



## *Ushpizot: Inviting sacred women into the Sukkah*

By Elana Maryles Sztokman

The “Ushpizin”, literally “guests”, is a Jewish custom to invite the spirits of our ancestors into the Sukkah during the seven nights of the traditional holiday (eight in the Diaspora). The Ushpizin represent the commandment to open one’s house to poor people, as well as the more kabbalistic idea that each guest has a unique character trait or energy that we would like to invite into our lives, families, communities and world. The seven traditional Ushpizin are all men. Over the past few years, women have created parallel rituals to invite “Ushpizot”, women spiritual guests, each night a different woman. Although some Ushpizot texts use the seven women who are traditionally believed to have been prophetesses, others vary the names invoked based on women whose lives had particular meaning. The ceremony suggested below uses seven Jewish ancestral women based on particular traits that they embodied, with a suggested variation at the end.

*We invite our sacred ancestresses into the Sukkah to celebrate with us the festival of Sukkot.*

*We welcome the women, who are connected to the earth, to nature, and to the Divine, as we sit outside in the beautiful fresh air under the stars and skies, basking in God’s bounty.*

*We remember the women and bless them, honoring their lives and spirits, sanctifying their characters and inviting them to submerge us with their wisdom, embracing the memories of these female heroines whose actions, understandings and sacrifices gave birth to us, enabling us to live.*

*We welcome Eve, Sarah, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, Beruriah<sup>1</sup> and Ruth*

### *First Night: Eve (Hava)*

Eve was the first woman, the mother of all mothers, the mother of humanity, the only woman to have ever inhabited the Garden of Eden. She ran free and passionately. She was the first not only to eat the forbidden fruit, but also to taste all fruits of all the trees, to experience succulent flavors and aromas that were destined to fill the earth with their bounty, to touch the grass and view the open skies, to climb mountains and trees and listen to the sounds of birds singing in the morning, to know the joy that comes from breathing in God’s air and touching the universe. Eve was also the first woman to experience the suffering of childbirth, the shame of nakedness, and expulsion from glorious Paradise.

Eve represents our **passions** and **deep connections to the earth**, as it is written, "*For she was the mother of all living.*" (Genesis 3; 20) We are all walking in Eve’s footsteps and feeling her magnificence for all of eternity.

*We welcome Eve to our Sukkah.*

<sup>1</sup> Beruriah is the only non-biblical woman in this group. For those who want a more exclusively biblical tradition, you may replace Beruriah with Esther. See the Esther text and explanation at the end of this document

## **Second Night: Sarah**

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Sarah was the mother of Isaac, grandmother of Israel-Jacob, and creator of the Israelite nation. She suffered deeply in order to achieve this role, surrounded by circumstances and people who made belief in her own destiny challenging. Sarah was cast as sister, as barren, and as useful in her unattached childlessness, before undergoing a very late transformation into the Mother of the Nation. She was mocked, laughed at, and used, but ultimately knew the truth about herself and the future Israelite nation.

Sarah represents **nation-building** and **destiny**, as it is written, *“My covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.”* (Genesis 17; 21) We are grateful to Sarah for her personal sacrifices, for without them, the Jewish people would perhaps not exist.

***We welcome Sarah into our Sukkah.***

## **Third Night: Leah**

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Leah was the mother of tribes, the sister of Rachel, and the wife of Jacob – functionary to all, loved by none. Although fated to a loveless marriage, a life of being the unwanted, the second-best, Leah created her own path and meaning through motherhood. She never stopped yearning for love. The one with “the eyes” – perhaps tender, perhaps puffy, perhaps beautiful, perhaps blind – her ability to see beyond her own pain and to provide motherly love is what built the first Israelite family.

Leah represents **motherhood**, **giving** and **selflessness**, as it is written, *“And she conceived again, and bore a son; and she said: 'This time will I praise the Lord' Therefore she called his name Judah; and she stopped bearing.”* (Genesis 29; 35) We offer Leah our eternal, unconditional love and acceptance, which she so needs and so deserves.

***We welcome Leah into our Sukkah.***

## **Fourth Night: Miriam**

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Miriam was the first to lead women in song, to take the instruments in hand and burst out in music at a pinnacle moment in history. Like Eve, she was passionate and alive, fluid, emotive and bountiful like the water of her name. Miriam was always excited to be present with the spirits of the earth and of humanity, to glorify God’s work through gratitude and passionate expression. She took care of others – like her baby brother, like the Israelite women – and lived with joy. Although she suffered on her very skin for her outspokenness and commitment to fairness, at the end of her life, the people of Israel loved, appreciated and respected her.

Miriam represents **prophetic vision**, **initiative**, and **expressiveness**, as it is written, *“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.”* (Exodus 15; 20) We miss Miriam, and we drink in her lovely sensuality and passion.

***We welcome Miriam into our Sukkah.***

## ***Fifth Night:* Deborah**

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Deborah was the only woman to lead the entire Israelite nation. She was a phenomenal warrior and agent of peace, bringing tremendous victories in battle, followed by a then-unprecedented forty-year period of peace. Prophetess, judge, and leader, she taught men to honor and respect women and she in turn honored and respected all people equally. Rather than sit on a throne surrounded by courtesans, Deborah sat outside under a palm tree, and welcomed all equality into conversation and justice.

Deborah represents **leadership, strength** and **power**, as it is written, *“Now Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, she judged Israel at that time; And she sat under the palm-tree of Deborah between Ramah and Beth-el in the hill-country of Ephraim; and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment.”* (Judges 4:4-5) Today, we wait for another Deborah to lead the Jewish people.

***We welcome Deborah into our Sukkah.***

## ***Sixth Night:* Beruriah**

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Beruriah is one of the few women given status of scholarship, of one who owns Jewish knowledge and is respected for her wisdom and ideas. Not afraid to speak her mind, willing to challenge accepted wisdom, and able to consume vast amounts of information, Beruriah’s intellect inspired women scholars throughout the ages. Despite a tragic death the result of men’s refusal to afford her the respect she deserved, her knowledge and spirit live on in the minds and hearts of generations of women.

Beruriah represents **intellect, wisdom** and **scholarship**, as it is written, *“Beruriah has spoken correctly”* (Tosefta Keilim Bava Metzia 1:3). Her brilliant ideas, and the courageous way she transmitted them, remain vital to the Jewish people.

***We welcome Beruriah into our Sukkah.***

## ***Seventh Night:* Ruth**

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Ruth taught us the ultimate lesson: all how to love, to care, and how to be compassionate. Ruth dedicated her life to looking after her suffering mother-in-law, giving up her own home, family and future in order to alleviate the pain of the other. Her expressions of love remain the most poignant texts in the bible, demonstrating the essence of Torah, and the meaning of “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” She brazenly taught Boaz how to be a caretaking Jewish man, and the result of their union will lead to redemption of the Jewish people with the coming of the Messiah.

Ruth represents **unconditional love, the ultimate expression of the Divine presence**, as it is written, *“And Ruth said: ‘Don’t hurt me by urging me to leave you, and to return from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more also, for only death shall separate you and me’.”* We pray that Ruth’s vision will embrace the entire Jewish people, bring about redemption, and help us create a compassionate world. Amen.

***We welcome Ruth into our Sukkah.***

## USHPIZOT CEREMONY

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Each day one of the seven spiritual guests is invited before the meal.

The following text is recited:

***May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my ancestors,  
To allow Your holy spirit to dwell in our midst;  
Spread over us the shelter of Your peace;  
Encircle us with the majesty of Your pure and holy glory.  
Give sufficient bread and water to all who are hungry and thirsty.  
Grant us many days to grow old upon the earth, the holy land,  
That we may serve and revere You.  
Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen, amen.***

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### Esther (Alternative or eighth guest)<sup>2</sup>

Placed in the harem of a cruel, misogynist king, forced to hide her identity while surviving due to her beauty and silence, Esther saved the Jewish people from death and destruction eventually using her charm, wit, and courage – and her voice. Putting her own needs and desires last, risking her life and sacrificing her future, she bravely and brazenly spoke out and asked for protection from the King for her nation.

Esther represents **courage, strength, and personal sacrifice**, as it is written, “*And Esther said... Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the King, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.*” We are all indebted to Esther for her ability to do what is necessary and use whatever tools at her disposal to protect the Jewish people.

***We welcome Esther into our Sukkah.***

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<sup>2</sup> This Esther text may replace the Beruriah text, which is the only non-biblical “ushpiza” in the ceremony. However, one may prefer to include Beruriah because there is no biblical female character specifically revered for her intelligence the way Beruriah was, and this is an important character trait for women to own. Also, although the original Ushpizin tradition is for seven nights – which matches both the original/Israeli holiday length as well as the kabbalistic number of sephirot or energy centers – there is also a strong Jewish tradition to the symbolism of eight, in which the eighth day or night represents that which is beyond the physical manifestations, like tradition of having a chair of Elijah at a brit milah on the eighth day after birth to represent the World to Come. Thus, those conducting an ushpizot ceremony in the diaspora may be interested in having an eighth night of ceremony, despite the break in tradition with the seven ushpizin, in order to fill the eight nights in the Sukkah and/or to expand the tradition to represent higher levels of divine revelation, as is perhaps hinted in the description of Ruth and her connection to the Messiah. For those choosing to do eight Ushpizot, I recommend inviting Ruth on the last night.