

Sukkot: Unity and the Role of the Aravah

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Sukkot: A Holiday of Unity?

A variety of sources attest to the prominent theme of unity on the holiday of Sukkot. The Talmud (*Sukkah* 27a) writes that from a halachic perspective, it is possible for the entire Jewish people to sit in one Sukkah, which some note is indicative of Sukkot's ability to metaphorically bring the Jewish people together. Moreover, it may not be coincidental that Sukkot is also the time when the mitzvah of *Hakhel* is observed. *Hakhel* requires the entire Jewish people to come together and learn Torah. Its fulfillment on the holiday of Sukkot may further reflect Sukkot's unique theme of unity.

Perhaps the most explicit source pointing to the theme of unity on Sukkot is in the *Midrash Rabbah* (Vayikra 30:12). The Midrash states that the four *minim* taken on Sukkot parallel four different types of Jews, as follows:

- **Etrog:** Both taste and smell - Jews with both Torah and good deeds
- **Lulav:** Taste but no smell - Jews with Torah but without good deeds
- **Hadassim:** Smell but no taste - Jews with good deeds but without Torah
- **Aravot:** No taste or smell - Jews with neither Torah nor good deeds

The Midrash concludes that Hashem commands the Jewish people to tie all four *minim* together, so that they can offer atonement for each other.

Despite the Midrash's clear encouragement of Jewish unity, the precise meaning and application of the Midrash is subject to debate. Is there a particular implementation of the value of unity that the Midrash is endorsing? Furthermore, Chazal record the *minhag* of separating the *aravah* from the other *minim* on Hoshana Rabbah and using only the *aravah* for the practice of 'chibbut' (striking the *aravah* on the ground).⁵⁶ This exclusive status that is assigned to the *aravah* is in spite of Chazal's identification of the *aravah* as the Jew who lacks Torah and good deeds. If unity is so important and its lessons so integral to the holiday of Sukkot, why is the *aravah* brought alone on Hoshana Rabbah? Finally, if one were to highlight one of the *minim* independent of the others, why choose the *aravah*!?

⁵⁶ See Talmud *Sukkah* 44.

What follows are three approaches in understanding the Midrash about the four *minim* representing four types of Jews, with corresponding explanations as to the significance of taking the *aravah* on Hoshana Rabbah. While not necessarily mutually exclusive, each approach highlights a unique facet of the message of unity in the Midrash.

Approach # 1: Understanding Unity

The Midrash clearly encourages a certain model of unity, one that involves an inclusionary stance towards others. The Midrash suggests that while the Jewish people is composed of a diverse group of individuals, the distinct and perhaps dissenting factions do not accurately reflect reality. Instead, the Jewish people is analogous to branches of a tree. While each branch has its own form, dimensions, and orientation, all branches actually emerge from one source.⁵⁷

Some proponents of this view explain that this form of unity is based on a mystical perspective that the Jewish people are united by a shared soul.⁵⁸ An interesting application of this idea is maintained by R. Moshe Cordovero (*Tomer Devorah*, 1:4). R. Cordovero suggests that the Jewish people are intrinsically connected by virtue of the link between Jewish souls, and that this notion underlies the halachic concept of *arvut* (mutual responsibility for one another) (see Talmud *Shavuot* 39a).⁵⁹ According to R. Cordovero, the interconnectedness of Jewish souls enables one to help others fulfill halachic obligations even in a case when one has no personal obligation, and also has implications for interpersonal conduct. If all share one soul, commitment towards the religious and personal well-being of others is amplified.

Based on this approach, it is possible to suggest why the *aravah* is highlighted on Hoshana Rabbah. Throughout Sukkot, the concept of unity has been celebrated in a plethora of ways. Perhaps the culmination of this message is an unequivocal statement that even the *aravah*, corresponding to the Jew void of Torah and mitzvot, is genuinely valued by and connected to the rest of the Jewish people. Indeed, the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 36a) records R. Meir's opinion that Jews retain their status as G-d's children even if they do not perform His will. Though certain actions cannot be justified from a halachic perspective, his presence should always be welcomed and cherished.

Approach # 2: The Importance of Influencing

The Midrash concludes by noting that the merging of the *minim*, and symbolically the merging of diverse Jews, results in each subgroup atoning for the other. Ramchal (*Mesilat Yesharim* chap. 19) cites this Midrash as proof that Hashem has no desire for the wicked to perish. "Rather, it is incumbent upon the pious to try and enhance their standing and to atone for them."⁶⁰ According to the Ramchal, this atonement is achieved, at least in part, by the more righteous positively influencing the spiritually impoverished.

⁵⁷ See R. Eliyahu Schlesinger, *Eleh Hem Moadai* pg. 416.

⁵⁸ See R. Schlesinger (ibid). Support for this approach is cited from *Noam Elimelech, Parashat Devarim*.

⁵⁹ See the commentary *ViHalachta BiDerachav* on the *Tomer Devorah* (ad loc) for an elaboration of this point.

⁶⁰ Translation from the Feldheim edition, pg. 141.

Others further develop the theme of the *minim* as representative of the spiritually-focused Jew influencing the less religiously-inclined. *Nezer HaKodesh*⁶¹ notes that curiously, the *etrog* is not tied together with the *lulav*, *hadassim*, and *aravot*. Rather, the three latter *minim* are bound together, while the *etrog* is unfastened and held in the other hand. The *Nezer HaKodesh* therefore posits that the atonement that is achieved must not stem from the influence of the *etrog*, which parallels the Jew filled with Torah and good deeds. Rather, it is the *lulav* and *hadassim*, neither of which possesses the pristine combination of both ‘taste’ and ‘smell’, that are bound with the *aravah* and positively influence their surroundings. Implied in this interpretation of the Midrash is that even the Jew represented by *lulav* and *hadassim*, even the Jew who has not yet attained absolute religious piety, has the ability to positively influence others.

What emerges is a most powerful lesson. At times, one may feel unworthy of serving as a positive role model, lest others learn from one’s imperfections. The Midrash counters this assumption by emphasizing that when an individual has spiritual bounty to offer, he or she should share this treasure with others, even if one has not yet achieved spiritual perfection. While one should always be striving for increased personal growth and should never idealize one’s personal flaws, it is incumbent upon all to have a positive impact and influence in any way possible.

This approach may highlight another perspective on the meaning behind the *aravah*’s solo performance on Hoshana Rabba. Though one may have learned and grown extensively under the influence of righteous and dedicated teachers, the goal is not to forever remain dependent upon mentors. The other *minim* promote the spiritual growth of the *aravah* throughout the seven days of Sukkot, but then, come Hoshana Rabba, they take a step back and empower the *aravah* to stand on its own. Similarly, the greatest teacher is not one whose students are so moved that dependency on the teacher is cultivated. Rather, the ultimate goal of education is, arguably, to produce lifelong learners with the disposition and skills to continue to learn and grow independently.

Approach # 3: An Alternate Read of the Midrash

A highly original and alternate understanding of the Midrash is offered by The Lubavitcher Rebbe (see *Likutei Sichot* Vol. 29, pg. 223-225). The Lubavitcher Rebbe challenges the simple reading of the Midrash, namely, that the *minim* correspond to Jews with and without Torah and good deeds. For example, the Lubavitcher Rebbe questions the category of the Jew who has Torah but no good deeds. One who doesn’t have good deeds cannot be viewed as truly and authentically possessing Torah. Instead, the Lubavitcher Rebbe assumes that all groups mentioned in Midrash possess knowledge of Torah and are morally upright individuals.

How, then, does the the Lubavitcher Rebbe understand the categories that are outlined in the Midrash? The Lubavitcher Rebbe suggests that the Midrash is not establishing categories based on the *presence or absence* of Torah and good deeds. Rather, it is highlighting differences based on the *nature* of the Torah and good deeds. Each person has a different set of qualities and characteristics through which he or she serves G-d. Each individual has strengths and

⁶¹ See *Otzar Michtivei Kodesh Chelkat Yehoshua* pg. 42-43.

weaknesses. The Midrash is not focusing as much on Jewish unity as it is on the value of alternate approaches to serving Hashem.

Some approach Torah learning and living with astute intellectual capacities. Others experience religious observance through the prism of their heightened interpersonal sensitivity. The Jew associated with the *aravah* may appear to be lacking in intellectual and emotional sophistication, and for that reason lacks “taste” and “smell.” However, such a Jew may possess a distinct and unique quality- that of a very powerful, albeit simple, connection with Torah and mitzvot. Throughout Sukkot, the Minim are brought together and many different ways of connecting to Torah are celebrated. However, it is natural that those decorated with badges and titles and awards receive the most attention and accolade. On Hoshana Rabba, we ensure that the quiet and simple *aravah* has not been overlooked. The *aravah’s* unadulterated simplicity in dedication to religious observance may not contain the elegance of the intellectually or emotionally sophisticated, but the unwavering commitment is dazzling in its own right.

Conclusion

The Midrash above states that the four *minim* are representative of four types of Jews, and through their unification, a powerful atonement can be achieved. Three approaches in understanding this Midrash have been shared, as well as corresponding explanations of the practice of highlighting specifically the *aravah* on Hoshana Rabba. These explanations can be summarized as follows:

	Application of Ideas to the Midrash	Based on the Midrash, Why is the Aravah Highlighted on Hoshana Rabbah?
R. Moshe Cordovero	All Jews are mystically united by one soul, despite different levels of religious practice.	Unequivocal statement that even the Jew void of Torah / good deeds is holy and special
Ramchal and Nezer Hakadosh	Importance of trying to have a positive influence on others.	After the <i>aravah</i> has been positively influenced for seven days, it is able to stand on its own and grow and succeed independently.
Lubavitcher Rebbe	All Jews referred to in Midrash learn and live Torah, but different people connect to service of G-d in different ways.	Don’t overlook or underappreciate the simple, committed Jew.

The Ba’al Shem Tov once suggested that each person must experience a personal redemption before the Jewish people can experience a national redemption. May we achieve our own spiritual success while inspiring others through our behavior. May we merit the ultimate unification of the Jewish people with the rebuilding of *sukkat David hanofalet*, the Beit Hamikdash, in Jerusalem, the *ir she-chubrah lah yachdav*, the city of unity.