



SUKKOT

A Thousand *Etrogim* Cannot Replace One *Aravah*

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It was Sunday, September 29, 1963, the eleventh of Tishrei, the day after Yom Kippur.

A young Rav Yoel Bin Nun had just completed his first forty days of study at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav in Jerusalem. Before returning to Haifa for Sukkot, he went to say goodbye to his rebbe, Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, who lived in Geulah, and accompanied him on the walk back to the yeshiva, as Rav Tzvi Yehuda had difficulty walking.

As they approached Kikar Shabbat, they encountered a large public chareidi rally. Suddenly, Rav Tzvi Yehuda grabbed the young Rav Yoel's hand and began walking with extraordinary speed. Rav Yoel would later describe him as moving almost as though he were fleeing from a fire.

Only once they had passed the square and reached Rechov Strauss did Rav Tzvi Yehuda slow down. Catching his breath, he turned to Rav Yoel and offered an extraordinary reflection.

There are Jews, he explained, who resemble the *etrog*.

The *etrog* possesses both taste and fragrance. In the famous rabbinic symbolism of the Four Species, it represents those blessed both with Torah learning and with mitzvot.

But then Rav Tzvi Yehuda asked a simple question.

With what did the Jewish people encircle the altar in the Beit HaMikdash during Sukkot?

Was it with *etrogim*?

No!

It was with the *aravah*.

The willow possesses neither taste nor fragrance. Rabbinic tradition sees it as representing Jews who may appear to possess neither Torah scholarship nor an impressive record of religious observance. And yet it was the *aravah* that encircled the altar during the holiday of Sukkot (Sukkah 4:5).

Then Rav Tzvi Yehuda made the statement that Rav Yoel Bin Nun would never forget:

A thousand *etrogim* cannot replace one *aravah*.



Indeed, to this day, *Aravot* trees adorn the entrance of Rav Yoel Bin Nun's home—a loving living reminder of that encounter. Each year before Sukkot a sign adorns the trees offering all who wish to come and cut *aravot*.

The message goes to the heart of Sukkot.

Religious life can tempt us to create a hierarchy of Jewish worth. We naturally admire the "*etrogim*": those whose Torah knowledge is profound, whose mitzvah observance is meticulous, whose lives emit the fragrance of religious devotion.

But admiration becomes dangerous when it leads us to conclude that those who do not look like the *etrog* are somehow dispensable.

They are not.

The *aravah* is not a deficient *etrog*; it has its own place in the service of God. Remove the *aravah* from the Four Species, and the mitzvah itself is incomplete.

After the spiritual grandeur of Rosh HaShanah, when God is enthroned above us, and the humility of Yom Kippur, when we stand before Him, Sukkot reminds us to make room for God in this world, to find God among the ordinary.

That is why we leave our permanent homes and construct a new dwelling – from simple materials, creating something sacred in the process.

Our tefillot expand this idea: *Ufros aleinu sukkat shlomecha* — "Spread over us Your sukkah of peace."

Such peace can only be achieved when we embrace the other.

It is easy to build community with those who look like us; far harder to recognize the holiness of those who do not. The greatest threats to the Jewish people are not only those that come from without, but also those that emerge from within.

The moment one group of Jews begins to believe that another group is unnecessary, we endanger something fundamental about the Jewish people.

The Four Species can only fulfill their purpose when they are held together.

So too with the Jewish people.

This vision extends even beyond the Jewish people.

The Sukkot offerings in the Beit HaMikdash were understood by our Sages as having significance for all the nations of the world. At the very moment when we celebrate the particular covenant



between God and the Jewish people, the Torah asks us to maintain concern for humanity, by offering sacrifices for all nations.

Sukkot teaches us that particularism need not produce isolation, and religious conviction need not lead us to diminish those who are different from us.

The Jewish people can only fulfill its mission when we remember the lesson Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook taught a young student on the streets of Jerusalem more than sixty years ago: We need the *etrog*, with its Torah, its fragrance and its beauty.

But we also need the *aravah*.

For a thousand *etrogim* cannot replace even one.