



THE MYSTERIOUS GUESTS

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Three mysterious guests appear at generous but impoverished Ezra's table on Sukkot and bless him, but don't do the same for his rich but selfish brother, Eben.

Also called the Festival of Booths, Sukkot is a weeklong fall harvest festival that begins on the 15th day of the month of Tishrei. See the Author's Note at the conclusion of *The Mysterious Guests* for more about the history and celebration of Sukkot.

HACHNASAT ORCHIM

The joyous nature of Sukkot is made especially clear given its occurrence four days after the somber *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). While Sukkot encourages us to be openly thankful for the blessings and bounty in our lives, we are also meant to share with those less fortunate. Sukkot lends itself well to living the fundamental Jewish value of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests into one's home, or, in this case, one's *sukkah*! As happened in this book, it is said that honored *ushpizin* (Aramaic for "guests") visit one's *sukkah* if invited. In addition to the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David may also be included; in contemporary times, strong Biblical women such as Sarah, Miriam, and Esther may be among these guests.

The quintessential role models for hospitality were Abraham and Sarah, our Biblical ancestors. Whenever guests arrived, Abraham and Sarah warmly welcomed them. Tradition teaches that Jews are to remember what it was like to be "strangers in a strange land" during the time of their slavery in *Mitzraim* (Egypt).

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

In this story, the differences between the two brothers, Ezra and Eben, are significant. One such difference is that Eben puts great stock in material goods, while Ezra does not. This is an opportune time to share with your children the message that fine gifts are not necessarily costly. Together, find meaningful gifts—art creations, thoughtful gestures, unsolicited helpfulness, etc.—that can be given without spending money. Make the point to your children that you value these gifts at least as much as purchased items.

In this story, strangers are permitted to enter Eben's *sukkah* but are made to feel like beggars. Help your children understand that the spirit with which we act can be as important as the act itself. Giving with a miserly heart diminishes the gift, but giving with a generous spirit enriches the recipient and the giver. Acknowledge this with your children as they choose outgrown toys to donate to a homeless shelter or give time to help prepare a fruit basket for a lonely neighbor.

When constructing a *sukkah*, whether a full-fledged one in your yard or a tabletop model in the living room, encourage your children to be architects and interior designers; this will make the *sukkah* their own. Children can help make paper chains and other decorations commonly found in a *sukkah*. Take your children to a farm stand or garden store to choose gourds, pumpkins, and corn stalks to beautify your *sukkah*. Pj