

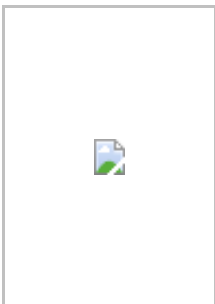
Two similar shared human experiences: Burning Man and Sukkot

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"Sukkot is the Jewish Burning Man," my friend said to me in the waning moments of Sukkot last year — as we sat on low cushions in his sukkah with friends, red wine and the divine Ushpizin joining us for the end of the holiday.

It was a lovely conclusion to Sukkot, which has long been my favorite Jewish holiday. Last year felt like an especially long holiday season because, just before Rosh Hashanah, I went to Burning Man for the first time, joining more than 50,000 other people in the Nevada desert for a week.

This year, there has been a slightly longer stretch between the end of Burning Man — which ran Aug. 29 to Sept. 5, and which I attended again — and Sukkot, which started Oct. 12.



This year's theme at Burning Man theme was "Rites of Passage." It was perfect timing, as the beginning Elul (marking a period of reflection) came during my week "on the playa."

This year I joined a camp called Sukkat Shalom, where the motto comes from the daily Amidah prayer: "... nourish the faith of those who sleep in the dust." Of course, in a place where the fine dust of the playa coats everything, this has an additional meaning beyond the traditional statement of faith in the messianic resurrection.

To mark the beginning of Elul, we began blowing the shofar, met for Kiddush levana and hosted a Kabbalat Shabbat/potluck dinner for about 350 people.

There were numerous other Jewish happenings at Burning Man — including Jewish weddings, a bat mitzvah, a "burn mitzvah" (for 13-year attendees) and a "dust mikvah."

And then there was "Jewish Motherly Advice" dispensed by Mama Lisa, along with bagels and lox. "Everyone needs motherly advice," was her motto, "but who wants to hear it from their own mother?"

The organizers of these various events seem to have understood what Rabbi Eve Ben-Ora, an educator and the in-house rabbi at the JCC of San Francisco, has said about Jewish culture today: "The question is not 'How Jewish is it?' but 'How do we make it Jewish?'"

Attendees at Burning Man 2011 gather for a Kabbalat Shabbat service in camp Sukkat Shalom's geodesic dome, where the Star of David shone all week. photo/brailey portnoy/trightestyoungthings.com

Last year, as we were leaving Sukkot and moving into Shemini Atzeret, I began to see a lot of parallels between Sukkot and Burning Man.

Back when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Sukkot was the main Jewish festival of the year. The Talmud tells us that a major element of Sukkot was a water-drawing ritual that was accompanied by a festival of fire that lasted all night and included fire-juggling, music, singing, dancing and enough torches to illuminate all of Jerusalem.



We are told that whomever “has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the Water Drawing has not seen rejoicing in his life.” This certainly sounds a lot like some of the major aspects of Burning Man: all kinds of illumination, including fire performances accompanied by music and dancing all night.

I had always wondered how — and why — thousands of people would go to Jerusalem and camp out in huts for a week.

Now, after two straight trips to Burning Man, I have my answer. As Ecclesiastes, the traditional scroll that is read on Sukkot, advises: “There is

nothing worthwhile for a man but to eat and drink and afford himself enjoyment with his means.”

But while this might make it sound like partying is the main thing, in both cases, this is only on the surface; at a deeper level, the celebrations are about the transitory, temporary, evanescent essence of life.

A sukkah, which takes so much time and effort to build, comes down after a week — so much like Burning Man, where a city arises for a week, only to disappear into the dust of the Nevada desert. Some people spend a year preparing an art, food or performance project for one glorious week of gifting it away (there is no money allowed at the event, much like Shabbat and chag).

And afterward, the entire encampment is cleared to a point where there is no trace left.

The deeper lesson of Sukkot (and Burning Man) is the transitory nature of our existence in the world — just like the point of Ecclesiastes, “all is ephemeral.”

The ends of the weeklong events are also similar. In the Bible, Sukkot is followed by Shemini Atzeret, the final holiday of the biblical holiday cycle, a somber day of recovery from the partying of the previous day and week.

Similarly, after the giant party that accompanies the ritualistic burning of “the man” on Saturday night, Burning Man concludes with the silent Sunday night burning of “the Temple,” a place where people leave notes to friends and loved ones who have passed on.

It’s too bad that Sukkot is mostly a lost holiday here in the United States. I’d even guess that there were more Jews from the Bay Area at Burning Man than will actually dwell in a sukkah this year.

I’m not saying that Burning Man has religious elements, especially Jewish ones. Rather, I’m suggesting that we see a shared human impetus for ritualized gathering that heightens the feeling of being alive, precisely because we are temporarily taken out of our usual routines.

Our awareness of life’s passage is sharpened, intensifying our feelings of joy and sorrow. Upon reflection, I think my friend’s comment was not quite right. Sukkot is not the Jewish Burning Man, as he said; rather, Burning Man is a contemporary version of Sukkot.

Ron H. Feldman earned his Ph.D. in Jewish history and culture at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he now is a visiting scholar. He has taught Jewish studies at four local universities and is the CFO of the JCC of the East Bay.