

THE FOUR SPECIES

By

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Lev 23:39-40 *Howbeit on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruits of the land, ye shall keep the feast of YHWH seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before YHWH your Elohim seven days.*

Dwelling in the *Sukkah*¹ for the seven days of *Sukkot*² fulfills an insightful spiritual ritual. But, there is more to this Feast than the building and dwelling in the *Sukkah*. There is also the *mitzvah*³ of the *Arba Minim* (the 4 species) which is our requirement to take *hadassim* (myrtle), *aravot* (willows), a *lulav* (palm) and *etrog* (fruit) and “wave” them before Elohim during our prayers. This rite is called *Netilat HaLulav* or taking the *lulav*. This ceremony also contains within it many marvelous secrets, most too profound to understand, yet, there is an adequate amount of material that we can discuss and ponder.

The four species are:

1. Myrtle (*hadassim*, spelled hey, dalet, samekh) הדרס,
2. willow (*aravah*, spelled ayin, resh, bet, hey) עֵבֶה,
3. Palm (*lulav*, spelled lamed, vav, lamed, bet) לולב
4. Citrus (*etrog* spelled alef, tav, resh, vav, gimel) אתרוג

The species themselves correspond to the seven *sefirot* that are manifest on this Feast. Three *hadassim* branches are used. These correspond to the three *sefirot chesed, gevurah* and *tiferet*. The two *aravah* branches correspond to *netzach* and *hod*. The *lulav* corresponds to *yesod* and the *etrog* to *malkhut*. The six branches are held in the right hand and the *etrog* is held in the left. Torah law based upon the *Kabbalah* dictates that when we hold the four species they must be held together with the *etrog* in the left hand touching the other species in the right. The *Kabbalah* is emphatic that the two never be separated during the times of prayer and the *hakafot*.

In the letters of the names of the four species, we have revealed to us an aspect of their secret nature and how they too serve to help create the Unity of the Bridegroom and the Bride thus maintaining the flow of blessing from the Heavens to earth. The final letters of each of the four are *samekh* ס (numerical value of 60), *hey* ה (numerical value of 5), *bet* ב (2) and *gimel* ג (3). Together these add up to 70, the numerical value of two important Hebrew words, *sod* (secret) and *yayin* (wine). Wine is almost always the symbol of blessing and joy in Torah. This is why wine is the prime element in *Kiddush* (sanctification), *havdalah* (separation) and every *simcha* (joyous occasion). We always celebrate a joyous occasion over a full cup of *kosher* wine. The four species are like our *Kiddush* wine for this Feast. With them we celebrate the Union of the Heavens (*hashamayim*) and earth, spiritual and physical. With them we celebrate the *sod*, the secret of the Union of the Bridegroom and the Bride concealed within these traditional ritual observances. We celebrate that Elohim has revealed to us His intentions for the *mitzvot*, that we recognize that our observance is not just a mere symbolic act, but our actual participation in the process of creation and the restoration (*tikkun*) of the state of harmony and balance between the worlds. All this is hinted to with four simple letters. Yet, this is not all!

The initial letters of the names of the four species (*hey* ה, *ayin* ע, *lamed* ל, *alef* א) numerically equal 106. 106 is a special number, the value of the phrase recited daily in the *Shema Yisrael* prayer “*b’khol levavekha*” (with all your heart). This signifies that one who takes the four species and waves them before Elohim in the prescribed *Halakhic* fashion during these days is thus fulfilling Elohim’s command for us to love Him “with all our hearts.”

¹ A temporary dwelling

² Also called the Feast of Tabernacles

³ Commandment

106 is also the numerical value of the word “*hamelukha*” (the Kingship). When one performs the waving in accordance to *Halakha* one is proclaiming one’s acceptance upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Hebrew word for yoke (*ohl*, spelled *ayin vav, lamed* **ו**¹⁷) is also 106. 106 is also the numerical value of the phrase “*higiyon lev*” (understanding heart). Understanding is always said to be an attribute of the heart and not the mind, as it is written in the prayer of Eliyahu “and the heart understands.”

One who observes this *mitzvah* of the four species cultivates an understanding heart with which one will be able to understand the secrets (*sod* level) of the Torah. This is the definition of beauty, the Hebrew word of which is “*yofi*,” which numerically is also equal to 106.

If we add to the numerical value of 106 the number of the four letters themselves we will have 110. This number is the numerical value of the phrases, “*benei hayil*” (children of power), “*hakhamei lev*” (wise of heart) and “*YHWH tov u’metiv*” (YHWH who is good and provides). All of these point to the matter that by observing this *mitzvah* properly according to *Halakha*, one adorns the *Shekhina* with *kavod* (glory). Such ones are truly children of power and wise of heart. To these children, Elohim is good and provides for them great abundance.

The observance of this *mitzvah* of waving the four species is the source of spiritual life. The word *lulav* is numerically equal to 68, the value of “*chayim*” (life). When we wave the four species, we wave them three times in each of the six directions (18) of the earth, south, north, east, up, down and west. We repeat this procedure four times during the *Hallel* prayer⁴. Each cycle thus contains 18 waves. 18 is the number of “*chai*” (life). Four times the 18 equals 72, the numerical value of the word “*chesed*” (mercy) and the 72 “Names”.

In conclusion, we see that the four species are powerful acts loaded with meaning and power. When we perform this *mitzvot* in proper form and in enlightened spirit we set in motion a series of spiritual occurrences far beyond what our minds can even begin to imagine. We create a channel of powerful spiritual energy that comes down to us here on the earth. This occurrence is celebrated as a separate event and holiday. This is *Shemini Atzeret*, the 8th day. On this day, which is a Feast unto itself, the Union of the Bridegroom and the Bride are complete. On this day, they ascend to the spiritually lofty places in the invisible worlds of *Atzilut*. May Elohim bless us all to participate in this *mitzvah* and help in bringing about the supernal Unions.

Lulav Meditation

The custom of shaking the *lulav* in all directions – the four points of the compass, and up and down – originally symbolized an acknowledgment of Elohim’s all-encompassing presence. But in Chasidic thought, the practice took on other symbolic, spiritual meanings. Chasidism brought the mystical teachings of the Kabbalah to the masses, reinterpreting long-standing traditions with the spiritual meaning. For Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the shaking of the *lulav* was a meditation that could last half an hour. Each direction had significance; each represented a different prayer. The following is adapted from Rabbi Carlebach's teachings:

First, face right. Right in Kabbalah signifies the attribute of *chesed*, kindness, mercy, overwhelming beneficence. It’s a reminder of Abraham, master of hospitality. Facing right, slowly shaking the *lulav* in and out three times, think about all the *chesed*, the giving in your life, and pray to Elohim to perfect it. Do you find it too hard to be generous? Or are you suffering from an excess of generosity, of kindness, of love? "We don't know when to love and how to love and we always put so many borders in the wrong place," explained Rabbi Carlebach. Facing right, pray for Elohim to grant you the proper measure of *chesed*.

Then face left. Left in Kabbalah is *gevurah* – strength, strict judgment, limits. *Gevurah* is Isaac – bound for sacrifice on Mount Moriah, unflinching, accepting of judgment. Take this opportunity to think of the limits, the judgments in your life. Are your circumstances too confining? Do you need more boundaries, or fewer? Do you need more strength? This is an opportunity to invite Elohim to help you fix the limits in your life.

Next, face straight ahead: *tiferet*, or beauty. This is the balance, where the beneficence and the boundaries are in their proper proportions. It is Jacob, it is the middle course. (These three form the upper triangle of the *Magen David*.)

⁴ Tehillim113-118

Then, look up. Can you connect with Elohim? What's the holiness you need in your life? How high can you rise this year?

Then, aim down. This is about groundedness, about your foundations. And it's about your ability to find the buried treasures, under your feet; the truths buried in the dirt.

Finally, backwards. The essence of repentance is being able to go back and fix your past. This is a prayer that your past be fixed by your coming to terms with it. (These three form the lower triangle of the *Magen David*.)

Waving the Lulav: Stand facing east. Take the lulav in your right hand and recite the blessing, "*Al netilat lulav*." Take the *etrog* in your left hand. If it is the first day of *Sukkot* (or the first time you are observing the *mitzvah* this year) recite the blessing "*Shehecheyanu*." Bring the *etrog* and *lulav* together. Wave the *lulav* three times to and fro in each direction. Each time the four species are brought back, their lower tips should touch the chest (over the heart).

How to Hold: The top of the *etrog* should be held next to the bottom of the *lulav*. When holding the *etrog* while making the movements and during *hoshanot*, the top of the *etrog* should be covered with the fingers. When moving the *lulav* and *etrog* due west, the *etrog* should be uncovered

