

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Dear Members of The Center Family:

It is difficult to exercise normal objectivity and restraint in describing the experience of Sukkot in Israel, and especially in Jerusalem. It is a time when differences in opinion and background seem to vanish, or at least mellow, and the whole country is swept up in its joyous celebration. Instead of a systematic and logical description, I shall simply offer a few disconnected vignettes in the hope that, together, they will somehow suggest the exhilaration felt by an American visitor.

**Meah Shearim, the days before Sukkot.* The narrow streets are crowded with vendors and purchasers, haggling happily over price and quality of the *arba minim*. Pedigrees of *etrogim* are carefully described. Small and delicate Ashkenazi-type *etrogim* more green than yellow, growing naturally without the *pitem* — a sign of the purity of the species. Large, melon-sized Yemenite *etrogim* which most Americans have never seen. Jews of all types, with little children everywhere. This is what *erev Sukkot* must have looked like not only in the shtetl, but in ancient Babylon and ancient Israel as well.

**Jerusalem, Sukkot.* All traffic lights turn into blinkers as streets are crowded with old and young carrying their *lulavim* and *etrogim* to shul. People seem to be planning for the great events at night — the beginning of *Simhat Bet Ha'shoevah*. This water-drawing festival begins on the eve of the second day of the holiday and continues to Shemini Atzeret. We attended the opening session at the Yeshurun synagogue, addressed by the Chief Rabbi and Ministers of Religions, and ending with the dignitaries and crowds joining in the dancing. How strange for an American Jew to hear a band playing in the synagogue on the eve of the "second day of Yom Tov!" Every night, a different synagogue in a different area of the city sponsors such a celebration. Truly *zeman simhatenu*, "a time of our joy!"

**Hol Hamoed in the Upper Galilee.* Turning a bend on the Northern Road, right at the Lebanese border, we notice a small army outpost, with tanks, armored cars, and with 2 or 3 khaki tents for the soldiers to sleep in. There, right alongside, is a rectangular khaki structure with branches and leaves on top — a *sukkah* for the border patrol

**The Jerusalem Post* reported today that at Ben Gurion's 84th birthday celebration at Sde Boker, he received General Dayan and other dignitaries — in his *sukkah* . . .

**Simhat Torah Eve* (in the Diaspora, the eve of Shemini Atzeret). The pace intensifies, as Jerusalemites attend *hakafot* in their various synagogues. During the day, worshippers from several synagogues meet after services and, with Torahs covered by *talletim* as if with a *Huppah*, everyone marches, singing and dancing, to the Wall. Different groups, movements, synagogues, and schools have their own times that they march in procession to the Wall, where everyone joins together to conclude the *hakafot*. The true climax comes that night, when Israelis no longer observe Yom Tov. The celebrations (called "second *hakafot*") are accompanied by instrumental music throughout the city. 60,000 people gather at Independence Park near Heichal Shlomo for the "official" second *hakafot*. Honors are distributed amongst the various immigrant communities, the most colorful of which are the Kurdistan Jews. The most moving — recent immigrants from Russia, who spontaneously break into the program by offering Resistance songs in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew.

* * * *

Life in this country is not utopian, and one who comes expecting to find perfection will only be frustrated. But one of the indices of the collective character of a community is the form its celebrations take. And for this "time of our joy," there is nothing quite like Israel.

"May the Lord bless you from Zion; see how good it is in Jerusalem." (Ps. 128).

NORMAN LAMM