



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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Sukkot Day 1

**Do You Have a Spine?
The Four Limbs of Joy**

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Do You Have a Spine?

ABSTRACT

What is the secret to true joy?

It is hidden in the mitzvah of taking the four kinds – the *etrog* (citron), *lulav* (palm frond), *hadas* (myrtle) and *aravah* (willow). That, the Torah tell us, is how we rejoice on Sukkot.

But the obvious question arises: How do these four species bring joy?

We can understand how giving *tzedaka* to help the needy can bring joy and happiness to both giver and receiver. How dancing with the Torah is a joyous celebration. How sitting with family and friends and partaking of a festive meal in a sukkah is celebratory. How making *l'chaim* and eating a slice of challah dipped in honey is a sweet act.

But shaking four species of flora? How does this organic deed have the power to elicit elation and joy? And how, as many ask, is this archaic ritual relevant to our lives?

Four powerful, spine-tingling and heart-warming stories, teach us how the four species mirror our very bodies, each representing a key limb of the human experience – the spine, mouth, eyes and heart. When we examine the nature and shape of these four species, we discover one of the most critical and relevant messages we will ever hear:

There is no greater joy than knowing that what you are doing is what you should be doing.

DO YOU HAVE A SPINE? THE FOUR LIMBS OF JOY

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1. New Parts (Joke)

Yankel was an *alte yiddele*, an old Jew. Yankel was bent over from his days working in the factory – he actually couldn’t stand straight. He was nearly blind from his reading the fine print of the Talmud – he actually couldn’t see a thing. He lost his voice and actually couldn’t speak from all those years yelling at his wife and kids. All of that made him a mean, angry, and cold old man – in other words, Yankel had no heart.

Over the High Holiday season, Yankel decided to change his ways. He went to the best chiropractor and got a new spine. He then went to the best optometrist, who did some Lasik laser magic, and viola, he could see again! Yankel went to the oral surgeon, acquired a new mouth, and suddenly he could speak! Finally, Yankel went to the cardiologist and bought himself a new heart.

All excited, with a new spine, new eyes, a new mouth, and a new heart, Yankel ran out of the hospital, sang a song, hummed a tune, did a dance – and was hit by a speeding truck.

Yankel went up to heaven. But Yankel was livid.

Standing before the heavenly court, smoke billowing from his ears, fumes poring from his nostrils, Yankel opens his new mouth and yelled: “God, what is wrong with you? Over the High Holidays I finally decided, after many years, to repent and return to the heavenly fold – I stand upright, I see, I speak, I feel – and this is how you reward me? You hit me with a speeding truck?”

The angelic judges of the heavenly tribunal all nodded their heads in unison. They turned to God. God looked at them. God looked at Yankel. Then God said:

“To tell you the truth, Yankel, with your new spine and your new eyes and your new mouth and your new heart, I couldn’t recognize you!”

Do You Have a Spine?

2. Oy Joy

Sukkot is the most festive of times in the Jewish calendar. We are flush with blessings, health and prosperity from Rosh Hashanah, and we are sealed in the Book of Life on Yom Kippur. By the time we reach Sukkot, every single limb in our bodies is new and in tune.

[Sukkot is also a time when we recognize God and God recognizes us.] And so we sit in a Sukkah and are merry. Sukkot is a happy time. *Z'man simchateinu*, “the time of our joy” – our joy with God, and God’s joy with us.¹

The Torah describes in detail one of the foundational acts of Sukkot, which it directly correlates with joy:

And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the beautiful [citron] tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided [myrtle] tree, and willows of the stream, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for a seven day period.²

The verse makes it clear that we rejoice before God by taking a citron (*etrog*) and palm frond (*lulav*), a branch of myrtle (*hadas*) and willow (*aravah*) – and by binding them all together (and giving them a good shake).³

But I cannot be alone in being mightily confused how this mitzvah brings joy?

We can understand how giving *tzedaka* and helping the needy can bring joy and happiness to both giver and receiver. We can understand how dancing with the Torah is a joyous celebration. We can appreciate how sitting with family and friends, and partaking of a festive meal in a Sukkah is celebratory, how making *l'chaim* and eating a slice of challah dipped in honey is a sweet act.

¹ Psalms 149:2. 104:31. Likkutei Torah, Shemini Atzeret 88d.

² Vayikra/Leviticus 23:40.

³ The Jerusalem Talmud actually calls it “*simchat lulav*” (*Talmud Yerushalmi*, Rosh Hashana 4:3. Sukkah 3:11. See Rashi Sukkah 43b.) In the Yerushalmi there is another opinion that the joy is connected with the special holiday offerings, but our discussion here is according to the opinion that the joy is from the *lulav* (which includes all the species), as inferred from the simple reading of the verse.

But shaking four species of flora?!

How does this organic deed have the power to elicit elation and joy?

And the big question that many ask: How is this archaic ritual relevant to our modern day lives?

3. Funny Bones

The latter question being even more pressing than the former, I would like to share with you an eye-opening, spine-tingling, mouth-watering, heart-warming Midrash:

R. Mani said: “*All my bones shall say, O Lord, who is like You*”⁴ – this verse was not said but for the *lulav* (palm frond). The spine of the palm is comparable to the spine of man. The *hadas* (myrtle) is comparable to the eye. *Arava* (willow) is comparable to the mouth. And the *etrog* (citron) is comparable to the heart. Said David: There isn’t of all the limbs greater than these, for they are equal to the entire body, thus “*All my bones shall say...*”⁵

This Midrash anthropomorphizes the four kinds – on their own, four items of flora – and turns them into four parts of the human body. The entire body, the Midrash implies, tingles all over with the performance of this mitzvah because it involves *all my bones*!

How so?

Take a look at the four species that we have with us here today:⁶

- The long, firm palm frond, with its center stem and pointed leaves, resembles the spine.
- The leaves of the myrtle branch are oval-shaped like the eyes.

⁴ Tehillim/Psalms 35:10.

⁵ Vayikra Rabbah 30:13. See also Zohar, Pinchas 256a (Raya Mehemna).

⁶ If you wish, you can actually hold up each of the species and demonstrate.

- The leaves of the willow branch leaves are shaped like lips, the doorways to the mouth.
- And the oval citron is shaped like the heart.

To explain further, and to demonstrate the relevance of this mitzvah to our every-day life, allow me to share four stories relating to the four kinds and their corresponding body parts.

4. Spine – Lulav

The first story:

One of the Chassidic masters of pre-war Poland was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Master of Piaseczno [pronounced Pia-setch-no]. In 1940, the Germans deported Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman and his entire family to the Warsaw Ghetto. There he wrote a moving book called *Eish Kodesh* ("The Holy Fire"), setting down the inspirational teachings he gave in the darkness of the ghetto. He buried the book in a milk canister under the ground. In 1943 he was shot near Lublin, and his entire family too was exterminated. After the war, his manuscript was discovered by a construction worker in Warsaw and was given to the Warsaw Jews. In 1957, someone finally realized what it was, and the manuscript was sent to Israel, where it was published in 1961.

Its beauty humbled people. Many wondered, "Where are those people? The precious children and adults who heard these teachings every week in the Warsaw ghetto?" It seemed like no one survived.

But one day, a few years ago, a Chassid was walking down Rechov Yarkon, the boardwalk street near the beach of Tel Aviv, and there he saw a hunchback, who looked so broken and crushed. His spine was bent as he was sweeping the streets. The Chassid said, "*Shalom aleichem*, peace unto you."

The hunchback replied in Yiddish, with the heaviest Polish accent, "*Alaichem shoolem*."

The Chassid asked if he was from Poland. And the hunchback said, "Yes, I'm from Piaseczno."

Piaseczno – wow! The Chassid asked if he had ever seen the holy Kalonymus Kalman, Piaseczno's Rebbe?

The hunchback said, "What do you mean, have I seen him? I was a pupil in his school from the age of five until I was eleven. When I was eleven, I went to Auschwitz. I walked into Auschwitz so strong they thought I was seventeen. Now look at me!" And he kept on sweeping the streets of Tel Aviv.

The Chassid asked: "My holy Jew, can you please share with me one of the Rebbe's teachings?"

"Do you really want to hear it?"

"Yes. And I'll share the teachings with whomever I meet all over the world."

So the hunchback began. "I want you to know that there never was such a Shabbos as this one in our childhood town of Piaseczno. We danced, hundreds of children, and the master was singing a song to greet the holy angels, and at the meal he would teach between every course. After every teaching this is what the Rebbe would say:

"Kinderlach, gedenkt zshe, de gresteh zach in der velt iz tuen emetzen a tovah – Children, remember! The greatest thing in the world is to do somebody else a favor."

The hunchback sighed. "I entered Auschwitz with my entire family. I was big, strong and upright. Every day, they would take me and whip me and beat me and kick me with their steel-toed boots – they broke my back and I never healed – that is why I look the way I do now. I have nobody in the world. My entire family was murdered. My body was broken. I was a cripple all alone and I wanted to commit suicide. But each time, at the last moment, I would hear my master say, 'Kinderlach ... do somebody else a favor. Do somebody a favor.'"

He looked at the Chassid directly in the eyes. "Do you know how many favors you can do in Auschwitz at night? People are lying on the floor crying, and nobody even has any strength to listen to their stories anymore. I would walk from one person to the other and ask,

'Why are you crying?' and they would tell me about their children, their wives, people they'd never see in this life again. I would hold their hands and cry with them. Then I would walk to the next person. And it would give me strength for another day.

"I want you to know I'm here in Tel Aviv and I have no one in the world. And I'm a hunchback, physically broken. And I take off my shoes, go down to the beach, I walk up to my nose into the ocean, ready to drown, but then I hear my Rebbe's voice saying, 'The greatest thing in the world is to do somebody else a favor. Remember, my precious children, the greatest thing in the world is to do somebody else a favor.'"

He stared at the Chassid a long time and said, "You know how many favors you can do on the streets of the world?"

And this hunchback, whose spine the Germans broke, kept on sweeping the street.

It was the end of summer and the Chassid had to go back to the United States for Rosh Hashanah. But when he returned to Tel Aviv, he went searching Rechov Yarkon, looking for the holy hunchback. The Chassid couldn't find him. He asked some people if they knew what happened to the hunchback who would sweep the streets?

And they replied: "Don't you know? His soul left this world just after Sukkot."

So, tell me, who do you think is more upright? Who do you think has a stronger spine - he who is a hunchback but spends his nights in hell doing favors for people, or he who stands upright but doesn't stand for anything?

This hunchback had the strongest spine in the world!

As you grasp the lulav, remember that its upright spine mirrors the true nature and power of a spine. Is your spine as upright as your lulav? Are you living up to your spine's true potential to be unwavering and fully committed to the values that matter?

This then is the first lesson: When you have a center, a spine, a foundational purpose, then nothing can break you!

5. Mouth - Aravah

The second story:

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, instructed several of his disciples to embark on a journey. The Baal Shem Tov did not tell them where to go, nor did they ask – they allowed Divine Providence to direct their wagon where it may, confident that the destination and purpose of their trip would be revealed in due time.

After traveling for several hours, they stopped at a wayside inn to eat and rest. Now the Baal Shem Tov's disciples were pious Jews who insisted on the highest standards of *kashrut*, so when they learned that their host planned to serve them meat as part of their meal, they asked to see the kosher butcher, interrogated him as to his knowledge and piety and examined his knife for any possible blemishes. Their discussion of the *kashrut* standard of the food continued throughout the meal, as they inquired after the source of every ingredient in each dish set before them.

As they spoke and ate, a voice emerged from behind the oven, where an old beggar was resting amidst his bundles. "Dear Jews," the voice called out, "are you as careful with what comes out of your mouth as you are with what enters into it?"

The mouth is the channel that allows things (like food) to stream into our being and touch our essence. And the mouth is also the channel that allows things (like words) to stream out of our very essence to touch the world. No wonder the Torah calls the willow branches (which mimic the mouth) *arvei nachal*, the "willows of the stream."

Does your mouth stream a message of hope and love? Do the words that pass your lips bring warmth and light to others, or are they harsh and hurtful?

As you grasp the *aravah* together with the *lulav* visualize your mouth, ask yourself if you are using your mouth for the purpose for which it was created. Are you as careful with what comes out of your mouth as you are with what enters into it?

The second lesson is this: When you bind the *aravah* to the *lulav*, when you bind your mouth to your spine, to your foundation, then the words that come out of your mouth express the foundations of Judaism and God, the foundations that keep us Jews upright!

6. Eyes - Hadas

Which leads me to the third story:

A blind boy sat on the steps of a building with a hat by his feet and a sign that read: "I AM BLIND, PLEASE HELP ME." There were only a few coins in the hat.

A man passed by. He noticed the paucity of donations the poor boy had collected. He took a few coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. He then took the sign, turned it around, and wrote some words on it. He put the sign back so that everyone who walked by would see the new words.

Soon the hat began to fill up. A lot more people were giving money to the blind boy. That afternoon the man who had changed the sign came to see how things were going. The blind boy recognized his footsteps and asked, "Were you the one who changed my sign this morning? What did you write?"

The man said, "I only wrote the truth. I said what you said but in a different way."

I wrote: "TODAY IS A BEAUTIFUL DAY BUT I CANNOT SEE IT."

True sadness is not merely a result of not being able to see. (After all, if we find ourselves witnessing a painful situation, we often want to close our eyes – we don't want to see). No, my dear friends, real sadness happens when the world around us is beautiful, is magnificent, is electric, and we cannot *open* our eyes to see it.

Says the myrtle whose leaves are shaped like eyes: Open your eyes to see the true beauty of your life. Never take for granted the power of your sight. Use your eyes well to see and look at the right things.

Since you were blessed with healthy eyes, use them to appreciate your gifts and blessings. As the Prophet Isaiah exhorts us: "Lift up your eyes on high and see who created these."⁷ And as the Book of Job declares: "From my flesh I behold God."⁸ Look at the world, at the flesh, and behold the Divine!⁹

Today is a beautiful day – just open your eyes. As you stand in the sukkah, or in *shul*, and as you bind your *aravah* to the *lulav*, realize that you aren't merely listening with your ears to a symphonic recording, but you are seeing with your flesh-and-blood eyes the symphony being played. Ask yourself: Are you realizing the true purpose of your eyes?

The third lesson: Joy is opening your eyes to the divine beauty and gift of life.

7. Heart – Etrog

And, finally, the heart of the matter – the *etrog* – and fourth story.

This story is about Dr. Howard Kelly, the distinguished physician who was one of the four founders of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

While hiking through Northern Pennsylvania one spring, Dr. Kelly became lost. Hungry and thirsty, he knocked on the door of a nearby farmhouse.

When a young girl opened the door, he became embarrassed and instead of asking for food, he asked for a drink of water.

⁷ Isaiah 40:26.

⁸ Job 19:26.

⁹ Reb Bachya writes in his *Chovot Halevovot* (Duties of the Heart) chapter 5: It is our duty to study the origins and birth of the human, the form and structure of his physical frame, how the various body parts are connected and function together, the purpose of each individual part and the need for it to take its present form. Next we should study man's advantages, his various temperaments, the faculties of his soul, the light of his intellect, his qualities -- those that are essential and those that are accidental; his desires, and the ultimate purpose of his being. When we have arrived at an understanding of the matters noted in regard to man, much of the mystery of this universe will become clear to us, since the one resembles the other... as Job said, "From my flesh I see God."

The girl thought he looked worn out. She invited him in, sat him down, asked him his name, and gave him a large glass of milk. When he asked, "How much do I owe you?" she replied, "You don't owe me anything," adding, "Mother has taught us to open our hearts and never to accept payment for a kindness."

Some years later, the same young girl came to his hospital for an operation. He was by then a famous surgeon in the field of gynecology and he was called in for a consultation.

When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes. He decided to take on her case. He went back to the consultation room determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to her case.

He operated on her successfully. And when time came for her to be discharged, he requested the business office pass the final bill to him for approval.

A few weeks after arriving home, the woman received the bill from the hospital. She feared to open it. She was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it all. She finally mustered up the courage, opened the envelope and, with a pounding heart, read what it said:

"Paid in full by one glass of milk." (Signed) Dr. Howard Kelly.¹⁰

The heart is the center of the body, of the human experience. It literally shakes things up and makes them pulsate with life, warmth and love.

As you take the *etrog* visualize your own heart. Ask yourself if you are using it for the purpose for which it was created: To be empathetic? To feel the joy or pain of others? To show love?

Many people in the world (not to mention your family and friends) could use your heart, your love. Are you using your heart to its fullest?

¹⁰This story is told in abbreviated form in Dr. Kelly of Hopkins by Audrey W. Davis, published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959.

When you take the spine, eyes, mouth and connect them all to your heart, the heart's love infuses all your other faculties with pulsating energy.¹¹ When you open your heart – literally hold your heart in the palm of your hand and give it a shake – the end result can change the world!

This, then, is the fourth lesson from the most beautiful fruit of the four species (*pri eitz hadar*): a beautiful heart transforms the entire person and has the capacity to touch, move and shape destiny.

8. With All Your Body

We can now understand the personal relevance of taking the four species, and how this mitzvah brings us deep joy.

There is no greater joy than in knowing that what you are doing is what you *should* be doing.

How often do we live in doubt, questioning whether we are involved in the right things, committed to appropriate causes, invested in suitable activities? Are we fulfilling our own unique mission, or trying to satisfy and please someone else's plans for us? Are we living up to our true potential and realizing the purpose of our lives? Are we doing what we should be doing, or have we wandered off course and are wasting our energies in the wrong place?

The four species – which mirror our own lives, our very own bodies – help us visualize the power of our own bodily faculties. They teach us how to align our being, how to bind the disparate parts of ourselves to act in concert and serve our higher calling, the purpose for which we were created.¹²

¹¹ Perhaps this is what the Talmud (Sukkah 34b) means when it says: An etrog that is stolen or dry is possul (unfit for use). An etrog, a heart that is stolen, a heart that is dry, not yours, not moist, not alive, that doesn't shake, that's doesn't beat, that doesn't pulsate, is not kosher. If you steal someone else's feelings, it is a disqualified heart; if your heart is dry, your service is blemished.

¹² See Talmud, Kiddushin 82a: "I was created solely to serve my Master."

This is the greatest possible joy: to know that our life, our very body and bones – our spine, mouth, eyes and heart¹³ – are all aligned as one with their true purpose.¹⁴

Indeed, the mitzvah of taking the four species expresses what we recite daily in the *Shema* prayer:¹⁵ “And you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might (and resources¹⁶)...”

In other words, we remind ourselves that we are meant to serve God in this world with all that we have ... with our entire being and body – with our spine, mouth, eyes and heart.

And when we do, we fulfill our mission in this world – whether like the hunchback, our spine is broken or whole, whether we have eyes to see, and certainly by speaking words of kindness and inspiration and by opening our heart in gratitude and love.

When we do that, we experience indescribable joy. The joy of knowing that we are using our being – our very body – to do what it was meant to do. For can there be any greater joy than standing proud, seeing the miracles in our lives, saying something nice and soothing to another soul, and loving one another?

9. The Joy of Sukkot

Now, I no longer question how the four kinds are the vehicle with which to rejoice with the world and God.

¹³ These are primary limbs, encompassing the entire body, thus they reflect “all my bones,” as cited earlier.

¹⁴ The Sefas Emes writes: Through these species Jews receive the inner joy of the holiday [of Sukkot], and to extend the joy throughout the year. We bind the entire body, as the Midrash says on the verse “All my bones shall say, O Lord, who is like You,” that the *etrog* is similar to the heart, *lulav* is like the spine, *hadas* like the eye, *aravah* like the mouth. This means: To bind all these organs to God. And these species help man do this. This is also the symbolism [of the four species] as weapons demonstrating that we are victorious in judgment, because the entire battle is with the negative forces that want to enslave the body and separate it from the soul. And [through the four species] the Jews are victorious to bind the body to the soul.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 6:5.

¹⁶ Talmud, Berachot 61b.

My foundation, my spine has been set straight, my eyes have been opened, my mouth has been touched, and my heart has been pumped.

At last I know what is so joyful about shaking the *lulav*, *etrog*, *hadas* and *aravah*.

These four kinds remind us of the parts of ourselves that are meant to join together to serve God in joy. As we are commanded: "...*You shall rejoice before the Lord your God for a seven day period.*"

So, today, tomorrow, for the next seven days, as we walk into the sukkah ... as we hold in our hands the spine, the eyes, the mouth, and the heart ... as we shake them back and forth, feeling the beat of existence ... let us all *rejoice before the Lord our God!*

Chag Sameach!