

## ***Sukkot Potpourri***

[**note:** This document was created from a selection of uncited study handouts and academic texts that were freely quoted and organized only for discussion purposes.]

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### ***Midrash Tehillim 17, Part 5 - Why is Sukkot so soon after Yom Kippur?***

(Also referred to as *Midrash Shocheh Tov*; its beginning words are from Proverbs 11:27. The work is known since the 11th century; it covers only Psalms 1-118.)

In your right hand there are pleasures (*Tehillim* 16:11). What is meant by the word pleasures? Rabbi Abin taught, it refers to the myrtle, the palm-branch, and the willow which give pleasure. These are held in the right hand, for according to the rabbis, the festive wreath (*lulav*) should be held in the right hand, and the citron in the left.

What kind of victory is meant in the phrase? As it appears in the Aramaic Bible: ‘the sweetness of the victory of your right hand’. That kind of victory is one in which the victor receives a wreath. For according to the custom of the world, when two charioteers race in the hippodrome, which of them receives a wreath? The victor.

On *Rosh Hashanah* all the people of the world come forth like contestants on parade and pass before G-d; the children of Israel among all the people of the world also pass before Him. Then, the guardian angels of the nations of the world declare: ‘We were victorious, and in the judgment will be found righteous.’ But actually no one knows who was victorious, whether the children of Israel or the nations of the world were victorious. After *Rosh Hashanah* is gone, all the children of Israel come forth on *Yom Kippur* and fast thereon, clothed in white and comely garments. But even after *Yom Kippur* is gone, still not one knows who was victorious, either the children of Israel or the nations of the world. When the first day of *Sukkot* comes, however, all the children of Israel - they that are grown as well as the little ones - take up their festive wreaths in their right hands and their citrons in their left, and then all the people of the world know that in the judgment, the children of Israel were proclaimed victorious.

### ***Zechariah 14: 16-19***

And it will come to pass that everyone left of the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. And it shall be that whoever of all the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts - upon them there shall be no rain. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and does not come, it shall not [rain] upon them. The plague [on Egypt] will be [the same as] that with which the Lord will plague the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Booths. Such will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Booths.

## ***II Maccabees 10:1-2, 5-7***

Now Maccabaeus and his followers, under the leadership of the Lord, recaptured the Temple and the city, and pulled down the altars erected by the aliens in the marketplace ... Now it so happened that the cleansing of the sanctuary took place on the very day on which it had been profaned by aliens, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which is *Kislev*. And they celebrated it for eight days with gladness like a Feast of Booths, remembering how, not long before, during the Feast of Booths they had been wandering like wild beasts in the mountains and the caves (and were unable to celebrate it). So bearing wands wreathed with leaves and fair boughs and palms, they offered hymns of praise to Him who had prospered the cleansing of his own place ...

**Josephus** (Yosef ben Matityahu, 37- circa 100 CE) born to a father of priestly descent and a mother from the royal, formerly ruling, Hasmoneans. During the First Jewish-Roman War, he was defeated, then surrendered and defected in 67 CE. In 69 CE, Vespasian became Emperor and granted Josephus his freedom. Josephus assumed the Emperor's family name and became Titus Flavius Josephus. Josephus recorded Jewish history with a special emphasis on his period of time. His works are the chief source, after the Bible, for the history of ancient Palestine.)

***Antiquities of the Jews 13.13.5:*** As for Alexander\*, his own people revolted against him – for the nation was aroused against him – at the celebration of the Festival, and as he stood beside the altar and was about to sacrifice, they pelted him with citrons, it being a custom among the Jews that at the Festival of Booths everyone holds wands made of palm branches and citrons – these we have described elsewhere; and they added insult to injury by saying that he was descended from captives and was unfit to hold office and to sacrifice; and being enraged at this, he killed some six thousand of them, and placed a wooden barrier about the altar and the Temple as far as the coping (of the court) which the priests alone were permitted to enter, and by this mean blocked the people's way to him.

\* Alexander Jannaeus (born Jonathan Alexander יהונתן "ינאי" אלכסנדרוס) was the second king of the Hasmonean dynasty. He ruled over an expanding kingdom of Judea from 103 to 76 BCE. From his conquests to expand the kingdom to a bloody civil war, Alexander's reign has been generalized as cruel and oppressive with never-ending conflict. Alexander also had many of his subjects killed for their disapproval of his handling of state affairs. Due to his territorial expansion and interactions with his subjects, he was continuously embroiled with foreign wars and domestic turmoil. Like his father, Alexander also served as the High Priest. This raised the ire of the religious authorities who insisted that these two offices should not be combined. According to the Talmud, Yannai was a questionable desecrated priest (rumor had it that his mother was captured in Modiin and violated) and, in the opinion of the Pharisees, was not allowed to serve in the Temple. This infuriated the king and he sided with the Sadducees who defended him. This incident led the king to turn against the Pharisees and he persecuted them until his death.

## The Four Species

וּיקְרָא כג:מ

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן  
פְּרֵי עֵץ הַדָּר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנַף עֵץ-עֵבֶת וְעַרְבֵי-נַחַל  
וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים:

**Leviticus 23:40** And you shall take for yourself on the first day *pri etz hadar*, a beautiful fruit tree, *kapot temarim*, branches of date palms, *anaf etz avot*, twigs of a plaited tree, and *arevei nachal*, willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for seven days.

1. *Sukkot* occurs in autumn on the threshold of the rainy season. Rainfall is vital for human existence; if it is abundant it means prosperity; should there be a drought, famine is the result. The Four Species (*arba'a minim* - ארבעת המינים) are especially dependent on rain for their growth. Holding them in our hands, we beseech God to grant us sufficient rain just as He did for these plants.

2. The *Torah* speaks of the “fruity” in the singular, indicating one *Etrog* (citron - אתרוג). It also speaks of the *Aravot* (willows - ערבות) in the plural, meaning two. When the *Torah* speaks of the *Hadas* (myrtle - הדס), it describes it in three words - *anaf etz avot* - a bough that is thick and grows on a tree; hence, the necessity for three *Hadassim*.

3. The *Hadas* (myrtle) must stand slightly higher than the *Aravah* (willow) when placed in the two-pocketed sheath into which the *Lulav* (ripe, green, closed frond from a date palm tree - לילוב) has been inserted. The reason for this arrangement is the superiority of the *Hadas* over the *Aravah*. The *Hadas* possesses a fragrance which is lacking in the *Aravah*.

**Menachot** (second Tractate of *Kodashim*, the fifth volume in the Order of the *Mishnah*)

Of the four kinds [of plants] used for the *Lulav* ... the [absence of] one invalidates the others, for as it is written in **Leviticus 23:40** ... this signifies the taking of them all ...

It was taught: Of the four kinds used for the *Lulav* two are fruit-bearing (the citron and the palm branch) and two are not (the myrtle and the willow); those which bear fruits must be joined to those which bear no fruits and those which bear no fruits must be joined to those which bear fruits.

A man does not fulfill his obligations unless they are all bound in one band. And so it is with Israel's conciliation with G-d, [it is achieved] only when they are all in one band.

***Yalkut Shimoni*** ('Anthology of Simon' – aggadic, ie, non-legalistic exegetical texts, compilation of older interpretations and explanations of Biblical passages)

Just as a man cannot fulfill his obligation on the Feast of Booths unless all Four Species are bound together, so Israel can only be redeemed when all Israelites hold together.

***Pesikta Rabbati*** (collection of aggadic *midrashim* on *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and special *Shabbatot* – c 845 CE)

Even as the *Etrog* has aroma and has edible fruit, so Israel have in their midst men who have knowledge of *Torah* and also have good deeds.

Branches of palm trees also stands for [some men in] Israel: as the palm tree has edible fruit but no aroma, so Israel have in their midst men who have knowledge of *Torah* but have not good deeds.

Boughs of leafy trees also stands for [some men in] Israel: as the myrtle tree has aroma but has not edible fruit, so Israel have in their midst men who have good deeds but have not *Torah*.

Willows of the brook also stand for [some men in] Israel: even as the willow has neither edible fruit nor aroma, so Israel have in their midst men in whom there is neither, knowledge of *Torah* nor good deeds.

The Holy One says: In order to make it impossible for Israel to be destroyed, let all of them be bound together as plants are bound into a cluster, so that the righteous among them will atone for the others. Hence, as Moses charged Israel in **Leviticus 23:40**.

## **The *Sukkah***

While the *Torah* is quite explicit concerning some of the details of the Festival, it is less specific regarding the Four Species, and is also rather vague in respect to the construction of the *Sukkah*.

The Rabbis keyed on the following two words: *ba-sukkot tayshayoo*, "you shall dwell in booths". From these two words, the Sages derive a paradoxical feature of the *sukkah*. It must be a dwelling place with all the features of a regular dwelling but remains a booth with all the insecurity it entails.

We must bring into the *sukkah* the finest of linens and tableware, decorate it lavishly, and even sleep there. All the same, if inclement weather sets in we're instructed to leave the *sukkah* and return to our permanent homes. "To dwell" indicates normal standards of living. It conveys that we are to live as we are accustomed to. Conditions which would force us to leave our permanent dwelling free us of our obligation to dwell in the *Sukkah*.

**Mishnah Sukkah** (sixth Tractate of *Moed*, the second volume in the Order of the *Mishnah*)

**R Ammi said (Sukkah 30a):**

A withered [palm branch] is invalid because it is not “goodly”. **Leviticus 23:40** uses the work *hadar*, literally, “beautiful tree”, ie, “goodly”, in the context of its fruit, the *Etrog*. But the rabbis apply it to all four species. A stolen one is invalid because it constitutes a precept fulfilled through a transgression.

**R Johanan explained (Sukkah 37b):**

[One waves them] to and fro [in honor of] Him to whom the four directions belong, and up and down [in acknowledgment of] Him to whom are heaven and earth.

**Chapter 2 Mishnah 6**

Rabbi Eliezar says, A man is duty bound to eat fourteen meals in the *Sukkah*, one each day and one every night. But the Sages say, There is no prescribed number except only on the night of the first night of the Holyday of the Festival of Booths. And Rabbi Eliezer made a further statement; If one had not eaten on the first night of the Holyday of the Festival, he must fulfill his lapse on the last night of the Festival. But the sages say, The matter cannot be rectified ...

**Chapter 2 Mishnah 9**

Throughout the seven days a man must make his *Sukkah* his principle abode and his house a temporary dwelling. If rain fell, when may he clear out? When a dish would be spoiled. They made a comparison: To what can the matter be compared? To a slave who came to fill the cup for his master, and he poured the jug over his face.

**Chapter 3 Mishnah 83**

The *Lulav* must not be tied with anything but something of its own species; this is the view of Rabbi Yehudah. But Rabbi Meir says; even with a cord. Rabbi Meir said, It is a fact that the men of Jerusalem used to bind up their *Lulavim* with threads of gold. They answered him, with threads of its own species did they bind it up below.

**Chapter 3 Mishnah 12**

Aforetime, the *Lulav* used to be taken to the Temple the whole seven days, but in the provinces only one day. After the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai ordained that the *Lulav* should be used in the provinces the whole of the seven days in remembrance of the Temple.

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**The following is an excellent summary of some of the concepts we just discussed:**

**My Jewish Learning** (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/lulav-and-etrog-symbolism/>) taken from **The Jewish Catalogue: A Do-It Yourself-Kit**, edited by Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld and Susan Strassfeld, published by the Jewish Publication Society.

## **Lulav and Etrog Symbolism**

### **Four Species and the Four Letters in God's Name**

The four [species] represent the four-letter Name of G-d, with the lulav being the [Hebrew letter] *vav*, which channels the divine energy into the world and man. If for no other reason, the four must be held together while waving for the Unity of the Name.

### **Masculine-Feminine Symbolism**

There is a masculine-feminine symbolism within the Four Species, besides that represented within G-d's Name. The lulav is obviously a masculine symbol and the etrog, with the form of a breast, is obviously feminine. Since these are conduits of divine flow, it is important that they be perfect and whole. The necessity of having the *pittam* intact makes ultimate sense in this context (cf *Sefer Sefat Emet*, the commentary on *Sukkot*).

### **Each Species Alludes to G-d**

Each of the species is a hint or allusion to G-d, according to a Midrash found in *Leviticus Rabbah*, 83:

**Etrog** – because it is written (Psalms 104:1) - ‘You are clothed in glory and majesty.’ (The word translated as majesty is *hadar*. In the *Torah* (Leviticus 23:40), the *etrog* is called the fruit of the goodly tree. The same Hebrew word, *hadar*, is used in that context to mean goodly.)

**Palm** – because it is written (Psalms 92:13) - ‘The righteous bloom like a date palm.’

**Myrtle** – because it is written (Zechariah 1:8) - ‘And he stood among the myrtle-trees.’

**Willow** – because it is written (Psalms 68:5) - ‘Extol Him who rides on the clouds [*aravot*], the Lord is His name.’

### **Species as Limbs**

Each of the four relates to a particular limb through which man is to serve G-d (cf *Sefer HaChinukh*, #285 – The Book of Education – composed in Spain around 1255-1285 CE - systematically discusses the 613 commandments in the *Torah*):

**Etrog** refers to the heart, the place of understanding and wisdom.

**Palm** refers to the backbone, uprightness.

**Myrtle** corresponds to the eyes, enlightenment.

**Willow** represents the lips, the service of the lips (prayer).

## **Taste and Fragrance**

Taste represents learning. Smell represents good deeds. The *etrog* has both taste and smell. The *lulav* has taste but not fragrance. The myrtle has smell but no taste. And the willow has neither. Each represents a different type of man. Some have both learning and good deeds; some have one without the other; and some have neither. Real community is found in their being bound together and brought under one roof.

## **Symbolism of Waving the Four Species**

The motion and order of the wavings is highly significant.

1. On a basic level there is simply the arousal of our joy, thanksgiving, and praise of God at the time of the final fruit harvest.
2. The directions are symbolic of divine rule over nature.
3. There is the representation of the fertility of the land and the desire for rain.
4. This is also representative of our complete immersion in the holiday. On one level, we are surrounded by the *sukkah*. On another level, through this motion (of bringing it toward us), *Sukkot* enters us. The *lulav* becomes a conduit of peace and God's presence from every direction; transcendence and immanence. We gather in and are gathered in.

Through all of these, the themes of *Sukkot* are played out and interwoven beautifully: redemption, universal peace and brotherhood, completion.