

Ushpizin 5764: Be Our Guest, Be Our Guest Sukkot

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I probably should not tell you what I am about to tell you. It's top-secret information. It's about a new reality TV show that I have special knowledge about. You might ask how I know about this new reality TV show that has not even been announced yet. Well, I'll tell you. It's because it is my reality TV show. I invented it. It's my brainchild, and you're the first ones to hear about it. So, please keep it secret until I have the chance to make the pitch to the big networks – you know ABC, CBS, FOX, etc. This is going to be big. Real big!

So you're all probably wondering what this new reality show of mine is all about it, aren't you? The suspense is building. Okay, here's the premise. Your average family, or just an individual, builds a flimsy 3-4 walled edifice – we'll call it a hut – outside their home. There are some corn stalks or evergreen or bamboo lying across the top serving as a pseudo roof. There are a table and some chairs, a nice spread – you know Thanksgiving meal without the football game, and some guests sitting around the table. But, ready, here's the cool part. The people who put up this temporary hut – a booth if you will – get to invite seven famous people (alive or dead) into their hut. Seven people, celebrities, writers, thinkers, biblical figures, what have you. Regular family invites seven guests into their sukkah – it's "Ushpizin 5764"!

It will be a one-hour program in Prime Time. Here's the promo: It's Sukkot and you always invite the same friends into your sukkah. You could spend one more year with Aunt Sally... or you could use your seven Ushpizin wild cards to invite anyone you want. They might be alive. They might be dead. They might have traveled to the moon. Or won an Oscar or a Stanley Cup or a Nobel Prize. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have George Washington, Gandhi, Babe Ruth, Mr. Rogers, and Napoleon in your sukkah? Well now, you can on "Ushpizin 5764"! It's bigger than "Survivor," better than "The Bachelor," more real than "Joe Millionaire." "Ushpizin 5764", a new reality show on NBC, coming this Sukkot. Check local listings for time and channel.

So, my show, I should tell you, is a take-off on the Sukkot custom of inviting honored guests into our sukkah at dinner each evening of the holiday. On the show, each family will get to select seven guests comprised of the following: a politician, an athlete, a scholar in any field, a celebrity, a religious figure, a humanitarian, and a relative. The relative, of course, doesn't have to be famous – just famous to you. No other rules apply – your Ushpizin can be male or female, alive or dead, good or bad, Jewish or non-Jewish. Before I tell you my seven selections, let us look back at the history of the custom of the Ushpizin.

The word Ushpizin, meaning guests, is taken from the Latin *hospes* meaning guests or strangers. It is related to the Latin word for hospitality. According to Kabbalah, or the mystical tradition, there are seven "guests" whom we invite into our sukkah during the seven days of the holiday. Remember, it is only in the Diaspora that Sukkot is celebrated for eight days. The Kabbalistic book, the Zohar, instructs us to invite our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David to visit our sukkah. According to the Zohar, Joseph comes after Moses and Aaron, but in most Ashkenazi prayer books, the order is chronological.

The spiritual guest of each day is invited before the dinner meal, and we recite, "I invite to my meal the exalted guests: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David." And then, we invite that particular day's guest, or Ushpiz, saying, "May it please you, Abraham (for example), my exalted guest, that all the other exalted guests dwell here with me and with you – Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David.

It has also become common practice to decorate the sukkah walls with a poster bearing the names of the seven guests together with the Kiddush, prayer for sitting in the sukkah, and the text of the invitation to the Ushpizin. Many new customs have begun based upon the Ushpizin ritual. Chasidim have

implemented an entire ritual called *Seder-Ushpiz* with liturgy based upon the practices of their honored tzadikim from Hungary. Some will also have pictures of their exalted rebbes on the walls of their sukkah, adding them to the list of mystical guests.

Today, we not only invite the glorified men of our heritage into our sukkah, but also the important women of our people's past. There hasn't yet been consensus on precisely which seven women we should invite into our sukkah as our Ushpizot. However, Ma'ayan: The Jewish Women's Project, a women's resource center, has created an Ushpizot ritual with Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther.

In their ceremony, they say "Enter holy guests from on high; enter hallowed mothers of our people, sisters, wise women, and prophets. Take your place with us under the protecting canopy of the Shechina, in this sukkah of peace. Enter Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Devorah, Avigail, Huldah, and Esther. Enter all those whose names we don't even know, because you have been lost to us.

As we welcome you today into our sukkah, may we soon welcome into our communities all women, who like you, have voices and visions and leadership much needed in our communities. Take your place, take your place, guests from on high. Take your place, take your place, hallowed guests. May we all join you in taking our own places and in making places for others under the protection of Shechina.

Many incorporate both the traditional crew of Ushpizin together with the feminist Ushpizot, inviting one man and one woman on each day of Sukkot. It is truly a beautiful minhag, a beautiful custom. The idea of Ushpizin reminds me of a question I once heard in an interview. The candidate for office was asked if he had the opportunity to ride on a two-seater bicycle across the country for a few months, who he would choose to be on the other seat. This led me to consider if I could invite any one I wanted into my sukkah, who would I want to sit with my family and me in our outdoor temporary hut?

So, back to my reality show, "Ushpizin 5764." If I were the first contestant on "Ushpizin 5764," and I had to choose seven people to come to my sukkah, one per day, who would I choose. Now, remember I get to choose one politician, an athlete, a scholar in any field, a celebrity, a religious figure, a humanitarian, and a relative. My choices would be: politician – JFK; athlete – Jackie Robinson; scholar – Maimonides; celebrity – Jon Stewart; religious figure – Joshua; humanitarian – Mother Teresa; and relative – my grandfather David Gudes.

John F. Kennedy would be my politician Ushpiz because I wasn't yet born when he was President, but after reading his writings and speeches, I know I would have really liked him. We can only imagine what he might have done for our country had his life not been taken from him at such a young age. I think he'd make an interesting Ushpiz in my sukkah, even though you're not supposed to talk politics at the dinner table.

My athlete would be Jackie Robinson – that was an easy choice. I would be interested to shmooze with him not about his athletic prowess, but what it felt like to break the color barrier in baseball. I've always wondered if he felt that the attention he drew because of this event detracted from the public attention to his baseball accomplishments.

The Rambam, Maimonides, is my choice for scholar because he is the paradigm for multi-tasking. He was a famous physician, rabbi, communal leader, Bible commentator, and legalist. He completed his commentary on the entire Mishnah by age 33. Not too shabby. The first question I would ask him in my sukkah is how many hours of sleep he got each night.

Those of you who know the comedian and late-night TV host Jon Stewart can probably guess why he would be my celebrity Ushpiz. His sharp wit and wisdom are impressive, as well as his ability to say what everyone else is thinking. He has his finger on the pulse of country; and, while he can be goofy and silly, he also provides a brilliant commentary on many subjects – politics, religion, ethics, Hollywood, etc. He's

also the only comedian I've ever heard say something about Tisha B'Av on network TV and refer to Passover as Pesach.

Everyone knows it's not easy to take over a leadership role after a successful and beloved leader has left. When Moses ascends Mt. Nevo to die, Joshua takes over the reins of the Israelite tribe and succeeds skillfully. Joshua is portrayed in the Torah as combining the qualities of a military leader and a prophet. While it can be argued that his major achievement was the conquest and settlement of Canaan, I think his non-military accomplishments were more impressive. We know that he "was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon him" and like his predecessor, he is called a "servant of the Lord."

Mother Teresa was a beloved humanitarian known throughout the world for her charity towards the poor. She was universally regarded as a living saint by residents of Calcutta. Literally, millions of men and women have been touched by Mother Teresa's hand of generosity and care. She spent her entire life working for the orphans and the sick. Mother Teresa made an invaluable contribution to society, helping a staggering number of ordinary people in a very personal way.

My last Ushpiz, but certainly not least, is my Papa, David Gudes. My grandfather, a physician, was a wonderful, intelligent, and kind gentleman. He grew up in New York, the son of immigrants, and moved to Michigan for college and medical school. It wasn't until late in his life that he charted his own course of religious study. He had his *makom kavu'ah* – his set seat – in shul on Shabbat, and in his retirement, he began to learn Torah with many rabbis in the community and made it a personal goal to learn conversational Hebrew. Like Rabbi Akiva before him, he didn't let his age determine what he couldn't do; his determination dictated what he could do.

As you can see from this new reality show, "Ushpizin 5764," inviting dignified guests into our sukkah is a beautiful minhag that is accessible to each of us. You don't have to be a contestant on this new TV show to welcome fantasy Ushpizin to your sukkah this year. So, when you sit around the dinner table in your sukkahs this holiday, raise the question, "If you could invite anyone in the world to be our guest here this evening, who would it be?" It will make for insightful discussion; I can assure you of that. And then, at the end of the holiday, I hope you will e-mail me with the names of your fantasy Ushpizin for this year so I can create a synagogue list of our fantasy Ushpizin. Oh, and remember, inviting actual living friends and family to your Sukkot meals is important too!

Chag Sameach.