

## **Jewish Families Ready to Dine Beneath the Stars**

*The 7-day Jewish Thanksgiving party under a rickety hut recalls Israel's 40 years of desert wanderings, while house-to-house sharing calls observers to remember every one who may have a need.*

By [Todd Svano](#) for St. Louis Park Patch, an affiliate of *The Huffington Post*

If God seemed a grim judge to Jewish families who fasted and sought his favor on Yom Kippur Saturday, he shows his “party side” by commanding seven days of joyous outdoor feasting, a holiday to be observed beginning sundown Wednesday. And St. Louis Park kids are excited.



The Feast of Tents (or Booths) called Sukkot (soo-cote), is a celebration beneath temporary dwellings, or [sukkahs](#), that Jewish families construct in their own back yards, recalling the days when ancient Jews wandered for 40 years in the desert living in tents, and were led by the fire of God’s presence at night and by a cloud each day.

Each October, out of garages come the poles, lattice, bamboo canes and pipes to construct the makeshift homes. Then in come the pumpkins, corn stalks, gourds, palm fronds, candles, and hanging fruit to decorate it with a harvest and hospitality theme.

A favorite holiday of children, Sukkot will include a scavenger hunt in a synagogue community of the [Fern Hill Neighborhood](#) this year. “We have 10 or 12 houses in our Sukkah Hop that give out candy and treats,” said Rivka Buchbinder, 13.

“One house has chocolate, another cookies or candies,” she added. “Our family does wafer cookies or pretzels. The cool thing is they give you riddles along the way so you have to guess which house to go to next.”

Another circuit in Golden Valley will do a tent-to-tent progressive dinner, with families in turn providing appetizers, main dishes, sides and deserts.

“You’re defined by who you eat with,” said Rabbi Morris Allen of [Beth Jacob Congregation](#) in Mendota Heights. “My wife and I invite folks that define our identity, but we also welcome people from all walks of life, Jews and non-Jews, and that really does create a sukkah of peace.”

That’s what Rivkah’s mother, Janie, loves about Sukkot, she said. “People have open houses and all are invited.”

This is even more significant for Janie as a very Orthodox Jew among less observant Jews, she said. Of the dozen interviews conducted for this article, she alone specified the holiday's rules. "The men eat certain foods only inside the sukkah, even if it's snowing, raining or pouring. That's how important it is to remember from where we came," she said. "Even bread is considered a meal."

But she loves and affirms the inclusive spirit of the holiday. "It brings all Jews together," Janie noted. "There's not a division of orthodox, reform or conservative."

Families make and decorate their sukkahs with tinsel or paper chains, and hang gourds and other fruits of the harvest from the sukkah ceiling, while a lemon-like "etrog" and three mandated branches (palm, willows and myrtle) take center stage for a ceremonial waving of the fruits of creation. It's also customary to hang pictures related to aspects of Jewish devotion.

"One of my favorites," Buchbinder said, "is of an Israeli soldier in fatigues praying at the Wailing Wall, a secular Jew with a very religious Hassidic Jew, praying together. It's very powerful. That's what this holiday is about. Everyone coming together no matter who you are."

For Rabbi Allen and others, that includes society's most vulnerable members. "The ultimate message," he said, "is that we delude ourselves in thinking that big structures provide real protection. The housing crisis of the last three years has expressed a really significant message of Sukkot. We have all believed that once we got into a home, we were secure, and it's not so clear anymore that that's the case."

This has become all too real for "many victims" of the recent mortgage crisis at Beth Jacob, the rabbi said. "Two years ago during Sukkot, a member got up and gave a controversial talk saying that if Sukkot had any real meaning, we'd respond and not allow this individual to be foreclosed upon.

"Two weeks later, this congregant, through his own and other members' efforts and the help of Senator Amy Klobuchar's office, was able to end the threat of foreclosure."

The sukkah has taken on extra meaning for Luke Weisberg of Golden Valley as well. "When I put up our sukkah each year," he said, "I make a direct connection to those who are unemployed or marginally employed and in danger of losing what they have."

This year, due to a shaky economy, that threat is close to home. "I have a brother, cousins, nieces and nephews who are out of work," Weisberg said. "They could run out of money and become precariously housed."

As a consultant, Weisberg has been involved in [Heading Home Hennepin](#), which is at the halfway mark of its 10-year plan to end homelessness in the county. "The numbers this fall are sobering," Weisberg noted.

"In the past," Weisberg said, "there was more often a precipitating event or a dramatic behavioral issue you could point to" as the cause of homelessness. "But today, families' stories are, 'I'm running out of money. Period.' It's phenomenal. Let's hope that this Sukkot not only causes us to pause and reflect, but moves us to action," he added.