

The Fruit and the Flower

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The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

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By Rav Yair Kahn

"Be not seduced by Greek wisdom, which yields only flowers but no fruit." - R. Yehuda Halevi

When we study the halakhic aspects of the arba minim, the four species taken on Sukkot, our curiosity is aroused regarding their meta-halakhic significance as well. One ponders the spiritual significance of the mitzva of lulav and questions the symbolism of the chosen species. To be sure, Chazal offer innovative and profound insights regarding this question on the level of derash (creative homiletics), apparently assuming that the simple peshat (literal meaning) was relatively obvious. This compels us to explore the straightforward symbolism embodied in the Torah's selection of these specific species.

The Torah refers to Sukkot as the harvest season when it introduces the mitzva of lulav. At the time produce is harvested from the fields, we are commanded to take the four species and rejoice with them before God. It would appear that the purpose of the mitzva of lulav is to translate the joy of the harvest into a religious experience, which combines praise with prayer. Therefore, the Torah demanded that we take four different types of plants, each of which is connected to the idea of harvest, and express through them our resultant gratitude and petitions. Based on this interpretation, peshat would dictate explaining the four species within an agricultural context, and the mitzva associated with the religious feelings expressed at a harvest.

When considering the mitzva of lulav from this perspective, we may offer a suggestion regarding the significance of the four species. The lulav, which grows on top of the palm tree, symbolizes the majesty and grandeur found in flora. Even when removed from the tree, the lulav is the tallest of the species and, according to many Rishonim, must actually be placed higher than the rest. It is due to this dominance that Chazal instituted that the blessing should single out the lulav - "al netilat lulav."

The etrog is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah. Instead, we find a reference to "peri etz hadar," the fruit of a beautiful tree. This singular terminology focuses our attention upon the unique element of the etrog: it is a "peri," fruit, and therefore representative of agricultural produce.

Similarly, there is no explicit Biblical reference to hadasim. Instead, the term "anaf etz avot" (branch of a thick-leaved tree) is employed, which describes the characteristics of the hadas rather than identifying it as a species. From this phrase, our sages derived that the leaves must envelop the branch of the hadas, and, according to many opinions, the hadas is actually defined by these characteristics. Accordingly, when considering the hadas, our attention is focused upon the richness of the foliage and the wealth and abundance found in nature. (See R. Mosheh Lichtenstein's article on hadas in Alon Shevut #158.)

Arava as a species is specified in the Torah, which makes reference to "arvei nachal," willows of the stream. Many opinions take this literally and require aravot that actually grew alongside a stream. Even those opinions that forgo this stipulation, nevertheless admit that aravot are of a species that normally grows alongside a stream. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that aravot represent water, which is the source of all agricultural life. In fact, we find that aravot are taken independently on Hoshana Rabba, a day whose liturgy revolves around water.

Accordingly, the four species relate to different aspects of the botanical world. They combine in a comprehensive manner, in order to generate the appropriate religious response. The source, the majesty, the overflowing abundance and the produce are all represented. However, there seems to be one botanical aspect that was ignored, one field of agriculture that was omitted. The flower is not represented. Why is the beauty found in nature overlooked?

Before tackling this problem, let us take a quick glance at one verse in Sefer Bereishit:

"And the Lord God caused to grow from the ground every tree that was pleasing to behold (nechmad le-mareh) and good for consumption." (2:9)

While the Torah describes the trees of the Garden of Eden as aesthetically pleasing and edible or nutritious, Chava viewed the Tree of Knowledge as "good for consumption and a delight to the eyes (ta'ava hu la-einayim)" (3:6). Close inspection reveals two critical differences between Chava's description and that of the Torah. Chava didn't refer to the tree as a pleasant sight, but rather as a beautiful object that arouses passion. Secondly, the Torah mentions the aesthetic element first, while Chava inverted the order.

The shift of order indicates a variant perspective on the role and purpose of beauty. Chava considered the aesthetic as an independent objective. The Torah, on the other hand, ascribed auxiliary status to the beauty of the tree, the pleasing vision being secondary to its primary element and objective, the fruit.

Man is fascinated by the aesthetic. He becomes captivated by beauty. When that which is pleasant becomes an object of passion, man's fancy turns to obsession and his lust leads to sin. The Torah accepted the legitimacy of the aesthetic, But not as an independent goal. Beauty is can serve as a

stimulant capable of motivating human creativity. The experience of beauty is productive insofar as it inspires spirituality.

We can now attempt to explain why the flower, representing beauty, is omitted from the four species. Based on our suggestion, we may claim that in fact the aesthetic is included - but it does not appear independently. As we mentioned, the etrog is not mentioned in the Bible by name, but is referred to as "peri etz hadar." This phrase does not only single out the etrog as a fruit, but focuses on its beauty as well. According to certain Rishonim, the beauty attributed to the etrog is an integral characteristic (see the attached shiur by R. Moshe Taragin on hadar). Moreover, we find an opinion that identifies the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge as an etrog.

Thus, the blossom turns into a fruit and, through the etrog, the aesthetic element is enlisted and joins the other species in the worship of God. However, this is possible only insofar as the beauty is expressed as a fruit, which is both "pleasing to behold and good for consumption." Beauty here is not an independent goal but rather is yoked to a higher purpose. Only thus can the aesthetic be redeemed and used to enhance human creativity and to inspire exalted spiritual objectives.

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