

The Whole Peace
Sukkot 2011
The Jewish Center
Rabbi Yosie Levine

The Honorable Essam Sharaf
Prime Minister
The Arab Republic of Egypt
c/o Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt
3521 International Court NW
Washington DC, 20008

Dear Prime Minister Sharaf:

I am writing to express my deep concern over reports that Egypt has made a decision to ban the export of palm fronds, also known as lulavs, used in the upcoming Jewish holiday of Sukkot, which begins on October 12th of this year. Given that Egypt is one of the world's largest suppliers of lulavs, an export ban imposed so close to Sukkot may lead to shortages or extreme price spikes – causing financial hardship for families and communities simply wishing to fulfill their religious obligations.

I understand that Egypt has previously limited the export of lulavs to prevent overharvesting, and I appreciate the fact that Egypt has a sovereign right to manage its agricultural resources, but such prior export limitations were announced well in advance of Sukkot – giving Jewish communities ample notice to secure alternative supplies of lulavs before the holiday.

In light of the recent tensions between Egypt and Israel, there is a widespread perception that the reported ban on lulav exports was imposed for purely political reasons. I sincerely hope this is not the case, for such a restriction could deprive a very large number of Jewish people around the world – including many of my constituents in Los Angeles -- of lulavs used in religious services.

I urge your government to reassess in a timely manner the decision to impose an export ban and take all necessary steps to prevent any disruption in the supply of lulavs before Sukkot.

Sincerely,

HOWARD L BERMAN

Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs Committee

Allow me to share with you three reactions to this letter.

First: Isn't it amazing that we live in a country where an Egyptian ban on lulavim registers on the radar of the ranking member of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee?

Second: What great irony? Our Sukkahs commemorate the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Linked as it is to Pesach, this holiday in one respect celebrates our independence from Egypt – and now 3500 years later we're oddly dependent on that very country to observe properly this holiday properly.

And third: Thankfully we rustled up enough lulavim to get by without Egypt's supply. But in principle, I want to consider what it would mean to celebrate Sukkos without a lulav – with only three out of the four species.

In Chassidic thought: Every holiday is associated with a Biblical figure. Pesach, for instance, belongs to Avraham. Yom Kippur corresponds to Moshe. And Sukkos is said to be linked to the character of Aharon.

On the most basic level, this makes perfect sense. After all, we know the famous debate between R. Eliezer and R. Akiva as to whether our Sukkos commemorate the ענני הכבוד, the clouds of glory, or סוכות ממש, the literal huts in which the Jewish people lived during their travels in the wilderness.

We know that the clouds of glory accompanied the Jewish people and protected them in the merit of Aharon. When he died, the clouds disappeared. So at least according to R. Eliezer, connecting Sukkos to Aharon vis-à-vis the ענני הכבוד is both consistent and logical.

But I'd like to explore the possibility that there is something deeper going on here. Because there's another theme of this holiday. And that's shalom.

- It's about all the nations paying homage to Hashem in our holy Temple.
- It's about our messianic aspirations.
- And it's the symbolism of the ד' מינים – all types of Jews coming together as an אגודה אחת in the service of the Almighty.

And this of course is the defining character of Aharon. Unlike his brother who we associate with the attribute of אמת, of truth, Aharon is the consummate איש שלום. That said, there's a complexity about his persona that I think we sometimes miss.

What I'd like to suggest is that Aharon actually does as much to teach us about what Shalom is not, as he does to teach about what shalom is:

It all goes back to the sin of the Golden Calf. If you look closely at the story, you'll notice that Aharon's definition of peace is fundamentally ill-suited to the particular circumstance. And the text goes out of its way to highlight precisely this failing. When Moshe returns from the mountain to find the people dancing around the golden calf, he says:

מה עשה העם הזה כי הבאת עליו חטאה גדולה?

Aharon – what did this people do to you that you brought such a grievous sin upon it?

And listen to Aharon's reply: אל יחר אף אדוני

The first thing he says is: Please, Moshe, don't be angry.

The people have committed a cardinal offense and the first thing Aharon is worried about is Moshe's being angry?

The answer is yes. Because it's totally in keeping with Aharon's character. He never wants anyone to be upset. He's so integrated and invested in the people, that he can't tell them no. Moshe, on the other hand, tells them no all the time. But characterologically, Aharon has a very difficult time stopping people from crossing a line or telling them to stop sinning.

In attempting to avoid conflict, Aharon actually leads the people down a terribly dangerous path. But he teaches us a profound lesson about Shalom in the process.

Shalom is not about as we might say in English "keeping the peace" by capitulating to the whims and fancies of those around you. Shalom doesn't mean ensuring that no one is upset or put out. When those are the goals, something may be achieved. Catastrophe of some kind might be averted. Whatever one calls it, though, it is most assuredly not shalom – and it may come at the cost of creating a golden calf.

Real Shalom is how our sages portray the virtue of Aharon in the Talmud and Medrash. Privately, out of the limelight, Aharon is the אוהב שלום and a רודף שלום – someone who would shuttle back and forth between feuding couples and friends and attempt to bring them back to a place of harmony. For Shalom is always about a quest for שלימות – bringing a wholeness to that which is fractured.

Sukkos is the great celebration of Aharon's ethic – the ethic of שלום in its truest and most meaningful sense:

- It's all of the arba minim coming together.
- It's inviting in all the Ushpizin and guests to join us in our Sukkah.
- And it's about a messianic hope for future redemption and a time when the world will know the true meaning of שלום.

On Tuesday it was announced that the Israeli government had reached a deal with Hamas and that Gilad Shalit would go free. I'm neither a politician nor a negotiator and it's certainly not my place to weigh in on the equity or inequity of a particular prisoner exchange. But as members of the Jewish people, it most certainly is our place to react to his coming home.

Every time we've davened for Gilad and our other חיילים held captive, we've prayed that they be returned לחיק משפחותיהם – to the warm embrace of their families. And now the words of our תפילות have come to fruition.

זה היום עשה ה' נגילה ונשמחה בו.

Hashem set aside this day for rejoicing. And now we have a double reason to rejoice. First, because this is זמן שמחתנו – our great festival of joy. But second, because we have borne witness to a contemporary application of everything for which Sukkos stands. Until Tuesday, not just Gilad's family, but the entire nation of Israel, the entire Jewish people suffered from a chronic absence of shalom in the knowledge that one of our own was not with us.

They say the Tzaddik of Yerushalayim, Reb Aryeh Levin, once took his wife to the doctor when she was experiences a very acute pain in her leg. When the doctor turned to the Rabbi and asked what's wrong, he said: "Our leg hurts."

To be missing Gilad was for every one of us to feel the pain of his absence. And the inverse is most assuredly true as well: Each of us should share in the delight of his coming home.

The Gemara says that ארבעה מינים מעכבים זה את זה – if any one of the four species is missing, one cannot perform the mitzvah. But the Rosh writes, if someone has three out of four, they should pick up them up without a brachah as a זכר בעלמא – as a way of demonstrating that they have not forsaken the mitzvah entirely. The set is incomplete and as a result the full mitzvah is not possible. Less than whole, we move forward with a memory of that which is missing and a solemn hope that next year we will once again be complete.

For more than five years, this has been precisely our posture: Thinking of Gilad regularly, recognizing his absence, and hoping and davening for the day when he would we be שלם once again. Now that that day has come, let us pray that no such tragedy befalls our people again – that we remain שלם forever more.

ופרוש סוכת שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל

May the Lord protect us by spreading the Sukkah of peace over all Israel and let us say Amen.