



SUKKOT

Day 2

In The Palm Of Your Hand: The Lulav That Pierces Heaven

September 25, 2018

WHY THESE FOUR SPECIES?

IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND: THE LULAV THAT PIERCES HEAVEN

ABSTRACT

Why are these specific species – the Etrog, Lulav, Haddasim and Aravot – the ones chosen for the mitzvah on Sukkot?

The Kabbalists offers us a fascinating answer. These species stand out from all others by virtue of the fact that they have a direct link to the divine “main power line” without any filters, intermediaries and administrators.

They thus empower us in extraordinary ways, including enabling us to triumph over every form of adversity and challenge.

Fascinatingly, the power of the palm (lulav) has carried over into the secular world – Roman culture, naval fleets, onto a coat of arms, and into the motto of the modern-day University of Southern California: PALMAM QUI MERUIT FERAT, loosely translated from the Latin as “let whoever earns the palm bear it.”

Grass and nature have a natural relationship with their Creator. The palm frond – the Lulav – holds the secret to a supra-natural relationship with our Creator.

As hinted to in a romantic verse from Song of Songs: I said: *Let me climb up (ehheleh) the palm tree, let me seize its boughs.*

Ehehleh – a secretive and revealing word – is the acronym for Etrog, Aravah, Lulav, Hadas.

1. Farmers Market

A *shtetl* farmer purchased an old, rundown, and abandoned farm with plans to turn it into a thriving enterprise. His dream was to plant date palms and produce the world’s sweetest dates. The fields were overgrown with weeds, the farmhouse was falling apart, and the fences were broken down. The farmer had his work cut out for him.

During his first day of work, the *shtetl* rabbi stops by to bless the man’s work and place Mezuzot on all the doors of the barns and farmhouse. The rabbi concluded with a blessing: “May G-d and you work together to make this the farm of your dreams!”

A few months later, the rabbi stops by again to call on the farmer. Lo and behold, the blessing had come true – the farm was transformed to a completely different place. The farmhouse was totally rebuilt and in excellent condition; there was plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on feed in well-fenced pens, and the fields were filled with date palm after date palm in neat rows.

“Amazing!” the rabbi says. “Look what G-d and you have accomplished together. It’s a miracle!”

“Yes, rabbi,” says the farmer, “But remember what the farm was like when G-d worked it alone.”

2. What Causes Things to Grow?

The *shtetl* farmer forgot one “little” detail: As much as he invested in the field, without G-d creating the earth with the power to grow vegetation, and without G-d blessing his harvest, no amount of human effort would yield any produce.

Indeed the Midrash expresses this idea in these intriguing terms: “Said Rabbi Simon: There isn’t a single blade of grass on earth that does not have a spirit in the firmament urging it on and telling it, ‘grow’.”¹

Obviously, G-d created the earth in a way that we – and the *shtetl* farmer – are partners with G-d in turning a field into a rich source of fruits and vegetable. We are charged with working the field, of sowing and planting, of watering, nurturing and weeding the earth, but nothing, not even a single blade of grass, can grow without its designated spirit enabling, empowering and encouraging it to grow. The ability and power to grow comes only from on high.

Reminds me of the dialogue between a self-proclaimed atheist scientist and G-d:

The secular/atheist scientist says to G-d: “Hey, we scientists have figured out how to make life from dirt, just as described in that book of Yours, Genesis.

G-d: Oh yeah?

Scientist: Yep

G-d: Show Me.

¹ Genesis Rabba 10:7.

Scientist: No problem!

The scientist started to gather some dirt, and just as he was about to start working with it, he was interrupted...

G-d: Hold it, stop!!

Scientist: What?

G-d: What are you doing?

Scientist: I'm gathering some dirt to generate life, just as described in Your book.

G-d: Get your own dirt...

We humans cannot create anything from nothing. We cannot create the dirt or the earth, which contains the power to grow things. We can only take an existing entity and maximize its potential. We cannot even create a blade of grass.

How poignant then are the words of the Midrash: "There isn't a single blade of grass on earth that does not have a spirit in the firmament urging it on and telling it, 'grow'"!

This alone carries an amazing lesson for us about the wonder of every detail in existence. Every time we see even a single blade of grass it reminds us of the divine spirit guiding its growth.

But we find an even greater message in the mitzvah of the four species that we bind together, recite a blessing over, and shake on Sukkot. These four species stand out from all other forms of vegetation.

As we read the mitzvah in the Torah: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the hadar tree (the etrog, citron), date palm fronds (lulav), a branch of a braided tree (myrtle branches), and willows of the brook (aravot), and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for a seven day period."²

3. The Secret Power of the Four Species

Why are these specific species – the Etrog, Lulav, Haddasim and Aravot – the ones chosen for the mitzvah on Sukkot?

² Leviticus 23:40.

The Kabbalists offers us a fascinating insight into the unique spiritual nature of the four species.

[optional paragraph]

The Kabbalists I am referring to are the Seder Hayom³, written by the 16th century Rabbi Moshe ben Machir, the Megaleh Amukot⁴, a 17th century work authored by Rabbi Nosson Noteh ben Shlomo Spira (1585-1633), and the Torat Chacham⁵, penned by the Kabbalist Rabbi Chaim HaKohen (1585-1655) (student of Rabbi Chaim Vital). The latter is cited by Rabbi Chaim Dovid Azulai, the Chidah⁶ (1725-1806). The Bnei Yissachar⁷, by Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dinov (1783-1841), also cites these sources.

They write:

While every single piece of vegetation on planet earth – from a tiny blade of grass to a mammoth California redwood – has its heavenly spirit, its mazal and angel, urging and enabling it to grow, the four kinds receive their sustenance and direction directly from the Divine “Source,” without going through any “intermediary interfaces.”⁸

Simply explained:

Two channels of divine energy manifest in existence. 1) Most creatures receive their energy via a series of layers, shrouds and garments, which diminish and conceal the divine energy within these beings. Think of it like electricity running into and energizing appliances, but to do so the energy has to be regulated and channeled through a series of circuits and breakers, and a complex network branching off from the main power line. If those interfaces didn’t exist, the unfettered energy would blow every appliance. 2) Then, there are entities that are directly plugged into the main energy source, without any filters and veils.

The former energy channel energizes most of the world. Every detail and fiber of existence has its corresponding respective “angel” and “spirit” channeling energy into it. Its existence and sustenance is subject to their filters and interfaces.

³ Kavanot HaLulav.

⁴ Megaleh Amukot Al HaTorah – L’Sukkot 67b.

⁵ Drush L’Chag HaSukkos 465c.

⁶ Rosh Dovid Parshat Emor.

⁷ Maamarei Chodesh Tishrei, 10, section 24.

⁸ See Torat Chacham ibid citing, as a basis for this idea, Zohar I 220a, that the four species are linked directly to the four letters of the holy Divine name. The Megaleh Amukot says something similar in the name of the Rakanti Parshas Emor. See also Beis Yosef on the Tur Orach Chaim 651; Taz 651:11 (14), citing the Rakanti.

The four species, by contrast, do not have a corresponding “angel” or “spirit”, but are directly “plugged in” to the main source, manifesting the Divine as it is in its pure essential form.

This profound insight into the four species offers us an amazing new take on the power and significance of this great mitzvah:

When you “take for yourselves” the four species and you draw your etrog, lulav, myrtle and willow branches to your heart, you are touching heaven itself! In the palm of your hand you are holding infinity – and plugging in directly to the “main power line,” without screens and veils!

This adds an entirely new dimension to the mitzvah of the four species. The mitzvah allows us to connect to the very essence of the Divine Source and channel that into our lives and our daily activities throughout the entire year.

Simple awesome!

4. Triumph Over Adversity

The question still remains: Of all flora in the world, why are these four species, which we bind and bless on Sukkot, infused with this unique power and connection – that they are directly plugged into the divine source?

The answer in one word is because the four species on Sukkot represent: **triumph**.

The Midrash explains the mitzvah of the four species with a parable⁹:

This commandment is a parable that describes two people who contend in a legal battle before the King. Although the two people were not informed in whose favor the judgment was issued, they can figure it out by looking to see who walks out still holding his weapons. Thus Israel along with the nations of the world face the Divine judgment on Rosh Hashana. We cannot tell which one emerged victorious, which is why G-d commanded ‘You shall take for yourselves’ ... You can see from the fact that Israel emerges from before G-d holding its palm leaves and citrons, its lulav and etrog, that Israel emerged victorious.

When people stand in judgment we don’t know what the verdict will be; whether they will be found guilty or innocent. But when we carry the lulav and etrog on Sukkot, which follows the judgment days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we know and demonstrate that we have triumphed.

⁹ Leviticus Rabba 30:2.

The lulav and the four species, which are sometimes all included in the word “lulav” (as in Mitzvat Lulav), is a tall palm frond, which resembles a tall weapon. The four species are our spiritual weapons empowering us to overcome any challenge. Lifting the lulav with the other species is a sign of triumph – like the victor lifting his weapon in the air.

5. The University of Southern California's Motto

In case anyone make be skeptical and may question this Midrash connecting a palm frond and the other species with victory, let me share with you an interesting addendum.

Not that all of you need this as support to the Midrash, but it's interesting to note that the Midrashic idea of a palm frond and other foliage being a symbol of victory and prowess has spilled over to modern culture. And of all places, in the Ivory Tower:

The University of Southern California's motto is: PALMAM QUI MERUIT FERAT. This is loosely translated from the Latin as “let whoever earns the palm bear it.”

USC's website explains: “The expression reflects the broad significance of palms, palm fronds and other branches of foliage as symbols of triumph, victory, ascension and regeneration in ancient times, and in particular may allude to the Roman custom of giving the victorious gladiator a palm branch as reward for prowess.

[The next three paragraphs are optional]

“One of the earliest references to the phrase is found in a small volume of Latin verse, titled *Lusus Poetici*, which was first published by English theologian John Jortin in 1722. Decades later, it became widely known as the personal motto of Horatio Nelson, a British naval hero who distinguished himself during the Napoleonic Wars. In 1798, after a spectacular victory over Napoleon at the Battle of the Nile, Nelson was granted the title of Baron Nelson of the Nile, and the words PALMAM QUI MERUIT FERAT were added to his coat of arms.

“Over time, the saying has been used as a watchword by diverse organizations ranging from athletic clubs to educational institutions such as the British Royal Naval School and other military academies as well as high schools, preparatory schools, and colleges and universities around the world. USC adopted the motto in 1908, when it was incorporated into the

design of a new university seal.”

The USC website goes on to explain how USC “has earned the palm” motto due to its steadfast commitment to strive for “accomplishment, righteousness and victory.” “By holding fast to its foundational self-reliance, “we-can-do-more” spirit... USC is not content to rest upon its laurels... USC is characterized by a keen desire to do even more tomorrow no matter how much we may have accomplished today... That goal is yet another palm, and USC is determined to earn it.”¹⁰

It’s quite intriguing to see how an ancient teaching in Midrash about the significance of the palm, known at the time only to Jews, has made its way into Roman culture, naval fleets, onto a coat of arms, and into the motto of modern-day USC.

6. *Ehebleh*: Go Up, Up, Up

No we can understand why the four species (unlike other vegetation) of Sukkot are “plugged in” directly to their Divine main power source, because we need the extra surge of strength and power straight from the source in order to achieve triumph and victory on Sukkot after being challenged and judged in the preceding Days of Judgment.

In conventional situations, in times of peace, we can receive our energy through the heavenly administrators – the regulating “angels” and “mazals” above. But when we are waging “war” – in this case a spiritual war – we need to evoke a direct link to the divine source, to help us triumph.

And this what we achieve on Sukkot when we take to ourselves the four species – and we bind, bless, lift and wave them – declaring and demonstrating our great victory after the judgment and challenges we have faced.

On Sukkot we celebrate the reconciliation and the renewed love we have gained on Yom Kippur, when G-d said “I will forgive as you have asked” for the grave sin of the Golden Calf – a love and connection that comes straight from the Divine Essence.

¹⁰ <https://about.usc.edu/traditions/motto/>.

7. *Ehebleh*: Go Up, Up, Up

This triumphant ascent is also inferred in the acronym of the four species – *Ehebleh* (which means, let me climb up) – *aleph, ayin, lamed, hei* – Etrog, Arava, Lulav, Hadas.¹¹

The four species allow us to ascend and *climb up* in a direct, loving relationship directly with G-d sans angels or spirits in between.

A little more explanation:

Two verses in the Torah use the word *ehebleh* (the acronym of the four species). But with two opposite meanings.

In the Torah portion of Ki Tisa we read: *The Lord spoke to Moses: “Go, ascend from here, you and the people... to the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... I will send an angel before you... because I will not go up (ehheleh) in your midst since you are a stiff necked people.”*¹²

In the Song of Songs we read: *I said: Let me climb up (ehheleh) the palm tree, let me seize its boughs...*¹³

The verse in Ki Tisa speaks about the aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf. G-d is not happy with the people. He tells them that when you ascend to the Promised Land, because you are a stiff-necked people I, G-d, will not go up (ehheleh) in your midst, but will instead send an angel to help pave the path to the land.

The verse in Shir Hashirim, which describes the intimate romance between G-d and the people of Israel, uses the word in the exact opposite context – describing how G-d and the people will be so close that *I said: Let me climb up (ehheleh) the palm tree and seize its boughs.*

These two verses reflect two types of relationships we have with G-d, the natural and the supra-natural. How does nature grow? Through angels and spirits. Every blade of grass has an angel whispering in its ear to grow. That’s nature. You don’t see G-d Himself because He works through, and is hidden within, His instruments.

On a “natural” conventional level our relationship is primarily with the divine instruments G-d embedded in existence. He sends us light and warmth through the sun, and oxygen through the air.

¹¹ Zohar III 283a. Tikkunei Zohar 13 (29a). See Rosh Dovid and Bnei Yissachar ibid.

¹² Exodus 33:1-3.

¹³ Song of Songs 7:9

This is particularly true when we transgress and fall out of G-d's favor. Then we write our own scripts and our errant behavior causes us to be vulnerable to the "elements" and subject us to the control of the "natural order." When we are stiff-necked in our sins and choose to deny G-d, then G-d says *I will send an angel before you... because I will not go up (ehheleh) in your midst.*

But after we do Teshuva and return from the sin of the Golden Calf on Yom Kippur (as hinted in the opening verse of that chapter in Song of Songs: "*Return, return, O Shulammitte; return, return, and let us gaze upon you.*"), after we reconcile and rebuild our loving relationship with G-d, then we bypass all the celestial angels and cosmic forces in between, and we receive our energy and strength directly from the Divine Essence.

And then *I said: Let me climb up (ehheleh) the palm tree.* With emphasis on the palm tree – the lulav, which includes all four species secreted in the word *ehheleh* (*etrog, lulav, badas, arava*), because these four species on Sukkot contain the power to climb up and connect us with the Divine Source of all sources, empowering us to triumph against all adversity and challenge, and heal even from the gravest sins.

The mitzvah of the four species on Sukkot demonstrates that we are not subject to the natural laws that govern the rest of the universe. That, by internalizing and drawing these species to ourselves, we are capable of triumphing over any adversary, and coming out victorious.

This is the profound level of divine growth and ascension which we are able to climb to and celebrate triumphantly as we lift and perform the Mitzvah of the four species on Sukkot – a victory dance that transcends the natural order, like the blades of grass and the trees around us, which are subject to their respective administrators, aka as administering angels.

8. Conclusion: A Mitzvah, A Connection.

Just as every single blade of grass has its spirit telling it to grow, every single mitzvah has its spirit driving us to grow. The unique mitzvah of lulav and etrog reveals the Divine source in all of nature.

When we look at a beautiful garden, or even one blade of grass, we understand that a higher force energizes it to grow and flourish. But that source of growth is concealed in many layers of spirit and energy. We don't grasp these different forms of flora in hand, make a blessing on it, and have a divine interaction with it.

By contrast, when we take the four kinds in the palm of our hand, we aren't touching nature – we are piercing heaven itself. True, the four kinds are natural things that grow, but when we bind them together and do the Mitzvah with them, make the blessing, and shake them we are revealing their connection to their Core Divine Energy Source.

And then we carry this awareness into the rest of the year, allowing us to recognize and be conscious – and revealing this level of the Divine in every blade of grass, in every flower, in every tree, and in every garden. Indeed, we learn to perceive the Divine essence in every fiber of existence.

This is how we transform a wilderness, a potential, a run down plot of land, into a flourishing garden – a home for the G-d Himself.

Good Yom Tov and Chag Sameach!

Copyright 2018 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others..