Rosen. (New York: SUNY, 2009) 225-34.

7: Excerpt, Michal Govrin's "Snapshots," 2002.

Michal Govrin, a prolific Israeli author, poet, and director, is interested in narratives of Jewish Diaspora and redemption, the legacies of the Holocaust, and the Zionist idea. She explores the way that multiple, conflicting narratives complicate the possibility for peace.

In this excerpt from her novel *Snapshots*, Ilana Tsuriel, a renowned Israeli architect, submits a plan for a "Peace Monument" in Jerusalem that consists of a series of impermanent structures (huts, like sukkahs) that show the connection of Israelis and Palestinians to the land. She describes the project, its aesthetics and politics, explaining the revolutionary potential of the temporary structure of the sukkah.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to draw a picture of the monument as they imagine it, based on this description. What is the architect trying to say, with this monument, about the nature of peace? Have students discuss whether sukkahs would or would not make a meaningful monument to peace.

Source: Michal Govrin, *Snapshots*, trans. Barbara Harshav. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 74-75.

8: Video excerpt, "Sukkah City," 2013.

"*Sukkah City*" was an architectural design competition and work of installation art held in Union Square Park in September 2010. Conceived by journalist Joshua Foer and Roger Bennett, it was sponsored by Reboot, an organization for innovation in

Jewish culture, rituals, and traditions. The competition invited architects and designers to construct radical sukkahs that adhered to traditional requirements but otherwise rethought the sukkah's structure and appearance.

Jason Hutt created a documentary film about the competition, and this video excerpt is the documentary's trailer.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students: What values or ideas should a sukkah express? What do you think would make a sukkah innovative? Then, have your students view the sukkahs on the Sukkah City [website](#) and choose their own winner. Ask students to explain their choices and to describe what relationship, if any, the sukkah they chose has with another sukkah described in this kit.

Source: "Sukkah City" trailer, dir. Jason Hutt, *First Run Features*, 2013.