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Sukkah dedication in Pentagon center court

## The Four Species

Thank you, Rabbi Bash. I certainly did not expect to be back so soon. I retired last Friday after 34 years of service in the Department of Defense, the last 27 of them being in the Pentagon. Most importantly, I did not expect my last “briefing” in the Pentagon to be on a religious subject. But as the Jewish saying goes, “If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.”

We are here today to dedicate the Pentagon sukkah, in celebration of Sukkot, the Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles. The holiday is described in the Bible, where we are enjoined to wave the ‘four species’ – arba’ minim in Hebrew. In the Book of Leviticus, it says:

And you shall take, on the first day [of Sukkot], the fruit of the beautiful [citron] tree, branches of palm trees, the branch of the braided [myrtle] tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days... It shall be a statute forever in your generations. [Leviticus 23:40-41]

Why did the Bible choose these specific species? The Midrash [Leviticus Rabbah 30:12], which is a large compendium of rabbinic wisdom more than 1500 years old, says that the four species represent four types of people:

- The lulav, or palm tree branch, has taste but no smell, and therefore represents those who have scholarly knowledge but do not perform good deeds – ‘maasim tovim’ in Hebrew.
- The hadass, or myrtle, has no taste but smells good, and therefore represents those who are not scholarly but perform good deeds
- The aravah, or willow, has neither taste nor smell, and therefore represents those who are neither scholarly nor perform good deeds.
- The etrog, or citron, both tastes good and smells good, and therefore represents those who are both scholarly and perform good deeds.

These, of course, are four corners, four extremes. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. Acquiring knowledge and performing good deeds are two pillars of Judaism -- theory and practice -- and we all

do a bit of both. But the interesting part is that the ceremony is deemed invalid unless all four species are present and held tightly together at the same time. Why so? What use do we have for people who are neither scholarly nor perform good deeds?

We want them there because we refuse to give up on anyone. By holding all four species tightly together, everybody gets a chance to absorb what he lacks from everyone else around him. As the Jewish saying goes, we are all responsible for one another. No one must be left behind. Everyone has value in the scheme of things, whether we perceive that value or not.

It is not only the less virtuous who benefit from contact with the more virtuous, but everybody benefits from everybody else. Indeed, the Midrash passage I just quoted continues, "God said: Let them all bond together in one bundle and atone for one another", implying that everyone needs everyone else. The Talmud says, 'Who is wise? He who learns from all people.' [Pirkei Avot 4:1]. Another way to make the point is what Benjamin Franklin said at the time our country was founded, 'We must all hang together, or, most assuredly, we will hang separately'.

So it is in our military: Our soldiers perform their missions as one team, and will never abandon one of their own in difficulty. So it is in our civilian life: As individuals and as a nation, we help the poor, the disadvantaged, the handicapped, so they can rise as high as their potential allows. From "No child left behind" to "No soldier left behind", we Americans are one people and care for one another.

So we hold the four species tightly together and wave them in all four directions, plus up and down, to acknowledge God's mastery over all Creation. We also say a blessing. What does the blessing say? It says, "Blessed are You O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and has commanded us concerning the lulav -- the palm tree branch."

Something's odd here. Only the palm tree? And what about the other 3 species? Why are they not mentioned in the blessing? It looks like the lulav, the palm tree, is considered first among equals, at

it were. Why is only the lulav mentioned? Didn't we just say that ALL four species must be together for the ceremony to be valid?

I can only speculate. Recall that the lulav represents people who are scholarly but do not perform good deeds.

Scholarly people ensure continuity. By keeping knowledge alive, they create opportunities for future generations to be observant. If I may be allowed to lapse into military jargon, if the "measure of effectiveness" to be maximized is the number of good deeds performed over all time, then scholarship is critically important because it guides us and tells us in detail what we are supposed to do and how to do it, to fulfill God's commandments. Absent scholarship, future generations may not be sure of what is expected of them. To paraphrase Prager and Telushkin, two best-selling authors on Jewish philosophy, without the authority of the Bible, the only thing wrong with torturing small children is that 'I don't like it', and that's not a good enough reason to continue following commandments. [The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism, Touchstone, 1986]

People who perform good deeds but are not scholarly certainly inspire others around them and future generations, but cannot provide authority and rationale for their actions, and, because of that, their example may wane over time.

What about people who are both scholarly and perform good deeds? They are symbolized by the etrog, the citron, the first item mentioned in the Bible. Surely, if only one of the four groups is to be mentioned in the blessing, it should be them, as they embody the epitome of a good life.

But perhaps they are too perfect, too intense for most of us. They represent a valid goal, to be sure, but realistically unattainable for most of us. By doing everything, they do not help us set priorities. Also, the etrog is the most expensive of the four species, and because of its shape it must be held separately from the other three (one hand holds the etrog and the other holds the other three), and physically it does not easily mingle with the others. This whiff of elitism may have turned Tradition away from using it for the blessing.

Some say only the lulav is mentioned because it is the largest and most visible of the four [Sukkah 37b]. But one can say equally logically that it is the smallest that should be mentioned, so you become aware it is there. Another explanation is that the blessing, rather than dump everything on you at once, points only to the beginning. And that beginning is to study. The Book of Proverbs says, "Teach a child in the way that he should go, and even when he is old he will not depart from it." [Proverbs 22:6] The Talmud concludes that one must begin studying the Bible at age five [Pirkei Avot 5:25]. So, in this view, our premise was wrong. The blessing is on the lulav alone, not because the lulav is the most important of the four, but because it points to the first step in the journey.

So it is in our military and everywhere else. Doing the right thing requires knowledge and planning. These must come first, and if they are good, good things usually follow.

As was mentioned at the dedication of the first Pentagon sukkah on this spot, five years ago in 2004, the symbolism of the world's flimsiest building standing inside the world's mightiest building is not lost. We all need one another, the weak and the strong, the scholarly and the less scholarly, the virtuous and the less virtuous, the rich and the poor. Unity. One people. The United States. And that is the message of the holiday of Sukkot. Thank you.