

REACHING GOD WITH THE *LULAV*

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EACH AUTUMN, IN the days preceding Sukkot, a pilgrimage of sorts winds its way to the intersection of Essex Street and East Broadway in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Hordes of individuals from diverse Jewish backgrounds converge there to procure their *lulav* and *etrog*, which together make up the *arba minim*, the four species mentioned by the Torah (Leviticus 23:40). The streets bustle with temporary market stalls, consisting of makeshift tables and rental trucks, and the air crackles with electric excitement for the upcoming holiday.

Selecting a *lulav* and *etrog* can be a beautiful ceremony that transcends any other experience of purchasing fruit and plants. It represents a preparatory act for a deeply religious observance, occurring at a time that profoundly influences the spiritual course of the year, and it carries a palpable sense of tradition, informed by echoes of Jews patronizing markets just like these around the globe for centuries. Choosing one's set of *arba minim* can feel intensely holy.

But waving them around on Sukkot—that can be altogether different. This ritual can feel confusing, maybe silly or childish,¹ perhaps even pagan. Many of us experience a great deal of anticipation to a moment which, with *lulav* and *etrog* in hand, falls flat.

So what's going on here? How might we rediscover holiness within the act of shaking our *lulav* and *etrog*? What deeper meaning can we strive for in this ritual?

Based on the Talmud (Sukkah 37a-38a), the Rambam (Hilkhos Shofar ve-Sukkah ve-Lulav 7:9) codifies that *na'anu'im*, the act of shaking the *lulav*, is

an essential part of fulfilling the *mitzvah*. Even though the blessing is “על נטילת לולב - on taking the *lulav*,” the *mitzvah* can only be performed by shaking.

But why is the shaking so important? Neither the Gemara nor the Rambam tell us.

R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Gur, the 19th century Hasidic Rebbe known by the name of his major work, *Sefat Emet*, suggests that the intricate movements of extending the *lulav* in all directions and bringing it always back to the heart are a way of increasing awareness of God's presence, which surrounds us in all directions, receiving God's light and ushering the lifeforce of connection to God internally within one's heart:

שפת אמת, סוכות תרל"ד

לולב גי' חיים ובני' חפצים לקבל חיים אמיתיים
בפנימיות שלהם. ... זהו ע"י מיני הלולב
שבני ישראל מרמזים במעשה להשי"ת. ...
ומיני הלולב היא הקבלה שבני ישראל מקבלין
ומביאין הדעת לעומק לבבם.

Sefat Emet, Sukkot 5634 (1873)

“Lulav” (לולב) is numerically equivalent to “life” (חיים), and the Children of Israel desire to accept true life within their inner being. ... This is facilitated through the species of the lulav, with which the Children of Israel physically gesture toward God. ...

¹ The Mishnah (Sukkah 3:15) explicitly includes children who know how to wave in the *mitzvah*.

The [waving of the] species of the lulav represent the acceptance through which the Children of Israel accept and bring this intimate awareness [of God] into the depth of their hearts.

The waving of the *arba minim* is part of a mystical act that connects God and the Jewish people for the year ahead. As we extend them outward away from ourselves, we gesture toward God in every direction. And when the *lulav* is brought in again, it is as if we are catching God's lifeforce and receiving an intimate connection with God, and placing that within the depths of our hearts.²

This spiritual practice of the *na'anu'im*, safeguarded within the innermost chambers of the heart, becomes an experience that we then carry with us throughout the year ahead. It helps convey the deep understanding that God's sheltering presence can be felt wherever we strive to encounter it. As we walk through the world—no matter the direction—we walk with God.

R. Sholom Noah Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe from 1981–2000 and author of the work *Netivot Shalom*, takes this one step further:

נתיבות שלום חלק ב, סוכות מאמר ד
 כאשר עוברים עליו זמנים שאינו מוצא שום
 תוכן בחיים, איננו מרוצה מעצמו וכ"ש
 מאחרים, אך תפקיד יהודי להיות שלם עם
 עצמו, לשלוט על כל המצבים ומצבי הרוח ולא
 להיות מושפע מהם, ושלא יגרמו לו לשינויים
 במציאות חייו בידעו שהקב"ה הוא הבורא
 יום ולילא גולל אור מפני חושך וחושך מפני
 אור. ... וד' המינים מסייעים ליהודי לאמלוכי
 לקוב"ה בכל המצבים. ... וזה נותן לו כוחות
 לעמוד בכל השנה בכל הבחינות ומצבי החיים.

Netivot Shalom Vol. 2, Sukkot Essay 4

When a person goes through times in which they find no meaning in life, is dissatisfied with themselves—and certainly with others—nonetheless, the mission of a Jew is to be whole with oneself, to have mastery over all situations and moods, and not to be controlled by them. They should not cause changes in the essence of one's life,

knowing that the Holy Blessed One is the Creator of day and night, "Who rolls away light before darkness and darkness before light."³ ... The arba minim help a Jew to coronate the Holy Blessed One in all situations. ... This gives one the strength to stand firm throughout the year, in all aspects and circumstances of life.

It's not just that we bring our connection to God wherever we go. It's that, sometimes, the path we take is tortuous. The year ahead will have ups and downs. There will be times when feeling that connection to God comes naturally. But there will also be times when we feel completely disconnected—from God, from others, and even from ourselves. Shaking the *lulav* is a way of affirming that no matter where the path of the year takes us, even if through difficult terrain, God will be with us through it all. And though God may sometimes roll away the light to make room for darkness, God will also roll away the darkness to make room for light once more.

Perhaps these texts can serve as a meaningful intention when shaking the *lulav* this year. With each shake of the *lulav*, we can reach out to God in every direction around us and receive God's blessings for life deep within our hearts. Through this *mitzvah* we mindfully preserve that experience for the year ahead to give us strength, faith, and hope, no matter what the year may bring. ♦

2 Perhaps this is the meaning behind the Chabad custom of specifically touching the *lulav* to the chest right above the heart with each of the *na'anu'im*.

3 From Ma'ariv.