

Sukkos - Day 1

Spinal Tap

Our sages tell us that when calamities befall us, we should interrogate our actions. I believe it is the Shaloh, Rav Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz, who went as far as to draw a causal connection, based on kabbalistic sources, between specific physical maladies and corresponding spiritual ailments. As many of you know, I've struggled off and on for several years with back pain arising from a severely herniated disc. This past summer in particular, the pain was excruciating, robbing me of sleep and comfortable mobility. Many of you have provided really useful suggestions, recommending physical therapists, chiropractors and spinal neurosurgeons, as well as suggesting other curatives. I underwent physical therapy and then received steroidal injections; I continue to receive medical care and am, thank God, doing better- at least for now. In the midst of the physical pain I was experiencing, I decided to investigate the spiritual significance of the spine in Jewish thought and Jewish law. Indeed, one of the contexts in which the spine is most discussed is in connection with the lulav. As we are often taught, the Midrash tells us that the Four Species correspond to different parts of the human body. The הדסים, the myrtle branches, represent the eyes, the willow, the ערבה, corresponds to the lips, the אתרוג is the heart, and the לולב represents the spine.

But if we are to truly comprehend the profundity of this Midrash, it behooves us to delve into some of the particular *halachot* pertaining to a *kosher lulav*.

One of the primary *halachot* of the lulav is that its spine must be intact- if it is split down the center or at all broken, it is deemed *passul*. A backbone is literally and figuratively that which provides stability to the person. It goes without saying that a split or broken spine is catastrophic for the physical health of a person, which is true for one's spiritual health as well. Having a spine means that you have ideals for which you stand and upon which you will never compromise. As Jews, we cannot maintain a life with contradictory principles, like eating kosher in one venue and non-kosher elsewhere, celebrating Sukkos and then three weeks later going Trick or treating, or giving abundant charity while profiting from the misfortune of others. To quote the poet Patience Strong:

A backbone, not a wishbone, is the thing that you require

If you want to make your mark, and gain your heart's desire...

The second important feature of a lulav is that it has to be somewhat flexible; there must be three handbreadths so you can actually shake the lulav. It is important to be principled, but there must be some flexibility built in, or else that isn't being principled- it is being rigid and stubborn. Without a few *tefachim* of wiggle room,

people cannot maintain friendships, they have difficulty in their marriages, fail as parents, struggle in professional settings and have difficulty navigating the unexpected twists and turns life often has in store. Without flexibility, you will never experience some of the most delightful experiences that come from spontaneity and out-of-the-box thinking- like trying different items on a menu, getting away on short notice.

There is a third law of the spine of a lulav that is quite instructive- Lulav that is dry is not kosher, either. One of the symptoms of a herniated L5 is searing pain on one hand, but numbness in certain parts of your legs on the other. Just a few days ago, in the Ne'ilah prayer, we said the following words:

מְרַבִּים צָרָכֵי עַמֶּךָ וְדַעְתָּם קְצָרָה,

מְחֻסְרִים וּמְשֻׁאלוֹתֶם בִּלְיֹכְלוֹ לְסַפְּרָה,

נָא בִּינָה הַגִּיגְנוּ טָרֵם נִקְרָא,

הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא.

The needs of your people are great, and their tempers are short.

Their deficits and requests are too great to count,

Understand our cries before we call out,

God, who is great, mighty and awesome

In this prayer, we beseech God to grant the many requests that we have- even though we, ourselves, are not necessarily as compassionate. There are so many people in distress, so many needs that have to be fulfilled, so many charity campaigns and tzedakah drives that inundate our whatsapps and insinuate their way into our text messages. It is easy, and understandable, to develop what is known as “compassion fatigue,” a form of burnout that inures us to the suffering of others. So what do we do when we feel this way? One response that seems to be de rigueur is to engage in “self care.” While there is nothing wrong with this in some moderation, there is a risk that it can devolve into the avodah zarah of “me time,” where we grant ourselves narcissistic license not to care for others because it hurts our ability to care for ourselves. David Kessler, a renowned grief expert and founder of the website grief.com, found himself understandably out of sorts upon the tragic passing of his son. Despite providing invaluable resources for others going through the process of grieving, he didn’t feel he could carry this burden on his own, and reached out to a network of friends, mental health specialists and counselors. With regard to compassion fatigue, he asks:

*So how can we survive and even thrive in our world of caring for the wounded, the broken-hearted? The mantra I live by is this: **To feel too much is dangerous, to feel too little is tragic.** My job is to find the balance in that every day¹*

The lesson of the spine of the lulav is that we should not let it become devoid of feeling. If you find yourself ceasing to care, look around at your network- or look around for those who don't have one- and fill the void. There are people who know exactly how to spot a need and fill it; these are the eyes, the *hadassim*. There are those who know exactly the right thing to say- these are the lips, the *aravos*. There are those who have a heart of gold and perhaps the means to write large checks- these are the *etrogim*. Sometime before Rosh Hashanah, a few weeks ago, a sign went up in a store in Lakewood indicating that there were a few outstanding balances left by some needy customers. Within a short amount of time, the balances at this store were paid off by other customers. It went viral, and soon, customers in several other stores in other locations also found their balances paid off. How many different types of people were involved in this vast act of chessed? There were the administrators who noticed that an account was due- but it wasn't their job to pay it off, so they posted a sign instead. Not everyone who saw the sign could pay off the entire balance, but maybe had a few friends that could, so he or she spread the word. Even if one individual in the network had compassion fatigue,

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<https://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2021/12/10/5-ways-to-combat-compassion-fatigue-and-still-create-change/?sh=5476812fd17a>

there were others who could pick up the slack. It takes vision to see how all these components can be integrated- and that is the power of the lulav. True sensitivity doesn't mean shouldering the entire burden yourself- but rather harnessing the strengths of all those around us, as the lulav binds the different aspects of every Jew, and every type of Jew together. Let us learn the lesson of the lulav- of steadfast commitment to our values, of wisdom and flexibility, and of marshaling the forces required so we remain vital and compassionate.