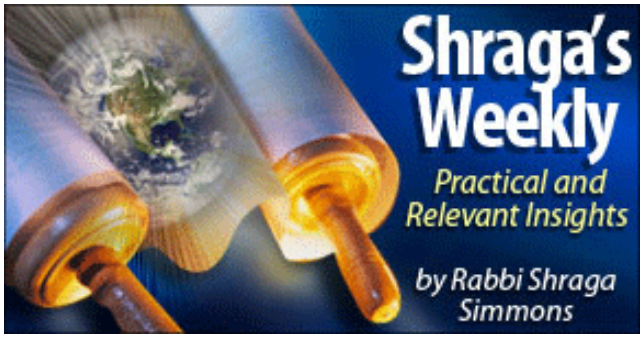
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Laws of the Four Species

The Torah says:

> *"You shall take ... the beautiful fruit (Etrog), a palm frond (Lulav), myrtle twigs and willow branches of the stream -and rejoice for seven days before the Lord your God." (Leviticus 23:40)*

On Sukkot, we bind all the branches together - two willows on the left, one palm branch in the center, and three myrtles on the right. We hold this bundle in our right hand, and then lift them together with the Etrog. We then shake them all together, three times in each direction: front, right, back, left, up and down. (Sefardim and Chassidim have a different custom for the order.) This mitzvah should be performed during the daytime, each of the seven days of Sukkot (except for Shabbat).

Before waving the four species, we say the following blessing:

> *"Baruch ata Adonoy, Elo-heinu Melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu bi'mitzvo-sav, vi'tzivanu al ni-tilas lulav."*
>
> *"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sanctified us with His mitzvot, and instructed us to raise up the Lulav."*

To be valid for the mitzvah, the four species must meet certain requirements. Since the details are many and technical, it is not recommended to search through the forest on your own for these species! (Particularly the Etrog, which can easily be confused with a lemon.) A better idea is to purchase a complete set from a reliable distributor. Your local Jewish bookstore may have a "Four Species Set" with a rabbinical seal certifying their validity.

To be an informed consumer, here are some basic requirements to look for:

ETROG

- Should preferably be turning yellow rather than green.
- The peel cannot be punctured through in any spot, nor can it lack any of its inner skin.
- The peel cannot be overly soft, cracked, dry or peeled.
- Even a small black dot on the upper part invalidates it.
- The shape should preferably be like a tower ? wider at the bottom and narrow at the top.
- If this particular Etrog grew with a protruding stem (called a *pitom*), then that stem cannot be broken off. (However, if the Etrog grew in the first place without a *pitom*, it is still kosher.)

MYRTLE

- You will need three myrtle branches.

- A kosher myrtle has a pattern of three leaves coming out from the same point in the branch. This three-leaf pattern must be repeated over at least half the length of the branch.
- Each branch should be at least 11 inches (29 cm.) long.
- The branch cannot be dried out.

WILLOW

- You will need two willow branches.
- The stem should preferably be red.
- The stem should be at least 11 inches (29 cm.) long.
- The leaves should be oblong, not round in shape.
- The leaves should have a smooth edge, not serrated.

LULAV

- Look at the very top of the branch and make sure that the center-most leaf is not split, but rather is closed (at least half-way down).
- The top cannot be cut off.
- The branch cannot be dried out.
- It should be at least 16 inches (39 cm.) long.
- The straighter the branch, the better.



The Blessings Continue

In this, the closing parashah of the Five Books of the Torah, Moses continues the tradition of the Patriarch Jacob and blesses each tribe. Even as the Patriarch commenced his blessing with the word "Zos - this," so, too, does Moses imparts his blessing with the word "Zos." Even as the Patriarch Jacob's blessing spoke to each tribe individually and charged each with his unique mission, so, too, did Moses speak to each tribe to define its special role and the contribution it was to make to the greater mosaic of the Jewish people.

It is a blessing to have someone help you define your purpose in life and delineate the contributions that you can make to the greater good of your people; prior to their deaths, Moses and Jacob were both able to do that for their children and disciples. In their blessings, Jacob and Moses foretold the future. Their blessings were so powerful that they transcended the centuries and are with us to this very day. Today, when we rise to bless our children, we invoke the words of the Patriarch Jacob and the Priestly Blessing that God imparted to Aaron. Thus, our children become a continuous link in the endless chain that takes us back to the genesis of our history.

The Uniqueness of the Jewish People

Prior to offering his blessing, Moses speaks of the greatness of the Jewish nation and recounts the merits that rendered them worthy of being God's chosen people. Thus, we learn from Moses the importance of referring to the good deeds of a person prior to imparting blessing so that God Himself may place His seal of approval on the berachah.

Moses recalls that God offered the Torah to all the nations, only to have them reject it after they learned what the Torah required of them. Although all the nations were consulted, Moses mentions only Esau and Ishmael. "Hashem came from Sinai - having shone forth to them from Seir, having appeared from Mount Paran ...."[1] (Seir and Paran were the habitations of

Esau and Ishmael.) Why does the Torah focus only on these two nations and ignore all the others that also rejected God's offer?

Esau and Ishmael should have known better, for they were nurtured in Torah homes. Esau was the son of Isaac and Rebecca and he also had the privilege of knowing his zeide, Abraham. Moreover, he was the identical twin of Jacob, the paradigm of Torah, and could have learned from him. So yes, he should have known better. He should have said yes to the call of God.

Ishmael was also guilty, for he was raised in the loving home of Abraham and Sarah, yet he chose the bow and arrow and thievery over the teachings of his father. Both Esau and Ishmael rebelled and spurned their spiritual heritage, and it was this rebellion and contempt for Torah that they passed on to future generations.

So it was that when God approached their descendants and invited them to accept the Torah, they asked what those laws entailed, and when they found that there were prohibitions and disciplines that would curb their animalistic natures, they rejected God's Torah out of hand. From this we can learn that the way of life a man chooses has far-reaching consequences that transcend generations and can taint his descendants.

In contrast, when God approached the Jewish people, they never asked questions. They did not make their acceptance contingent upon anything. Their automatic response was "Na'aseh v'nishma." The Jewish nation understood that it would be the height of chutzpah to ask God to first reveal the contents of His gift, the Torah. How dare anyone question it? If it comes from God, it must be perfect. The people understood that it would be a privilege to be given commandments that come from God. It is this awareness that flows in the veins of our people and has enabled us to remain loyal to our Torah throughout the centuries and to humbly thank Hashem for the privilege of serving Him.

Moses Died and yet He Lives

Vayamas sham Moshe, eved Hashem ... - So Moses, servant of Hashem, died there, in the land of Moab, by the mouth of Hashem."[2] Our sages ask, "What is the meaning of 'died there'?" And they answer, "He only died there, but he lives on in our hearts. His teachings are forever with us."

Our Sages further ask, "If Moses died, who wrote the last passages of the Torah?"

There are two views. One is that up to this point, Moses wrote, and Joshua completed these final passages. The other teaching is that God dictated the words to Moses and he wrote them with his tears.

Throughout his life, Moses was known as "Ish Ha Elokeim - Man of God." But as death confronts him, his title is changed to "Eved Hashem - servant of God." There can be no greater testimony to a man than to be called "Eved Hashem." A servant has no identity of his own; he belongs totally to his master. Similarly, Moses' entire life was dedicated to his Master, his God.

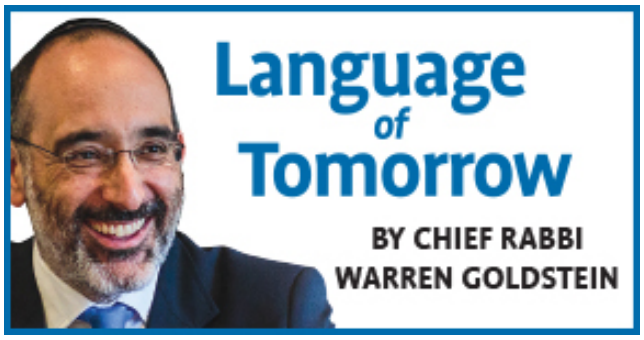
Moreover, in contrast to other members of a royal house, the servant has access to the inner chambers of the king at all times. Similarly, Moses was able to communicate with God at all times, speak to Him face to face, and now, in his death, as he sheds the barrier of his physical self, he is given this new title, "Servant of God," and is invited to enter the inner chambers of Hashem, the King.

Moses died "by the mouth of God," meaning that God drew forth his soul with a Divine kiss. God Himself buried him, and to this day, no one knows the exact location of his burial place.

The Last Letter

The concluding word of the Torah is "Yisrael - Israel," teaching us that the Torah was given for the sake of Israel - the Jewish people. The last letter of the Torah, lamed, is also instructive, teaching that if we combine that letter with the first letter of the Torah, "beis" from Bereshis, we will come up with the word "lev - heart." The entire Torah, from beginning to end, was given in order to refine our hearts and make us the compassionate, merciful children of God.

1. Deut. 33:2.
2. Ibid. 34:5.



Why We Celebrate Sukkot This Time of the Year

Click here to listen to podcast version: https://gallery.mailchimp.com/0de50ed881d65e87d675c02e9/files/2ab12832-b015-4c40-8439-6d171f5ffcab/Chief_Sukkot.mp3

What exactly is Sukkot doing at this time of the year? And, really, it's a question that can only be asked about Sukkot. All the other festivals are linked to specific times in Jewish history. Pesach, for example, commemorates the Exodus from Egypt, which actually took place on the 15th day of the month of Nissan. So we celebrate it every year on the 15th of Nissan. Shavuot, commemorating the giving of the Torah, took place on the 6th day of the Jewish month of Sivan. And so whenever the 6th day of Sivan rolls around - wherever we are in the world - we get ready to eat cheesecake and stay up all night learning. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, falls on the first two days of the Jewish new year, for obvious reasons.

But the timing of Sukkot is less apparent. The Gemara explains that when we sit in our sukkahs on this festival, we are celebrating the miraculous "Clouds of Glory" that protected the Jewish people for 40 years in the desert, providing shelter from the elements and cover from our enemies as we travelled through the harsh, hostile terrain of the desert.

Clearly, then, Sukkot is not a commemoration of a single event, but of a state of Divine protection that spanned a period of 40 years. So, why now?

Let's think about it... we've just had Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Sukkot comes a few short days after Yom Kippur (you'll know just how short if you haven't built your sukkah before Yom Kippur), after which there isn't another Jewish festival for six months. Seeing that Sukkot is just as pertinent at any other time of the year, why isn't the Jewish calendar spaced out more evenly? Why aren't we celebrating Sukkot three months from now, rather than in the thick of this intense concentration of festivals?

The key to answering this question lies in the integral connection between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur on the one hand, and Sukkot on the other. To understand that connection, we need to delve into the nature of the four species that we take in hand on Sukkot. These four species are the etrog - the fruit of a citron tree; the lulav - a date palm branch; hadass - leafy boughs from a myrtle tree; and aravah - leafy branches from a willow tree. On each day of Sukkot, we bring these four species together, say a dedicated blessing and shake

them in a specific way.

Our sages ask - what is the common denominator in the requirements of all four of these species? We know we bring them together because they are so different - in taste, in smell and in structure; but what is the one requirement that is common to them all?

Rabbeinu Bechaya, one of our great sages from the Middle Ages, explains the common denominator of these four species is that they are connected to water. He says they are fresh throughout the year and a very important requirement of them is that they be fresh for use during the mitzvah of Sukkot. The Gemara explains if your lulav is dried out, you cannot use it, you cannot fulfil your mitzvah; and so too with your etrog, aravah and hadass.

Thus, a really important shared requirement for all four of these species is their freshness - their connection to a water source. That remaining life-giving liquid encapsulated within each of them is an integral part of the fulfilment of the mitzvah on Sukkot.

But why? What does this water represent? What is this liquid, this juice within them, and what does it mean for us? Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that it represents life. When we bring these four species together, we celebrate and give thanks to Hashem for the fact that we are more alive than ever. And we are saying that we are now ready to dedicate that life to Hashem in His infinite wisdom and kindness.

And now, dear friends - the connection to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur becomes so clear. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pray for many things. We pray for a good year, for a sweet year, and we pray for all of G-d's blessings. But, most fundamentally, we pray for life itself. The words of the machzor are filled with so many rich examples. We ask Hashem: "The King, who desires life" to "remember us for life" and "write us in the book of life".

Chayim, chayim, chayim. Life, life, life. Over and over again - that is what we pray for. Because we never take its privilege for granted.

And so comes along Sukkot, immediately after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and you know what we give thanks to Hashem for? For the very fact that we're alive. For the fact that we have breath in our lungs and energy in our bodies - that is what we are thankful for. And that is why we bring together the four species, as fresh as can be, filled with as much moisture as possible, and we thank G-d for the life that He has given us. We take them and we say the blessing of shehechiyanu: "Thank you G-d, Who has sustained us and kept us alive to reach this point."

Now, let's take this idea one step further. It's not only about gratitude for being alive. Yes, we are incredibly grateful, but Sukkot is a declaration of what we plan to do with this new life. We take the four species, we bow before G-d and we sing Hallel - recognising the infinite greatness and magnificence of G-d, dedicating our gift of life to Him. And how do we do that? Through the Torah, which is the gateway to life.

The Torah is the Torah of life. It says in the Torah (Leviticus 18:4): "You shall keep my statutes and my laws that a person should do them and live by them." The Ramban explains that the Torah is the blueprint for how to live life in this world in our interactions with other people. And what is the best possible way to do that? Through the values and the principles and the laws of the Torah, which guide us on how to be a mensch, to be kind to people, to interact in good conscience with people.

And friends, it goes even deeper and further than this. By dedicating our lives to Him - by taking opportunities to fulfil G-d's mitzvot - we unlock the gift of another life... life in the World to Come. As Rashi says on that verse "...and you shall live by them" - this refers to

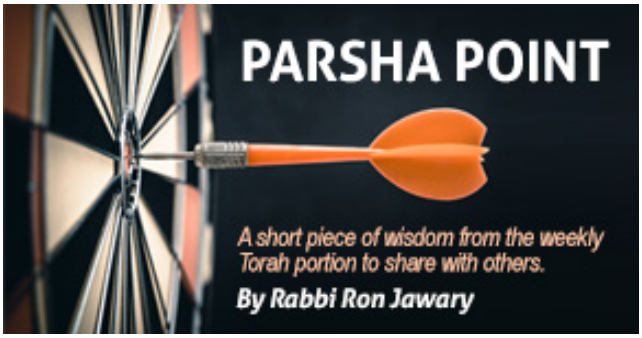
Olam Haba, the World to Come. The mitzvot that we do in this world enrich us with life in the World to Come.

And here's the really fascinating thing. The Hebrew word for life is chayim, which is plural. We never speak about life, but lives. And I came across an amazing explanation of this in a book by the brother of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Avraham Ben Shlomo Zalman. He explains that the word chayim is plural because it refers to two lives, life in this world and life in the World to Come. Whenever we refer to life, we refer to both.

As Sukkot comes in, we give thanks to Hashem for life, not only in this world, but for the infinite life He has allowed us in the World to Come. And we give thanks and praise to Him for the Torah that He has given us - the gateway to life. Sukkot is known as the "festival of the time of our joy". We are filled with joy and gratitude for the gift of life and the Torah, which is its gateway.

I would like to add one last idea to this understanding of Sukkot, the four species and the gift of life both in this world and the next. The Hebrew word for water, mayim, just like life, chayim, has no singular. We only refer to waters, never water. When we speak of water, we don't only speak of physical waters, but of Torah - the 'water' that connects us to our spiritual source.

This Sukkot, as we bring together the four species, let us recognise and celebrate the infinite gift of life we are reminded of when holding the lulav and etrog. Let us dedicate ourselves to Hashem and His Torah - the source of all life and all blessing.



Being Like God This Sukkot

There is a mitzvah in the Torah to try to be like God. One of God's characteristics is that He "sustains all the living with kindness." Not only does He give us so many things for free, but He lifts our spirits when we are down.

A person should try to emulate God both by giving in the physical sense, and by giving of himself to lift the spirits of those who are down. The Rambam writes that there is no greater joy in life than the joy one receives by lifting and reviving the spirits of those who are burdened by life's travails. The Torah teaches us that on Sukkot we should rejoice with our sons, daughters, our male and female household help, the orphans, widows, strangers and Levites (the spiritual leaders of the nation).

Rashi explains that if we look after the Almighty's four (the orphans, widows, strangers, and Levites), He will look after our four (our sons, daughters, and male and female help), blessing us and them with joy and inner peace. If we take the opportunity to be God-like and sustain all those around us with kindness, God will reciprocate in kind.

In fact, Sukkot comes after Yom Kippur because in order to be God-like, we need to be "big." We can't go through Yom Kippur properly and come out with grudges. The blessings which we receive are in direct proportion to the amount of effort which we invested.