

Galbanum, Madison, and Citron

The Lesson and the Laws of the Binding of the *Arbah Minim*

Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank

Faculty: RIETS, IBC, and Mechinah Jewish Studies Program, Yeshiva University

You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a citron tree, the branches of date palms, twigs of a plaited tree, and brook willows; and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your God, for seven days.

Vayikra 23:40 (Translation from Stone Chumash.)

ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון
פרי עץ הדר כפת תמרims וענף
עץ עבת וערבי נחל ושמחתם
לפני ה' אלהיכם שבעת ימים:
ויקרא כג: מ

The Torah instructs us to “take” an *etrog*, *lulav*, *hadasim*, and *aravot* on *Sukkot*. How should one take these four species, together or separately? The Talmud⁶² records a dispute about this question. According to R. Yehuda at least three of the species must be bound together. If one holds them separately, then he will not fulfill the mitzvah. He derives this from a *gezaira shava*—a hermeneutical principle which allows us to derive laws from two seemingly unrelated topics. However, the *Chachamim* disagree. They reject this *gezaira shava* and maintain that it is not absolutely essential that the *lulav*, *hadassim* and *aravot* be tied together. Nevertheless, they agree that doing so is recommended as it beautifies the mitzvah. We follow the view of the *Chachamim* that tying is not necessary but preferable; therefore, we tie our *lulav* together with the *hadassim* and *aravot*. (A summary of the laws that pertain to the binding of the *lulav* can be found in the appendix to this article.)

Let’s try to understand the nature of this debate. Rav Yehuda seems to understand that the four species are meant to be held as one unit; thus, they must be bound. But what about the *Chachamim*; if they maintain each species is meant to stand alone then why is it considered more beautiful to bind them together? It is not at all obvious why a flimsy string makes the mitzvah

⁶² תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף לג. : דתניא: לולב, בין אגוד בין שאינו אגוד כשר, רבי יהודה אומר: אגוד כשר, שאינו אגוד - פסול. מאי טעמא דרבי יהודה? יליף לקיחה לקיחה מאגודת אגוד. כתיב הכא (ויקרא כג) ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון וכתיב התם (שמות יב) ולקחתם אגדת אגוד, מה להלן אגודה - אף כאן אגודה. - ורבנן: לית להו לקיחה לקיחה. מאן תנא להא, דתנו רבנן: לולב מצוה לאוגדו, ואם לא אגדו - כשר. מני? אי רבי יהודה - כי לא אגדו אמאי כשר? אי רבנן - מאי מצוה קא עביד? - לעולם רבנן, מצוה משום (שמות טו) זה אלי ואנוהו.

more beautiful. Why can't I decide how to beautify the mitzvah as I do when I decorate my sukkah?

Perhaps we can answer this question by considering the symbolism of the *arba minim*. The Midrash⁶³ records that each of the four species represents a different type of Jew:

1. The *etrog* tree, which has a fruit with both a fine taste and fragrant aroma, reflects the person who excels both in Torah and good deeds.
2. The *lulav* which comes from a tree with a fruit with a delicious taste, the date, but no aroma represents a person who has mastered Torah but lacks good deeds.
3. The *hadasim* which smell good but lack fruit reflect the opposite—a person with good deeds but lacking Torah scholarship.
4. And finally, the *aravot*, which lack both smell and taste, represent the Jew who (*nebech*) lacks both Torah and good deeds.

The Midrash implies, that the beauty in binding together of the species reflects the beauty in unity and celebration of diversity. All sorts of people, each with their own strengths should merge and unite. This is the **beauty** of the bound *lulav*.

However, an obvious question arises—why is the *etrog* not bound together with the other species? According to our theory this would seem to imply an exclusionary or elitist model; one in which the greatest person remains aloof and separate from everyone else.

Here too, however, we can turn to the *halacha* to help us with the symbolism. The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that when shaking the *lulav* one must unite the *etrog* with the *lulav* and hold them together.⁶⁴ The Gra on *Shulchan Aruch* notes the source for each *halacha* in the *Shulchan Aruch*. What then is the source for the requirement that we hold the *etrog* together with the other species when shaking them—the very Midrash that we quoted about how the four species represent four types of people.⁶⁵ In other words, the reason why one must make sure that they hold the *lulav* and *etrog* together when performing the mitzvah is to stress that the scholar is not meant to be aloof or separate—on the contrary, he should be together with everyone else all bound together.⁶⁶

⁶³ **ויקרא רבה (וילנא) פרשת אמור פרשה ל':** ד"א פרי עץ הדר אלו ישראל מה אתרוג זה יש בו טעם ויש בו ריח כך ישראל יש בהם בני אדם שיש בהם תורה ויש בהם מעשים טובים כפות תמרים אלו ישראל מה התמרה הזו יש בו טעם ואין בו ריח כך הם ישראל יש בהם שיש בהם תורה ואין בהם מעשים טובים וענף עץ עבות אלו ישראל מה הדס יש בו ריח ואין בו טעם כך ישראל יש בהם שיש בהם מעשים טובים ואין בהם תורה וערבי נחל אלו ישראל מה ערבה זו אין בה טעם ואין בה ריח כך הם ישראל יש בהם בני אדם שאין בהם לא תורה ולא מעשים טובים ומה הקב"ה עושה להם לאבדן אי אפשר אלא אמר הקב"ה יוקשרו כולם אגודה אחת והן מכפרין אלו על אלו ואם עשיתם כך אותה שעה אני מתעלה הה"ד (עמוס ט) הבונה בשמים מעלותיו ואימתי הוא מתעלה כשהן עשויין אגודה אחת שנאמר (עמוס ט') ואגודתו על ארץ יסדה לפיכך משה מזהיר לישראל ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון.

⁶⁴ **שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות לולב תרנא:יא:** צריך לחבר האתרוג ללולב בשעת נענועו ולנענע בשניהם יחד.

⁶⁵ **ביאור הגר"א אורח חיים תרנא: יא:** צריך לחבר כו'. כמ"ש במדרש מה אתרוג זה יש בו טעם ויש בו ריח כו'.

⁶⁶ I assume that the reason that we do not actually tie it together is because that would be too cumbersome.

Nevertheless, to accentuate the beauty of unity we must make sure that all the species are held together. Perhaps, however, the motivation is not purely technical. While the Torah scholar is supposed to join the community in doing mitzvot, there are times when he must also remain apart.

The motif of unity as reflected in the binding of the species appears frequently in Jewish literature. Let us consider one more remarkable source that will help us understand the nature of the unity that we seek—why it’s so important and what it truly represents.

One of the offerings brought daily in the Temple was the sweet-smelling incense offering or *ketoret*. The Talmud notes that one of the ingredients did not actually smell good:

Any fast that does not include the sinners of Israel [in its prayer services] is not a fast. Because the galbanum had a foul smell and was nevertheless included in the spices of the ketoret.

Keritot 6b

א"ר חנא בר בונא א"ר שמעון חסידא
 כל תענית שאין בה ממושעי ישראל
 אינה תענית שהרי חלבנה ריחה רע
 ומנאה הכתוב עם סממני קטרת
כריתות ו:

According to the Talmud, *chelbona* or galbanum produced a foul odor. The spice was nevertheless included in the incense offering of the Temple service. Thus, the Talmud deduces that just as the incense offering is invalid without the galbanum, so too “every fast that does not include the criminals of Israel is not a fast.” While this passage is frequently understood either as a concession for the participation of sinners or as a general call for unity in the service of God⁶⁷, Rabbi Nissim (Ran) ben Reuben of Girona (c. 1310-1376) in his *Drashot* (homilies) interprets the reference as a requirement that malefactors contribute to all social endeavors, for without them even the service of the righteous is incomplete.⁶⁸

Why? Because the reprobate’s contribution is essential to the community. To prove this Ran turns to Aristotelian physics. A pure element (earth, water, air, or fire) is inherently unstable. Only when compounded with other elements does a substance prove sustainable. Even a higher element such as fire must contain at least traces of subordinate elements to endure. Likewise, a community, in order to achieve viability, must incorporate all elements of society, even those which on their own are undesirable.

The novelty of Ran’s attitude becomes clearer when compared to that of Maimonides.⁶⁹ Rambam assert that each individual must seek the golden mean of a particular character trait. While Rambam concedes that sometimes one must favor an extreme in order to counterbalance one’s natural disposition⁷⁰, his formulation focuses on moderation in the individual—“The straight” and appropriate path, according to Maimonides, involves acquiring:

[T]he midpoint temperament of each and every trait that man possesses. This refers to the temperament which is equidistant from each of the extremes, without being close to either of them. Therefore, the early sages

הדרך הישרה היא מדה בינונית שבכל דעה
 ודעה מכל הדעות שיש לו לאדם, והיא הדעה
 שהיא רחוקה משתי הקצוות ריחוק שוה ואינה
 קרובה לא לזו ולא לזו, לפיכך צוו חכמים

⁶⁷ See, for example, R. Bachya (*Ki Tisa* 30:34), *Machzor Vitri* 364, *Tur* (*Orach Chayim* 619), *Maharsha* (*Chidushai Aggadot Menachot* 27a), *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chayim* 55:11), *Pri Migadim* (*Orach Chayim* 55:11), *Mishnah Berura* (55:46-47), *Igrot Mosheh* (*II Orach Chayim* 19 and *I OraCh Chayim* 23), *Yabia Omer* (7:16), *Haichal Yitzchak* (*Orah Hayim* 2), and *Sichat Mussar* (p. 38). See also *Menachot* 27a.

⁶⁸ First *drasha*; see “Liberal Democratic Themes in Nissim of Girona” by Warren Zev Harvey in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III* ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay Harris (Harvard UP: Cambridge, 2000).

⁶⁹ *Eight Chapters*, IV, and *Mishneh Torah*, Deot chapters 1 and 2.

⁷⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, Deot 2:2

instructed that man constantly evaluate his traits to calculate them and direct them towards the middle path so that he will achieve perfection.

Mishneh Torah, Deot 1:4

הראשונים שיהא אדם שם דעותיו תמיד
ומשער אותם ומכוין אותם בדרך האמצעית
כדי שיהא שלם בגופו
רמב"ם הלכות דעות א:ד

Ran, on the other hand, seeks moderation within the community thereby allowing diversity within mankind.⁷¹ As such it must incorporate different extremes which will counterbalance each other, thereby leading to the ideal position. For example:

If there is one group of individuals who all have the vice of parsimoniousness, and another group who all have the vice of profligacy, the activities of the combined group as a whole will be more perfect than those of the individuals, just as is said regarding the elements.⁷²

Later, he posits that this variety forms the basis for friendship; one must seek companionship in order to broaden his horizons.

Thus, according to Ran, plurality is not only tolerated—it is mandated. Only by incorporating all elements of society does the possibility exist for reaching the ideal mean.⁷³ Without the inclusion of the extremes a people will necessarily tend towards extremism. As such the Torah values the inclusion of sinners in fasts not as an act of mercy but by necessity. Ran takes the Galbanum parable to its ultimate conclusion, arguing that the Galbanum allows the other spices to achieve their latent potential; “it stimulates and actualizes the other spices arousing their aroma.”⁷⁴

Sukkot is a time when we consider the contribution of the Jewish people to the broader world. That is why, for example, we offer seventy bulls as *korbanot* on sukkot, to sustain the seventy nations of the world.⁷⁵ In that light, let us consider an extraordinary parallel. James Madison in “Federalist No. 10” utilized many of these very same arguments that Ran offers in his *Drashot*.

Several of those participating in the constitutional convention of 1787 argued against the formation of a centralized government, fearing that it would include too many “factions.” Madison, in what was likely the most important of the federalist papers, countered, arguing that the stability of the republic rested on the inclusion of multiple and even divisive factions:

As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed. As long as the connection subsists between his reason and his self-love, his opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other.

⁷¹ This notion accords with numerous sources which highlight the uniqueness of each individual; “Just as the countenances of different people vary so to their opinions vary” (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 21.1). Maharal (R. Judah Loew; 1525-1609, Prague) goes even further in his praise of individuality stipulating that this multiplicity of personalities necessarily leads to the diversity of correct opinions within Torah.

⁷² *Derashot ha-Ran*. p. 4-5.

⁷³ R. Samuel Eliezer Edels (Maharsha; 1555-1631, Poland) likewise argues that only the debate between discordant positions can lead to the recognition of the truth (*Chidushai Aggadot; Chagiga* 3b).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁷⁵ *Sukkah* 55b. The Midrash states that if the nations had realized how much they benefited from these offerings, they would have sent armies to protect Jerusalem from attack.

In this famous passage Madison unknowingly⁷⁶ duplicates the argument of Ran for including the disparate elements of society. The “reciprocal influence” described by the Federalist is the counterbalance between the hoarder and spender depicted by the Talmudist.

In addition, Madison procures another idea from his medieval predecessor. Ran admits a weakness in his scheme of inclusion. If there is no counterbalance, admittance of extreme positions can prove disastrous:

Behold it is true regarding natural phenomena and human nature that everything is strengthened and increased when it is joined by that which is similar to it. It should also be the case regarding inferior and deficient qualities, namely, that the bad characteristic is strengthened when multiplied. This is the absolute truth, however, only under one condition, namely, that the vice in question is identical in each individual. For example, if one person with the characteristic of stinginess, a bad trait, is joined by another with the very same characteristic, that bad characteristic will be strengthened and multiplied.

Thus, while a community with a miser and spendthrift is strengthened by the inclusion of these two individually deficient people, a community which only incorporates members with one extreme will be misguided. Consequently, Ran’s plan relies on a large populace to assure the realization of a moderate and superior position.⁷⁷

Madison makes the very same argument regarding the advantage of a larger union:

The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it... Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.

Having some minorities, argues Madison, proves dangerous. Only with the incorporation of multiple factions are you guaranteed that man’s “opinions and his passions will have a reciprocal influence on each other.”

According to modern scholars history proved Ran (and Madison) right. Joseph Ellis writes in *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2000):

The achievement of the revolutionary generation was a collective enterprise that succeeded because of the diversity of personalities and ideologies present in the mix. Their interactions and juxtapositions generated a dynamic form of balance and equilibrium, not because any of them was perfect or infallible, but because their mutual imperfections and fallibilities, as well as their eccentricities and excesses, checked each other” (17).

I cannot think of a more eloquent articulation of Ran’s idea.

⁷⁶ According to researchers at the Jefferson Library in Monticello, VA, Madison did not have access to *Drashot HaRan*.

⁷⁷ Despite this Ran cautions against the formation of a single global state, like that proposed by William of Ockham, as it would close the opportunity for a malcontent or persecuted citizen from fleeing to another country. This argument also would almost certainly have found favor in the eyes of America’s founding fathers.

Appendix

Having considered the symbolism of the binding of the *lulav* let us review some of the laws.

1. One can bind the species together using anything. A rubber band or a piece of string is fine.⁷⁸ We have a custom to use the leaves of the *lulav*; however, this is not necessary.
2. An alternative to tying a knot is to take the *lulav* leaves and make a holder with a section for the *lulav*, *hadassim* and *aravos*. This does the same thing as tying because it binds the three species together and is also fine. Thus, having the holder and a loop seems redundant, but certainly does not hurt.
3. If one ties, the knot should be a permanent knot; not just a half-knot or slip knot. If one forgot to tie a permanent knot before Yomtov then one may tie a half knot or slip knot on Yomtov, as one may not tie or even tighten a permanent knot on Yomtov.⁷⁹
4. Thus, if one is tying a knot, before Yomtov you can simply take one of the loose leaves from the *lulav* wrap it around and tie a double knot. Some have the custom of making a more elaborate knot in which the leaf is wrapped around and through several times.
5. There is a custom to have three loops to correspond to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov.
6. According to the *Taz*, the bottom loop, which binds the *lulav* to the *haddasim* and *aravot* counts as one of the three; therefore only two more around the *lulav* are necessary.⁸⁰
7. According to the *Elya Rabba* one should have three loops in addition to the loop which binds all three species. Thus, there will be a total of 4 loops.⁸¹
8. One must be able to shake their *lulav* such that the leaves have room to flap; therefore, the top loop should be at least four inches from the top of the *lulav*.⁸²

⁷⁸שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תרנא:א: ויכול לאגדם במין אחר משנה ברורה תרנא:ט: במין אחר - ולית ביה משום בל תוסיף דכיון דאין חובה לאגדו האי לחודיה קאי והאי לחודיה קאי ומשום חציצה נמי ליכא אף שהקשר מפסיק בין ידו להלולב דכל לנאותו אינו חוצץ ואפילו אם הקשר היה בדבר שאינו מינו: ⁷⁹שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תרנא:א: ומצוה לאגדם בקשר גמור, דהיינו ב' קשרים זה על זה, משום נוי ואם לא אגדו מבעוד יום, או שהותר אגודו, אי אפשר לאגדו בי"ט בקשר גמור, אלא אוגדו בעניבה. ⁸⁰ט"ז אורח חיים תרנא:א: ועכ"פ נרא' דהקשר של מטה דהיינו מה שקשר כל הג' מינים ביחד משום נוי הוא נחשב לא' ויעשה למעלה עוד שנים אם אפשר לו: ⁸¹משנה ברורה תרנא:יד: ובא"ר משמע ג' קשרים בלולב עצמו לבד הקשר הד' שאוגד הג' מינים יחד ואם לא נאגד אלא אגד אחת כשר. ⁸²ט"ז אורח חיים תרנא:א: ותמוה לי דהא צריך לכסכס העליון וקשר זה מעכב הכסכוס ע"כ צריך לעשות בענין שיוכל לכסכס היטב: