

Humility's Open Door Policy

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The Jewish Center

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Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, known as the Malbim, was one of the greatest sages of the 19th century. A staunch defender of tradition, he tangled often with liberals and reformers. Once his opponents even succeeded in having him jailed and he was only released thanks to the aid of Sir Moses Montefiore.

The story is told that he once attended a conference at which he spoke immediately following one of his most vocal detractors.

And he began by thanking this opposing rabbi.

“You have helped me understand something that I had always found quite opaque,” he said.

“In the third chapter of Koheles, we read a series of famous pairs. And in each case there's a golden mean to be struck. There's a time to be born and a time to die; and in the middle is a time to live. There's a time to love and a time to hate; and in the middle is a time to feel neither love nor hate. But, he said, there's one couplet that defies the pattern:

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One is either speaking or he's silent. How is it possible to be in the middle?

But you just demonstrated that it's possible to speak – and at the same time – say nothing.”

It could be humbling to be in the presence of the Malbim. In some cases, it could also be humiliating.

And humility is the topic I'd like to call to your attention this morning.

Sometimes there's a profound message hidden in the tiniest detail. We spend a lot of time talking about and thinking about our lulavim and esrogim; but how much time do we devote to thinking about that small piece of dried palm that we use to bind our lulavim together?

So let me back up just half a step before moving forward.

Why is it that we tie our arba minim together?

The answer is that it's a מהלוקת. According to the חכמים, it's part of a broader theme. We all know that we don't just perform Mitzvot; we do our utmost to enhance them and make them as beautiful as possible. And in חז"ל's imagination, an untied lulav is an untidy lulav. It's messy and not very attractive. So we bind it together with the hadasim and aravot in the spirit of זה קלי ואנוהו – we want to be sure that the objects we use in the service of Hashem look smart and neatly organized. According to this approach, sometimes beauty is a function of orderliness.

So binding the lulav is certainly preferable; it's desirable; but in the end, it's not essential.

R' Yehuda has a different Mesorah. For him, binding the lulav has nothing at all to do with beauty. It's a law that's derived from the service we perform on Pesach and it's utterly indispensable.

Remember the bundle of hyssop the Israelites used to daub blood on their doorposts?
The Torah uses the same formulation.

ולקחתם אגודת אזוב וטבלתם בדם אשר בסף
ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ הדר

The fact that in both cases the Torah uses the word ולקחתם tips us off to the halacha that the two Mitzvot are parallel. Binding the hyssop together was required on the doorstep to the exodus. So binding the lulav is no less a requirement.

Even though on a technical level we don't follow the position of R. Yehuda, I'd like to trace his footsteps for a moment because they take us someplace important.

Sukkot is one of my favorite times of the year. We all know the hundred symbolisms of the arba minim. And on some level, they're all meaningful. Because any way you slice it, part of the idea is to promote the sense that when we pick up our lulav and Etrog, we're holding everything: Our sensory lives; our emotional lives; our economic lives. In an agrarian society, this time of the year is the pinnacle of the harvest season. And we have this extraordinary feeling – not just of accomplishment – but wholeness. How blessed we are to have such bounty in our lives.

Everything is fresh and florid and full of life.

The problem is that this is also a kind of a trap. It's so easy to behold this abundance and imagine as the Torah warned:

ואמרת בלבבך כחיי ועצמי ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה

What I've accomplished is the result of my own doing.

In fact, the Midrash even likens our lulavim to weapons. We hold them up proudly as if we've emerged triumphantly from the trials of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. As the Carpenters put it, "We're at the top of the world."

It's with this in mind that I think we can begin to appreciate the force of R. Yehuda's strict requirement for אגג.

Think back for a moment to his source. What were we doing tying hyssop together in Egypt? Why was it essential then?

Of course on a practical level we needed a brush to place the blood on our doorposts. But on the simplest symbolic level, the goal was to promote a sense of humility.

Hyssop itself is considered the lowliest shrub. And as Rashi alludes to, there's something deeply humbling about the process of tying together fibers to make a brush. It leaves one no choice but to recognize that he is in fact very small. The individual fibers themselves have almost no intrinsic value. Only by binding them together do they serve a function.

In fact, thinking about R. Yehuda's position more globally, he's preoccupied with the notion of humility.

This isn't well known because it's not in the gemara, but this is actually R' Yehuda's position throughout the Torah. Whenever there's a mitzvah of לקיחה – whenever there's a mitzvah to take a plant or an herb – it requires egged. We've already seen the first two cases – Korban Pesach and Lulav.

The next case is the Metzarah:

וְלִקַּח לְמִטָּהָר שְׁתֵּי-צִפְרִים חַיֹּת, טְהוֹרוֹת; וְעֵץ אֶרֶז, וְיִשְׁנֵי תוֹלְעוֹת וְאֵזֵב .

And the last case is the Parah Aduma:

וְלִקַּח הַכֹּהֵן, עֵץ אֶרֶז וְאֵזֵב--וְיִשְׁנֵי תוֹלְעוֹת; וְהִשְׁלִיךְ, אֶל-תּוֹךְ שְׂרֵפֶת הַפָּרָה .

What binds together these four cases is that in each instance, there's a pitfall of self-puffery.

- The slave becomes a free man;
- The Metzarah – ostracized from the camp – finally returns;
- The defiled man comes back to a state of purity.

It would be so easy in each of these circumstances for one to call attention to one's own sense of greatness. Look who I am; look how far I've come; look how much I've accomplished.

At just such a moment R. Yehudah says – start tying things together. Recognize that it's only when multiple pieces come together that the individual is endowed with meaning.

This much is self-evident.

But perhaps there's an even more powerful message here.

It's not just about being reminded to be humble because we're worried about the vice of pride. Humility opens doors. It's when a person recognizes his own limitations that he can find deep reservoirs of support in others. It's when Alice became small that she could enter Wonderland. To eat the Korban Pesach was to join the covenantal community of the Jewish people – to begin to accept the notion of mutual responsibility.

The Metzarah and the defiled Jew are ready to be transformed when they are ready to accept help from the Kohen.

And the Jew who binds and shakes the Lulav is reminded that he is but one individual among those who come together in the service of the divine. He surely has his strengths; but it's the recognition that others have theirs that makes it possible for him to develop further.

As David Brooks puts it so well at the end of his *Road to Character*: “No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside – from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions,

institutions, and exemplars. If you are to prosper in the confrontation with yourself, you have to put yourself in a state of affection.”

Like the lulav itself, one has to be prepared to be shaken – to be moved – by external forces and people. It’s when the rigidity of pomposity and self-assuredness gives way to the suppleness of humility, that we become capable of so much more.

The author of Kohelet put it so succinctly:

אל-תִּבְהַל עַל-פִּידָה וְלִבָּהּ אֶל-יְמִהָרָה, לְהוֹצִיא דָבָר--לְפָנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים: כִּי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם וְאַתָּה עַל-הָאָרֶץ, עַל-כֵּן יִהְיֶה דְבָרֶיךָ מְעֻטִים.

Part of our mission is to know – not just who we are – but where we are. Yes, we should reach toward the heavens, but we need to remember that we are but men of the earth.

And so in this moment – when politicians and pundits and pontiffs – speak with such certitude and sureness, that little tie on our lulav cautions us to speak more softly and with more self-doubt. It reminds us that others hold convictions as strongly as we do. It’s when we speak less that we hear more. And it’s when we speak more humbly, that we surely offend less.

עת לחשות ועת לדבר

There is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

If we choose the latter, let’s make sure it’s a choice well-made.