

Arba Minim and Sukkah: Is There a Connection?

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The many mitzvot associated with Pesach are clearly interconnected. The Torah links in the same verse the prohibition of eating chametz with the obligation of eating matzoh. Maror, matzoh, and the korban pesach are all integrated into the seder.

In contrast there is no apparent connection between the mitzvot of Sukkot - between the obligation of eating and sleeping in the sukkah, which applies night and day throughout Sukkot, and the obligation to pick up the arba minim and shake them which can only be performed during the day. In fact, biblically this latter requirement exists outside of the Beit Hamikdash only on the first day of the holiday. Although Hassidic custom advocates lifting the arba minim each morning in one's sukkah, thereby providing a connection between these otherwise disparate mitzvot, some opine that this may not be the optimal way of doing the mitzvah since it severs the connection between shaking the four minim at appropriate places during Hallel and saying the brakhah on the mitzvah.

The symbolism associated with the sukkah is related to Hashem's protection of the Jews during their forty year sojourn in the wilderness prior to reaching the land of Israel. Both Tannaitic views - that the sukkah reflects the clouds of glory or actual sukkot - interpret the Jew's living in this temporary abode for a week as reflecting trust that Hashem watches over him. We remain vulnerable wherever we live, whether in our own land of Israel or in America.

In contrast, the lulav, etrog, hadassim, and aravot are all agricultural. Sukkot is also called Chag Ha'asif, the festival of gathering of the crops. There was no agriculture in the wilderness when the Jews ate manna. The Sefer haChinuch associates all four minim with manifestations of joy. Other midrashic interpretations see the four minim as representing the unification of different bodily limbs or different types of people. Joy and unity do not mesh naturally with vulnerability and the need for Divine protection.

Let us examine other aspects of Sukkot besides the mitzvot of sukkah and arba minim. According to the mishna in Rosh Hashana (1;2) the world is judged on Sukkot about water. The ordinary libations of wine are accompanied on Sukkot by the pouring of water (nisukh hamayim). In addition, there was a special manifestation of joy in the temple (simchat beit hashoeva) which is related to the pouring of water (see Talmud Bavli Succah 51a-51b and Rashi on the mishna).

Water is both the source of life and the resource whose availability is most questionable. The world today knows too well the dangers resulting from scarcity of water. Israel, which has a short rainy season, is most vulnerable to a lack of rain. Halakha mandates an elaborate series of fasts of increasing severity exists as a response to a lack of rainfall.

Without water, none of the four species will grow. Strikingly, when it does rain on Sukkot we are freed from the obligation of eating in the sukkah. The absence of water is a tragedy; its abundance produces a bumper crop and great joy. Humans cannot make it rain. We can only pray that Hashem will make it rain. Hence, water signifies human dependence on Hashem's protection and the joy of a successful harvest.

A farmer works hard planting, plowing, nurturing, and harvesting to provide food. At the conclusion of this long process he has the right to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Historically this has led to forgetting that all his efforts would have been in vain if not for the rain that came from heaven.

Celebrating the harvest and acknowledging our vulnerability and dependence on Hashem's protection are complementary themes. We express our joy fully only in the temple, where we take the arba minim all seven days. The Rambam stresses that this extreme expression of joy is performed only by the scholars and the righteous who truly understand that it should reflect joy in serving Hashem.

The symbolism of the mitzvot of the Sukkah and of the arba minim remain different. However the combination of the two creates the proper balance between recognizing our vulnerability and dependence, and joy that we have merited Hashem's protection.