Before reciting Kiddush in the sukkah on the first and second nights of Sukkot (page 334), or before reciting the blessing over bread and beginning the meal on the other evenings of the Festival, it is customary to invite these special guests, called in Aramaic ushpizin, to feast with us in our sukkah. Although all the names are mentioned each evening, each night we issue a special invitation to one set of guests.

The Zohar, the classic book of Jewish mysticism, mentions that seven distinguished leaders join the righteous in the sukkah: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and David (Emor 103b–104a). Isaac Luria, the Ari, of Safed (sixteenth century) created the ritual of inviting guests according to the formula found on these pages. To the seven guests mentioned in the Zohar, modern liturgists have added worthy women: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth. An eighth pair — Solomon and Esther — are also added by those whose custom it is to eat in the sukkah also on Sh’mini Atzeret. The order of guests that we follow in this siddur, unlike the Zohar’s order, is chronological.

It is also customary to invite needy guests to eat the portions that are set aside for the ushpizin.
The Symbolism of the Sukkah

The reason for dwelling in the sukkah is mentioned in the Torah: “You shall live in sukkot (booths) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in sukkot, in order that future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt...” (Leviticus 23:42–43).

On the face of it, this seems to indicate that during their years of wandering, the Israelites dwelt in temporary huts. In order to remember this, we too dwell in fragile huts for one week out of each year. This could be a way of recalling our history, just as on Pesah we recall the Exodus. It could be a way of making us appreciate the fact that, unlike our ancestors, we are not wanderers but have permanent dwellings. We appreciate our well-being better if we are deprived of it temporarily. It could also be a way of remembering God's graciousness to our ancestors: even in the wilderness, they were given shelter and protection by God.

The Sages disputed the actual nature of the sukkah that existed in the wilderness:

Rabbi Eliezer said, “They were clouds of glory.”
Rabbi Akiva said, “They were actual huts.”
(Sukkah 11b)

According to Rabbi Eliezer, then, our ancestors did not live in sukkot. They were protected by the Presence of God, so that the sukkah in which we dwell is symbolic of the Shekhinah, God's Presence. This interpretation was accepted by traditional biblical commentators (such as Rashi) and is found in the Zohar as well.

Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation emphasizes the fact that the sukkah should make us aware of those who are homeless and in need.
Rabbinic Legends Concerning the Special Guests

Abraham and Sarah

Abraham and Sarah had a tent that was open to all four directions in order to receive wayfarers. Unlike Job, who would wait for passersby to come and then offer them hospitality, Abraham would go out and search for strangers. When he found them he would bring them in and feed them better food than they were accustomed to eat: fine bread, meat, and wine. After they had eaten, he would say to them, “Recite a blessing.” They would ask, “What shall we say?” He would reply, “Blessed is the Eternal God, of whose food we have eaten.” Abraham and Sarah would teach people about God and would convert them — Abraham would convert the men and Sarah would convert the women.

Adapted from Avot D’Rabbi Natan A 7 and Genesis Rabbah 54:6; 39:14

Isaac and Rebecca

During Sarah’s lifetime, the divine Presence lingered near the tent, the doors of the tent were open to receive strangers, and the tent was filled with light and blessing. When Sarah died all of this ceased, but when Rebecca came it was restored. When Isaac saw that Rebecca emulated the ways of his mother Sarah, “Isaac brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebecca as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67).

Adapted from Genesis Rabbah 60:16

Moses

Moses wept when he saw the suffering of his people, thinking, “I would die for them!” The work they had to do was the hardest work of all. Moses would help them, taking their burdens upon himself. When he saw that burdens appropriate for the strong were placed on the weak, he would leave his guard of honor and try to redistribute the burdens appropriately, all the time pretending to be helping accomplish work for Pharaoh. Said the Holy One, “You abandoned your own concerns and went to help Israel in its time of trouble and acted like a brother to them. Therefore I shall abandon My concerns and speak to you.”

Adapted from Exodus Rabbah 1:27
**Miriam**

When Miriam was stricken with leprosy, the entire camp of Israel, the very Presence of God, the clouds of glory, the Ark of the Covenant — all waited an entire week until she recovered and could join the procession. Why? This was a reward for Miriam’s action when she waited by the river to see what would happen to her baby brother Moses. Thus we learn that as one acts, so do others act toward them.

Adapted from Sifre Numbers 106

**Ruth**

When Naomi told Ruth to return to her own home, Ruth said to her, “Do not urge me to leave you (Ruth 1:16). I am determined to convert. Is it not better that I do so through your teaching than with someone else?” When Naomi heard this, she began to explain Jewish beliefs and practices to Ruth. She told her, “My daughter, the daughters of Israel do not go to pagan theaters.”

Ruth then said, “Wherever you go, I will go” (Ruth 1:16). Naomi said, “My daughter, the daughters of Israel do not lodge in a house that does not have a mezuzah.”

Ruth said, “Where you lodge, I shall lodge. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God” (Ruth 1:16). Said Ruth, “I shall abandon all my idolatry and observe all the other mitzvot.”

Adapted from Ruth Rabbah 2:22

**David**

A harp hung over David’s bed. Every night at midnight the north wind would cause the harp to play by itself. David would then awake and study Torah until dawn. David said to God, “Am I not pious? All the other kings sleep late, while I rise early to study Torah. Furthermore, I busy myself answering questions of the people concerning matters of purity and impurity and of right and wrong. Are not my decisions just and correct? Nor am I ashamed to ask others who know more than I.” Some say that David did not say that he was pious. He was afraid that his sins would cause God to punish him. Therefore he said, “I know that you reward the deserving in the world to come, but I am not certain that I shall have a share in that world.”

Adapted from Berakhot 4a

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On the seventh evening:

Welcome David, welcome Ruth. You represent the living legacy of Israel, the future as well as the past. As you embraced God with all your being, may we too live in dignity and honor, a source of pride to God and to our heritage.

Conclude with the meditation below.

There is a tradition that in the Diaspora, on the eve of Sh'mini Atseret, we welcome an eighth pair of visitors to our sukkah as we prepare to take leave of the Festival.

Welcome Solomon, welcome Esther. You each exercised royal judgment in the interests of Israel’s well-being. May we, in tribute to your example, live with wisdom and determination for the preservation and betterment of our people.

On each evening we conclude with this meditation:

We call upon you, revered elders — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David (and Solomon), Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Miriam, Deborah, and Ruth (and Esther) — to join us in this sukkah. May God’s presence also dwell among us and bring us honor, prosperity, and peace.

Upon leaving the sukkah for the final time, one may recite this prayer of messianic anticipation:

May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors, that just as we have fulfilled the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah on this Festival, so may we be privileged in years to come to dwell in the fabled sukkah, fashioned from the skin of the legendary Leviathan, in the holy city of Jerusalem.

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**333 HOME OBSERVANCES — FESTIVALS**

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