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In an earlier life, Melinda taught law and political science at Melbourne, Monash, La Trobe and the University of New South Wales. She was a Senior Lecturer in Law, the Editor-in-Chief of the Australian Journal of Human Rights and the Director of the Australian Human Rights Centre.

SUCCOT GUESTS.. THE ONES WE LONG TO KNOW

Tonight is the first night of Succot. I'm living in Melbourne Australia. 2020. COVID-19 is ranging in our midst and we are in Stage 4 Lockdown, albeit with eased conditions. My succah is quite large. In ordinary times I feed 12 or 15 each meal. It is often a rowdy affair. The comings and goings from the kitchen. The games that get started & abandoned. The intensity of being with family and friends.

Tonight – this week - will be a little lonely. So we have brought in a variety of a time-honoured tradition. Ushpitzim. There was great film about them a while back. Ushpitzim. Special Guests. Biblical characters who join people around the world in the Succah. Ushiptzim. Honoured men. Heroes from the past. A different one each night. Ushpitzot. Honoured women. Ushpitzot. Women to join us at the table. Ushpitzot. Women to share their stories. Women we honour who honour us with their presence.

So tonight, for the first night of Succot, I've invited Esther Abrahams/Johnston. Never heard of her? She isn't a forebear of mine. She came on the First Fleet as a convict. My family in the 1850s as freemen (and woman and child). Esther was pretty amazing. What a guest! She was just 16 and pregnant when she was convicted of stealing 50 shillings worth of lace. She plead her innocence. She had



character witnesses. No one believed that the cards of lace fell from the counter. Must have been in her coat. After all, she looked hungry. She was grubby & was from the East End. I want to hear more about this. I have so many questions. How did she get pregnant? Was there a father around? Had she been raped or molested? Did she have any choice?

On the ship over she gave birth. Alone. In cramped conditions, with many women helping or not. It couldn't have been clean. We know the women on the ship were constantly abused. When they landed at Sydney Cove the men went on a 2 day rampage & attacked every woman in sight. Did her relationship with Lieutenant George Johnston, second officer in charge of the Marines on the Lady Penrhyn, protect her? Was she, at least, safe?

And what about this man? He kept her and only married her 25 years after they got together. By then she had another 7 children. Did it matter to her that he wasn't Jewish? Did it matter to him that she was? Did she have a succah – I guess there were lots of succah-like structures in Sydney Cove. Did she see one here or even in London? Did Succot or any of the festivals play a role in her life? Did the boys have brises?

And how did she cope when her avaricious son tried to have her declared insane to take her property. The judge accepted she drank – sometimes a lot. He also said if that was the basis of insanity that no one in the Colony would be fit to join a jury. Was the drink ever diverted for religious reasons? If not, what was it to be a Jew?

I'm looking forward to asking these and many more questions. I read Kate Grenville's *A Room Made of Leaves*. I wonder if Esther shared the experiences of Elizabeth Macarthur. Did she have any sort of dealings or relationship with the indigenous people? Did the women of the Colony have a more humane perspective of the existing inhabitants of the land? Could there have been a different history?

As we remember and experience the transience of life, of ownership of property, of our stake in the world, it is nice to take a breather and think of someone you'd like to have for dinner this Succoth. Someone who can make you think. You don't often get the opportunity to invite a guest from the past. It's quite an experience.

