

Sukkos Day I 5779

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The sixteenth century was the heyday of Venice Jewry. At the time, close to 5000 Jews were living in the Venice Ghetto, and while their quarters were exceptionally cramped, they enjoyed a vibrant cultural and religious life; many of the magnificent synagogues they built still stand today. But Venice Jewry was the target of many anti-Semitic acts; it was not uncommon that Jewish bodies were snatched on the way to the cemetery by representatives of the local medical school, which was desperately in need of bodies to dissect and which the Jewish community refused to supply. So regular an occurrence was this that the Ghetto had a special hiding place for bodies until the funeral. In his *History of the Jews of Venice*¹, Cecil Roth tells the remarkable story of another “kidnapping” that happened one Sukkos. At that time, there was only one kosher Esrog in the entire city; this was not an uncommon situation in Northern Europe, and apparently it happened in other communities as well, even in Italy, where some of the world’s most beautiful citrons are grown. The esrog was shared by the various Venetian

¹ 286-287

communities. One day, as the Esrog was being brought from the German synagogue to the Italian synagogue, it was hijacked by a rowdy group of students, who would not return it until they were paid a princely ransom!

This morning, we picked up the Lulav and Esrog for the first time, a mitzvah people are willing to go to great lengths to perform. But prior to shaking the Lulav, assuming no one has *fruitnapped* it, we did something unusual with the Esrog: We turn it over. Why do we do that?

Tosfos in Maseches Sukkah² points out a difficulty in the laws of shaking the Lulav and Esrog. Normally, we recite the beracha on a mitzvah *before* we partake of the mitzvah; before washing over bread, before lighting Shabbos candles, before eating Matzah. This is known as *over la'asiyatan*, or “before their performance.” There is a problem, though, when it comes to taking the four species. There is a halacha in connection with the Lulav called ביה בעידנא דאגבהה נפיק - the moment you lift the Lulav, you have fulfilled your obligation. Therefore, in the normal course of events, one would fulfill the obligation to take the Lulav even before making the blessing. The Talmud (Sukkah 42b) explains that there is a way to get around this: first hold the Esrog incorrectly, recite the blessing and *then* after turning it the proper

² 37b

way, wave it in all directions. This is a neat solution, and it explains this halachic curiosity. But my question is a simple one. What is the meaning behind this concept? Is there any other mitzvah that can simply be fulfilled by lifting up an object, even without a blessing? For example, you can't fulfill the obligation of Tefillin simply by lifting them, and you can't fulfill the mitzvah of matzah just by picking one up. Why is that the basic way to fulfill the mitzvah of lulav?

I'd like to suggest that the strong tactile component to the mitzvah of the four species is no accident. It is, indeed, an integral part of the mitzvah. The tactile experience presents us with several distinct benefits. Firstly, the idea that we are accomplishing something of sanctity with our bare hands is noteworthy. In fact, it is a theme of the holiday of Succot in general. For a few blessed days during the year, doctors, lawyers, professors, accountants and therapists find themselves aimlessly wandering the aisles of the Home Depot, asking help locating "the thing that fits into the other thing, that goes on top of the stuff".

Those who have not woven anything since summer camp 40 years ago, are tying their own *koyshiklach* for their lulavim, and our inner Michaelangelo is channeled as we prepare paper chains to be hanged around our huts.

The holiday of Succos is suffused with personal involvement, taking the mitzvot in our hands. One of the costs of an Orthodox life, beyond the

financial outlay, is that many people who are extraordinarily talented and handy, who might find great fulfillment in working with their hands for a living, are forced into one of the five or six acceptable professions due to economic demands. In doing so, they relegate their talent and passion for shopcraft to the garage or shed, as an expensive and occasional avocation. Even more tragic is the fact that there exists in our community and our people dozens of budding artists, musicians and builders who will never reach their potential, while their soul and talents wither behind the desk of yet another brokerage firm. Think about the people you knew growing up who never found their place professionally, who always sensed that they did not have a unique offering for the world - what if their *rebbeim*, their schools and their parents would have said - I see you're not much of a student in the classical sense, but you are an extraordinary mechanic, plumber, landscaper or electrician. These are honorable ways to make a living and, moreover, they might even be what a person was designed to do. Not every *bochur* is meant to sit within the walls of the Beis Medrash, but who knows how many of those "misfits" could have designed, constructed and plastered those same four walls.

In Monsey, New York, there is an innovative *yeshiva* called Shaarei Arazim whose educational methodology has become so sought after that an affiliate yeshiva opened recently in Chicago called Shaarei Adirim. Every aspect of

their curriculum is designed to empower each student to reach his maximal potential. Every boy who enters the ninth grade has a regular woodshop class in which they personally construct their own *shtenders* and desks! These aren't sloppy pieces of work, they are truly magnificent, each shtender with an original design and unique stain. When I was young we would do the opposite - abusing the desks of the school, carving our initials with a kippah clip or a ballpoint pen, purely out of boredom! I'm willing to bet that a Shaarei Adirim student has never defaced his own handiwork, and even more so, I am certain that studying at a desk you personally designed is an empowering experience.

I doubt if the the Ribono Shel Olam will ever ask us why we didn't earn our first million by the age of forty five, but I fear that among the other scathing indictments of our community, He will ask us why we didn't produce more Betzalels, or Mark Chagalls, or Daniel Liebeskinds, and why it has been so long since we've produced a Jewish carpenter... the general contractor for our beautiful new building, Chris, is a wonderful person, and devout- but in another faith; why couldn't it have been a *yid!*? Working with your hands is by no means a *be'dieved* endeavor, a compromise for the less talented and un-gifted or un-ambitious child - it is in fact a respectable, honorable and admirable pursuit.

A few days ago, a woman by the name of Anne Russ Federman passed away at the age of 97. She was the last remaining daughter of the famous fish monger, Joel Russ, who founded the venerable palace of herring, lox and other delicacies known as “Russ and Daughters”. The establishment is unique for a number of reasons; firstly, Mr. Russ had no sons, and so his daughters earned their names on the signage and on the name of the business. Parenthetically, in the year 1935, this was considered a bold and radical move, and was the very first business to have the words “and Daughters” in its name. It remains among the 1% of American owned businesses to have been passed down through four generations of a single family.

In the New York Times obituary³ an interesting anecdote was recorded. When Anne was a young girl, first starting out in the family business at age 14, it was not necessarily the most attractive of professions, especially for a young woman. You could only imagine that her social life was hampered by the fact that she and her whole family were accompanied by the constant odor of herring and sable. Nonetheless, she did ultimately find her suitor, as her son Mark wistfully reminisced. Mark then shared his reaction when one of his children left the family business to pursue a career in medicine: “As far as I know, I am the only Jewish father who was disappointed that his kid became a doctor,” ... “I was thinking sturgeon, not surgeon.”

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/obituaries/anne-russ-federman-dies.html>

This was the “house that herring built”, but it is not the only structure founded upon seafood and *shmaltz*. Our Sages tell us that one day we will all merit to dwell in the סוכה של לוייתן, a portrayal of the united Jewish people in messianic times. I always found the imagery a difficult one to accept - Messianic times are supposed to be pristine, idyllic and filled with sweet aroma in the air. I never imagine a bunch of Jews huddled in the stench filled confines of a fish carcass! Though perhaps the message is that the non-traditional professions, the artists, and craftsmen, tailors and all of those who work with their hands will play a crucial role as well.

Indeed, if we long for such times, and we truly want the **entirety** of the Jewish children to dwell in peace in one hut, we ought to consider that those who are able to get their hands a little dirty may have the cleanest hands of all!

As we take hold of our ד' מינים, let us pause to reflect on a source of blessing so seldom recognized in our time:

וַיְהִי נָעַם אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ כֹּנֵנָה עָלֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ כֹּנֵנָהוּ (תהלים פרק צ)