

Sukkos

Simcha, Humility, and the Four Minim

A reflection on the joy of Sukkos through the Rambam and Rashbam

The Rambam has a very interesting way of understanding the pasuk describing the mitzvah of the ארבעה מינים:

“ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ הדר כפת תמרים וענף עץ עבת וערבי נחל, ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים.”
ויקרא כ"ג:מ'

In his Sefer HaMitzvos, the Rambam describes the mitzvah in striking language:

“היא שצונו ליטול לולב ולשמוח בו לפני ה' שבעת ימים.”

The Rambam does not simply say that we are commanded to take the lulav. He describes the mitzvah as “ליטול” — to take the lulav and rejoice with it.

He then explains that the seven-day Torah obligation applies specifically in the Mikdash, whereas outside the Mikdash the Torah obligation applies only on the first day. But the formulation itself is revealing: ...ולקחתם לכם. ושמחתם. Part of the mitzvah of taking the lulav and esrog involves an element of joy and simcha.

One can suggest that this idea is expressed in a number of different places. It may explain why the shaking of the lulav takes place specifically in the context of **Hallel**. The lulav is not simply something we take and hold. Its mitzvah is bound up with praise, thanksgiving, movement, and joy. The נענועים become an expression of the simcha inherent in the mitzvah itself.

SUKKOS AS THE FESTIVAL OF SIMCHA

Obviously, the theme of joy is central to Sukkos more generally. The Torah says:

“והיית אף שמחה.”
דברים ט"ז:ט"ו

Sukkos also contains the unique experience of the השואבה בית שמחת, about which the Mishnah says:

“כל מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה, לא ראה שמחה מימיו.”

The Rambam himself emphasizes that Sukkos possesses a unique level of joy in the Mikdash:

“אף על פי שכל המועדות מצוה לשמוח בהן, בחג הסוכות היתה במקדש שמחה יתירה, שנאמר: ושמחתם לפני ה' אלקיכם שבעת ימים.”

Sukkos, then, is not merely another Yom Tov on which there is a mitzvah of simcha. There is a שמחה יתירה, a heightened joy, that is somehow distinctive to Sukkos.

But at the end of Hilchos Lulav, the Rambam seems to go further. He does not merely describe the obligation to rejoice; he also seems to tell us how a person can actually attain this level of simcha.

And if one looks closely, he effectively says: through **humility**.

HUMILITY AS THE PATH TO JOY

The Rambam writes:

“השמחה שישמח אדם בעשיית המצוה ובאהבת האל שצוה בהן, עבודה גדולה היא.”

But immediately afterward, he identifies the obstacle to that joy:

“וכל המגיס דעתו וחולק כבוד לעצמו ומתכבד בעיניו במקומות אלו — חוטא ושוטה.”

He then presents the opposite:

“וכל המשפיל עצמו ומקל גופו במקומות אלו — הוא הגדול המכובד העובד מאהבה.”

The contrast is striking.

On the one hand stands the person who is מגיס דעתו, focused on his own dignity, honor, and status. On the other stands the person who is משפיל עצמו, capable of lowering himself in the service of Hashem.

It is specifically the second person who can truly rejoice.

The Rambam illustrates this through Dovid HaMelech.

When the Aron was brought to Yerushalayim, the Navi describes:

“וְדָוִד מְכַרְכֵּר בְּכָל עֹז לִפְנֵי ה', וְדָוִד חָגֹר אֶפֻּד בָּד. שְׂמוּאֵל בִּי וְיִי”ד

Dovid is the king, yet at this moment he does not emphasize his kingship. He is מְכַרְכֵּר בְּכָל עֹז לִפְנֵי ה' — dancing exuberantly before Hashem.

The Malbim explains that Dovid deliberately put aside the external dignity of royalty:

“בטל כבודו מפני כבוד ה'... שהיה חגור אפוד בד כלבוש הכהנים ועובדי ה', לא לבוש מלכות, שלא להראות גאווה לפני ה'.”

Dovid is expressing himself fundamentally not as the king, but as an עבד ה'.

When Michal criticizes him, Dovid responds:

“וְנִקְלָתִי עוֹד מִזֹּאת, וְהִיטִי שֶׁפֶל בְּעֵינַי.” שְׂמוּאֵל בִּי וְיִי”ב

And it is precisely this pasuk that the Rambam quotes:

“וכן דוד מלך ישראל אמר: ‘ונקלותי עוד מזאת והייתי שפל בעיני.’ ואין הגדולה והכבוד אלא לשמוח לפני ה', שנאמר: ‘והמלך דוד מפזז ומכרכר לפני ה'.’”

The irony is powerful.

Dovid lowers himself, and the Rambam says that **this itself is true greatness**.

The person who is preoccupied with protecting his dignity loses the capacity for this joy. The person who is willing to put himself aside can experience it.

In a sense, the Rambam seems to indicate that simcha is almost a natural feeling that a person is capable of experiencing. The problem is that when a person becomes too focused on himself — on his ego, his dignity, and how he appears to others — he prevents that natural feeling from coming to fruition.

Humility does not merely produce simcha. It removes the barrier that prevents simcha from emerging.

One can suggest that the joy that comes from humility also stems from recognizing that one's purpose is directed toward something higher than oneself. That recognition gives life its ultimate meaning. In relation to HaKadosh

Baruch Hu, this is the ultimate expression of humility: recognizing that we were created for His service and that our identity is ultimately subsumed within serving Him.

That is what Dovid HaMelech expresses. He is the king, but before HaKadosh Baruch Hu his deepest identity is as an עֶבֶד ה' . And דווקא through that humility, he is able to attain this tremendous joy.

THE SUKKAH AND THE FOUR MINIM

One can suggest that the experience of simcha represented by the מִינִים אַרְבַּע comes about, ironically — or perhaps precisely — through the context of the **sukkah itself**.

There is an obvious question regarding Sukkos: what is the relationship between its two central mitzvos? Why do the sukkah and the מִינִים אַרְבַּע belong to the same Yom Tov?

The answer may lie in this very idea of simcha.

The Rashbam has a remarkable explanation of the purpose of sitting in the sukkah.

He begins with the fact that Sukkos occurs specifically at the time of the harvest:

“חג הסוכות תעשה לך באספך מגרנך ומיקבך — באספך את תבואת הארץ ובתיכם מלאים כל טוב, דגן ותירוש ויצהר.”

Precisely when a person has finished gathering his produce, when his home and storehouses are full, the Torah tells him to leave that home and enter a temporary dwelling.

Why?

The Rashbam explains:

“למען תזכרו כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל במדבר ארבעים שנה, בלא יישוב ובלא נחלה; ומתוך כך תתנו הודאה למי שנתן לכם נחלה ובתים מלאים כל טוב.”

The sukkah forces the Jew to remember a very different existence: forty years in the desert, “בלא יישוב ובלא נחלה.”

The Rashbam then explicitly identifies what the Torah is trying to prevent:

“ואל תאמרו בלבבכם: כחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה.”

The danger arises specifically when everything has gone well.

A person has completed his harvest. His house is full. He looks around at everything he has built and naturally begins to view it as the product of his own efforts.

Therefore, at precisely that moment, the Torah commands him to leave his permanent home.

As the Rashbam concludes:

“ולכך יוצאים מבתים מלאים כל טוב בזמן אסיפה ויושבין בסוכות... לבלתי רום לבבו על בתיהם מלאים כל טוב, פן יאמרו ידינו עשו לנו את החיל הזה.”

The sukkah is therefore an antidote to רום לבבו.

It gives a person historical context. We remember the hardships and vulnerability of the desert, when we had no permanent dwelling and no independent security, and how HaKadosh Baruch Hu cared for us there. That memory then carries forward into times of prosperity and reminds us that even now, everything comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

FROM THE SUKKAH TO THE LULAV

It is specifically within this context that the experience of the **ארבעה מינים** becomes meaningful.

The **ארבעה מינים** represent the produce of the land, the success of the harvest, and the bounty of the year. Sukkos occurs at the time of **אסיף**, when a person is surrounded by the visible fruits of his success.

That success must be translated into a sense of gratitude to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and a recognition of the purpose for which that wealth has been given.

The sukkah gives that success its proper context.

A person first leaves his permanent home and remembers his vulnerability. He remembers that Klal Yisrael once had no houses, no land, and no harvest. Everything depended visibly upon HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Then he takes the products of his success themselves — the **ארבעה מינים** — into his hands.

But now he holds them differently.

They are no longer simply symbols of human accomplishment. They become instruments of thanksgiving and joy before Hashem:

“ליטול לולב ולשמוח בו לפני ה'.”

The very abundance that could have produced **כחי ועוצם ידי** is transformed into a vehicle of simcha.

This brings us back to the Rambam at the end of Hilchos Lulav.

The Rambam tells us that the obstacle to genuine joy is:

“המגיס דעתו וחולק כבוד לעצמו ומתכבד בעיניו.”

And the Rashbam tells us that the sukkah is designed:

“לבלתי רום לבבו.”

The parallel is striking.

The sukkah creates the humility that allows a person to experience the simcha of the **ארבעה מינים** properly. It reminds him that the success of the year is not **כחי ועוצם ידי**, but something that comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

That humility itself is part of the joy. A person recognizes that his purpose is directed toward something higher than himself, and that gives his life its ultimate meaning. In relation to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, this is the ultimate sense of humility: recognizing that we were created for His service and that our identity is really subsumed within serving Him.

That is what Dovid HaMelech expresses as well. He is the king, but before HaKadosh Baruch Hu his identity is as an **עבד ה'.** And **דווקא** through that humility, he is able to attain this tremendous joy.

The sukkah gives us that perspective, and the **ארבעה מינים** then allow the success of the year to be translated into joy and thanksgiving to HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Perhaps this is also part of the connection between these two central mitzvos of Sukkos, and perhaps it gives additional meaning to the minhag of some to take the **ארבעה מינים** specifically in the sukkah. Both are centered around the same idea: how a person attains the unique simcha of Sukkos.

First, through humility and the recognition that everything comes from HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

And then, by taking that very success and rejoicing with it before Him:

“ליטול לולב ולשמוח בו לפני ה'.”