

Timely Torah from Rabbi Sam Shor

The Four Species: Joining Each Individual With the Divine

One of my favorite times of year is the period leading up to the Festival of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles or booths). *Sukkot* is also referred to as *z'man simchateinu*, the time of our joy. There are two primary rituals associated with the holiday of *Sukkot*, which contribute in some way to distinguish this festival as the 'time of our joy;' specifically to dwell in the *Sukka* (temporary booths) and the joining together of the *arba minim*- the four species.

For me, the few days leading up to *Sukkot*, are particularly meaningful. For many years now, I have had the good fortune to assist in the selection of the finest, most beautiful sets of *arba minim* for members of my hometown synagogue. There is something indescribable, almost magical when you find that perfect *etrog* for Mr. Goldstein, or that *lulav* that seems to call out Mr. Simon's name!

Obviously, when I share these sentiments with people, often they look at me a little funny. What exactly is it about the *arba minim*- the four species, that speaks to me so vividly? What exactly are we to learn, experience, and feel while performing this seemingly odd mitzva- of holding together a *lulav* (palm frond), an *etrog* (citron- a citrus fruit indigenous to the Mediterranean area), *hadassim* (myrtle branches) and *aravot* (willow branches)?

The Torah, in *Parshat Emor* (*Vayikra* 23:40) states;

"Ulekachtem lachem bayom harishon, pri eitz hadar, kapot temarim, va'anaf eitz avot, v'arvei nachal, usmachtem lifnei adonai eloheichem, shivat yamim."

"And you shall take, **yourself**, on the first day (of the festival) the fruit of the beautiful tree, palm fronds, boughs from thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for seven days."

There are many, many questions that can be asked about this one simple verse, but I'd like to focus on one specific question. Why the apparent redundancy- *"Ulekachtem, lachem- And you shall take, yourself...?"*

Our Sages in the *Talmud*, in tractate *Sukka*, explain the verse to teach us that the *arba minim* must belong to the person wishing to fulfill the *mitzva*, thus excluding a borrowed or stolen set of the four species as a valid option.

Many of the Chasidic masters suggest that the verse is teaching us that there is actually room within this *mitzvah* for subjectivity and individuality; that Mr. Goldstein might find an oval shaped, bumpy bright yellow *etrog* to be most beautiful, while Mr. Simon is more

concerned that his *lulav* be somewhat shorter, so that his grandchildren may have an easier time carrying it to the synagogue with him. We must select and take from the four species in a way that most resonates with our own individual senses and needs.

Rav Moshe Wolfson, in his important work *Emunat Etecha*, explains that the four species are meant to represent the four letter name of G-d. Rav Wolfson explains further:

*‘Perhaps the verse also means join **yourself** to the four species, allow the depth of your soul to connect, to become one with the divine.’*

The four species thus becomes a paradigm for how ideally we need to view each and every *mitzvah*- as opportunities to manifest our relationship with G-d, within the physical reality that is the world we live in.

Perhaps then we can understand the second part of the verse as well: “*usmachtem lifnei Hashem ...* “And you shall rejoice before G-d...” In the words of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev-“*What greater joy could there be, then to feel the existential pull of the Divine Spark?*”

The beautiful lesson of the four species, is that each one of us in our own unique way has the ability to become one with G-d, has the capacity to find our own unique path, to what Rabbi Levi Yitzchak calls the “*great joy of the existential pull of the divine...*”

With warmest wishes for a *Chag Sameach*,

Rabbi Sam Shor
Director of Community and Leadership Development