

The Symbolism of the Arba Minim - A New Perspective

Rabbi Avie Schreiber

I. Introduction - The Mystery of the Minim

While walking the streets of Manhattan early one morning a few years ago, with my Lulav in hand, I felt more than ever the mystery of the Mitzvah of the Four Minim. As I noticed the many quizzical looks and double takes my Lulav was instigating, I imagined the questions people were probably wondering. “Why is this man holding a palm branch in his hand on his way to work on a random autumn day? And why is it in a fancy odd-shaped zip-lock bag? Is it his lunch?”

In truth, if asked about the Mitzvah of Lulav and Etrog, I think it would be difficult for most people to offer a clear rationale for it. As opposed to the Mitzvah of eating in the Succah, where the Torah articulates a reason for the command, regarding the Arba Minim the Torah gives no explanation at all.

Chazal help us by offering various symbolic meanings to each of the Four Species. By carefully analyzing the Arba minim, together with one of the well known Midrashim, we can uncover a deeper layer of meaning to the symbolism of the Lulav and Etrog.

II. Lulav and Etrog Questions

First, I would like to pose a few questions.

- 1) There is an interesting Gemara which discusses the identity of the פרי עץ הדר. The Gemara questions how we know that that the fruit described in the Torah as פרי עץ הדר is in fact an Etrog. One suggestion offered by the Gemara is that the word הדר, besides meaning beautiful, can also be translated as “one who resides.” With this understanding of the word, the Pasuk is referring to a fruit הדר באילנו משנה לשנה - that resides in the tree from year to year. Rashi explains that האתרוג דר וגדל באילנו שתים ושלוש שנים - the Etrog lives and grows on the tree for two or three years so that when new Etrogim are first developing, the mature fruit are still on the tree. Up to three seasons of Etrogim remain on the tree at one time.

Is this feature of the Etrog inconsequential as far as the Mitzvah is concerned or is there perhaps some symbolic significance to this phenomenon? If there is, what might that be?

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One of the ideas this Pasuk, (and therefore the Hadas), conveys is expressed by Rashi (based on the Gemara):

מי שהוא תלמיד חכם ובנו ובן בנו, שוב אין תורה פוסקת מזרעו. וכן הוא אומר (ישעיהו נט) לא ימוש מפיר ומפי זרעך ומפי זרע זרעך.

When a person believes strongly in certain ideals and he lives his life guided by them, then after a certain amount of time passes, those beloved ideals tend to take root, becoming a legacy of his family. The amount of time needed to stabilize one's ideals is three generations. When the moral code of an individual is upheld for a span of three generations, the moral code is likely to remain. Over the course of three generations, the family has internalized the values espoused, thereby granting them a measure of permanence. The values have been viewed from three different perspectives - the parent, the child and the grandchild, and each generation has incorporated them into its way of life. As a result, the ideals have been strengthened and are likely to endure long into the future.

This message is borne out by our forefathers. One forefather, apparently, would not have been enough to launch an eternal faith community. The Jewish family and nation was firmly established only after three generations had passed - Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

We can suggest then, that this is one of the messages of the הדס. The הדס reminds us to create a lasting legacy, to see to it that our value system - our commitment to Hashem and our love of Torah and Mitzvot - extends beyond our own lifetime and reaches out to the generations to come. If we are able to instill our values into our third generation descendants - to our grandchildren - then we will have emulated the משולש element of the הדס and the Jewish way of life we have embraced is sure to last.

IV. The Symbolism of the Lulav bundle

Let us take this idea a step further. The הדס of course does not stand alone. The הדס is part of a bundle which consists of the Lulav and Aravah as well. The Lulav, הדס, and Aravah are tied together and we hold this bundle (along with the Etrog) in order to fulfill the Mitzvah. The Aravot are referred to in the Torah as ערבי נחל - willows of the river. Since the Torah refers to them in the plural, we learn that there must be two Aravot. Even though the Torah refers to the Lulav as כפות תמרים - which is also plural, since the Torah writes כפת without the letter ו, we derive that we are to take and hold only one Lulav. In fact, the "oneness" of the Lulav

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seems to be of paramount importance. One of the flaws of the Lulav that is discussed in great detail by the Gemara and later Poskim is the split “תיומת.” This refers to a situation where the middle leaf of the Lulav is split in half, thus taking away from the unified characteristic of the Lulav leaves. What is the symbolism of the two Aravot and the one Lulav, bound together with the triadic Hadas?

If the Hadas represents transmitting our values to the **third** generation - to our grandchildren, then it follows that the Aravot, of which there are two, represent the second generation - our children. The Lulav, in turn, represents the first generation which means ourselves.

The Medrash which explains the symbolic meaning of the Arba Minim fits nicely with this approach. The Lulav represents the spine, the Aravot - the lips, and the הדסים - our eyes. Since the Lulav represents the spine, which is the most internal and essential body part of the three, it is logical that the lulav represents the person himself - the first generation. Contrasting the eyes to the lips, there is an interesting difference that emerges. The lips are used by a person to communicate and to connect with those close to him, in his immediate vicinity, whereas a person's eyes enable him to look afar and connect even with those at a distance from him. The Aravot, representing a person's lips, urge us to communicate directly with those in our immediate proximity - our children, teaching them Torah and passing on our Mesorah, as the pasuk says, ושונתם לבניך ודברת בם - Teach your children [Torah] and **speak** with them about it. The הדסים, symbolizing a person's eyes, represent one's grandchildren, whom he can behold even from a distance, and see them continue further along the course that he has begun to chart. As the pasuk says, וראה בנים לבניך “And you will **see** children from your children.” And so, when we take the three Minim - the Lulav, the Aravot, and the הדסים, and bind them together, we are praying that we will be zoche to be joined and bound together with our children and grandchildren in our common commitment to the service of Hashem.

V. The Symbolism of the Etrog

The Etrog and the Lulav, in a sense, are on opposite ends of a spectrum. The Lulav, a palm branch, if left on the tree, will grow and develop and eventually bear fruit - dates. Thus, the Lulav represents the **potential** for producing fruit in the future. The Etrog, on the other hand, which is the fruit itself, is the **final product** of the tree. The Etrog, therefore, represents the offspring that has already been produced. As such, both the Lulav and Etrog symbolize the

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current generation (the person holding them), but from different perspectives. The Lulav symbolizes the person as the potential progenitor of future generations. The Etrog symbolizes the person as the fruit of his forbearers' labor.

Let's develop this further. "עֲטֶרֶת זְקֵנִים - בְּנֵי בָנִים"- "The crown of the grandfather is his grandchildren..." Halachically speaking, the Etrog can be divided into three main sections. One section is the upper portion of the Etrog known as the Chotem. This culminates at the very top of the Etrog which is often capped off with the Pitom. The second section is the main body of the Etrog. The third part is the bottom of the Etrog - mainly the stem - called the עוקץ. Each of these parts has unique halachot that pertain to it. (In fact, perhaps the phrase in the Torah - הדר - עץ פרי hints to these three sections. פרי refers to the midsection of the Etrog where the fruit is. עץ refers to the עוקץ - the stem where it was attached to the tree. הדר - beauty - refers to the "crown" of the Etrog, the Chotem and the Pitom, which lend the Etrog its distinctive look.)

Based on this we can suggest that the upper portion of the Etrog, which is the final stage in its development, and which contains the Pitom - the crown of the Etrog, represents the person himself (the one doing the Mitzvah - the third generation descendant of the ancestor). The main body of the Etrog symbolizes one's parents - the generation which directly produced him. The עוקץ, the stem, represents his forbearers- the generation that began the process which ultimately led to this person's existence.

The typical person, in his lifetime, is part of a chain consisting of five generations. Every person is a bridge between generations past and generations in the future. He is influenced by his parents and by his grandparents, and in turn he shapes the lives of his children and grandchildren. We are suggesting that while the the Lulav, Hadasim and Aravot represent three generations going forward, the Etrog represents three generations looking back.

And so, as we grasp the Etrog together with the Lulav, Hadasim, and Aravot, we are emphasizing the importance of serving as the link between our past and our future. The Etrog reminds us to look retrospectively and to realize that we are the products of the great efforts our parents and grandparents took to instill Torah values within us. The Lulav bundle reminds

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us to look forward and realize the great responsibility we have to advance our mesorah to the next generations.

It is interesting that when taking out the Arba Minim, the widespread *minhag Yisrael* is to first hold the Etrog upside down, say the bracha of *al netilat luav*, and only then turn it right side up. We do this so that the *bracha* on the Lulav and Etrog is recited before we fulfill the Mitzvah - עובר לעשייתן. Even though there are a number of other suggestions offered by the *poskim* for how to delay the fulfillment of the Mitzvah in order to say the *bracha* first, the practice of holding the Etrog upside down has become the accepted method by most. When we think about this practice, it is actually a little odd. It is the only situation (as far as I know) where the item used for the Mitzvah - the חפצא של מצוה - is deliberately held upside down at some point leading up to the performance of the Mitzvah. Based on our analysis, we can suggest that there is an underlying meaning to this practice. By holding the Etrog upside down, the first thing we see is the עוקץ of the Etrog. As if to say that before beginning this Mitzvah, we should notice the stem - the source of the Etrog, representing our source as well. Before we fulfill the Mitzvah of the Arba Minim, before we pray for the merging and continuity of generations, we should take note of our origins - of the generations that preceded us - and the role they played in this process.³

VI. Tying it all Together

Now, Let's return to our original 4 questions.

- 1) The unique botanical feature of the Etrog, namely that it remains on the tree for two or three years, dovetails with the idea that the Etrog represents intergenerational connection, and three generations in particular. Each new seasonal crop of the Etrog lives side by side with the product of two earlier seasons. This reminds us to be aware of our ancestors - of where we are from.⁴

³ Thank you to my wife, Navi, for thinking of and sharing this insight with me.

⁴ This may also relate to the Rashi's description of another unique feature of the Etrog tree. Rashi says that : עץ שטעם עצו ופריו שנה : פרי עץ הדור - the taste of the tree is like the taste of the fruit. Symbolically, this is saying that the Etrog represents the idea that the offspring and the ancestor are alike. It represents the continuity of generations.

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- 2) We now understand the symbolic significance of the particular amounts that are required for each of the Minim. One lulav, Two Aravot, three hadasim symbolize the influence a person has on the second and third generations that follow him.
- 3) We can now understand why the Lulav, Hadasim, and Aravot are distinct from Etrog. The Lulav bunch represent three generations forward and the Etrog, three generations back.
- 4) We can understand the term לדורותיכם in a new way. The Torah is saying that on the holiday of Succot in particular, you should be concerned with “your generations” meaning the generations that you specifically are connected with, i.e. the two generations ahead and the two generations behind.

VII. Conclusion

The message of the Arba Minim - the importance of linking generations together is also expressed by the Holiday of Succot in general. While Pesach marks the formation of K'lal Yisrael, Succot is about its survival in the desert and beyond. Pesach teaches us about a moment in time; Succot represents a span of time extending into the future. The experience of the Jewish people finding shelter in the Succot lasted for years. It lasted for **generations**. Succot is unique among the holidays in that more than one generation of K'lal Yisrael experienced the original events that spurred the creation of the holiday. Over the course of their travels in the desert, one whole generation passed away and a new generation arose - both generations seeking shelter in the Succot. The Mesorah, the Jewish commitment to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, was passed from one generation to the next. Thus, the holiday of Succot represents the survival and continuity of the Jewish people over the course of generations.

An interesting idea found in various sources is that each of the Shalosh Regalim represents and corresponds to one of the Avot. Pesach corresponds to Avraham, Shavuot to Yitzchak, and Succot to Yaakov. Various insights are offered to explain this symbolism. Based on what we have been saying, it is precisely fitting for Succot to be aligned with Yaakov. Yaakov was the only one of the Avot who had a Jewish grandfather and who had a relationship with his grandchildren - Ephraim and Menashe. Yaakov was the link between past generations and

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future generations. He stood in the middle of five generations and bridged the expanse- the eternal values held dear by Avraham had indeed passed through Yitzchak and then Yaakov and landed firmly in the hearts and minds of Yakov's children and grandchildren. As we grasp the Four Minim in our hands and wave them in praise of Hashem, we think of Yakov's accomplishment and we pray that we too will succeed in internalizing the Torah way of life our ancestors lived, and in turn, instill this way of life into the lives of our children and grandchildren.