

When Bar Kohkba Ordered *Lulavim* ... The Second Jewish Revolt and the Miracle of the *Lulav*

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As a child growing up in San Diego, I marveled at the *lulavim* and *etrogim* that members of our community “imported” from Los Angeles each year. Few in number, the *lulav* was often quite dry, having been brought, I understood, all the way from Israel. Though I grew up with palm trees in my backyard, these brownish *lulavim* and golden *etrogim* were special, even majestic. My family, like most families, never owned our own *lulav* when I was young. Rather, the shuls brought in a few, and we all shared. This scarcity made the *lulav* feel all the more holy.

If this was the case in a small American community of the late 1960’s and 1970’s, the situation in most pre-War European communities was all the more extreme. A *lulav* and *etrog*, well beyond the means of most Jews, was imported from points south—and for the fortunate, from *Eretz Yisrael* itself. Often kept in a silver container (likely a sugar box with the word *etrog* inscribed carefully upon it), this fruit of redemption was treated with reverence, and even with numinous awe, by the Jews of the Diaspora. Arriving in Israel to learn in 1977, I was overtaken by the abundance of *lulavim* and *ethrogim*. The *shuq* was full of them—large, small, Yemenite and Chassidish. I remember selecting my *lulav* carefully (imagine, getting to choose!), living *halakhot* that until then had been strictly theoretical.¹⁰

Our national love of the *lulav* and *etrog*, identified as the *pri ets pri hadar*, “the fruit of the goodly tree” and by Targum Pseudo-Jonathan as the fruit of the tree of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, is expressed throughout *Hazal* and back to the Second Temple period. Judah the Maccabee rededicated the Temple in 164 BCE with a procession carrying palm fronds for his

¹⁰ For a fascinating reflection on transitions within Jewish communities during the latter twentieth century, focusing on larger “enclave” communities, see H. Soloveitchik, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” *Tradition* 28.4 (1994), posted at: www.lookstein.org/links/orthodoxy.htm

“Sukkot in the month of Kislev.”¹¹ In the Hellenistic world, the palm frond was a symbol for victory, a notion that Jews shared. This is expressed most prominently in the coins of the Second Revolt against Rome (132-135), led by Shimon son of Kosiba, apparently with the blessings of Rabbi Aqiva—who identified Shimon as the messianic “son of the star,” Bar Kokhba. The remains of this revolt are now plentiful, and include massive underground complexes throughout the Shephalah from which Bar Kosiba fought a guerilla war against the Roman legions. Within these complexes, and at numerous other sites in Judaea, thousands of bronze and silver coins have been discovered in numerous denominations that express Bar Kokhba’s intentions in the war. These were literally struck over Roman coins, the pagan imagery of which sometimes peeks through the quickly minted Jewish coins. The largest of the Bar Kokhba coins, the silver tetradrachm, bear the earliest image of the *Beit ha-*



Miqdash preserved, a four columned building (tetrapylon) typical of the Roman period (this is the image use for the famous model of the Temple now at the Israel Museum). Within its massive central portal, the *Shulkhan Lehem ha-Panim*, the Table for the Bread of the Presence, can be seen clearly. The inscription on the side, in ancient Jewish script, reads: “for the redemption of Zion.” The image on the reverse is connected to the one on the face. Here we see a *lulav*, the *hadasim* and *aravot* clearly visible and attached together with a kind of basket (of the kind still used by Ashkenazim), an *etrog* to the right. Bar Kokhba’s minters show us a Jewish palm frond promising victory and rededication of the Temple, even as it shows us a particularly beautiful ritual object of the sort that was taken up by Jews in their synagogues even in the absence of the Temple.

Among the first acts of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in the wake of the Temple’s destruction was the *taqqanah* that the *lulav* was to be taken up in the *medinah*— in local communities-- not just for the first day of Sukkot, but for the entire seven days (*Mishnah Rosh ha-Shanah* 4:3). Ben Zakkai’s intention was to intensify Jewish interaction with an object that had previously been central to the Temple service, but secondary to the synagogues. From Yavneh on, the *lulav* was to become a central symbol of Jewish life even beyond the Temple, promising redemption and messianic restoration. Bar Kokhba took this notion quite seriously. He would bring redemption to *klal Yisrael* as messiah. We know this not only from his coins, but from a letter preserved in the arid Judean desert and discovered by Yigael Yadin in the Judean desert.¹² This Aramaic document ensures the procurement of *lulavim*, *etrogim*, *hadasim* and *aravot* even in time of war,

¹¹ 2 Maccabees, chapters 1, 10. For a historical introduction to Classical Jewish History, including the sources presented here, visit [Jewish and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World](http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Jews_and_Judaism_in_the_Greco-Roman_Period), ed. S. Fine, cojs.org/cojswiki/Jews_and_Judaism_in_the_Greco-Roman_Period

¹² This document was published in a popular format in Y. Yadin, *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome* (New York: Random House, 1971), 129. See cojs.org/cojswiki/The_Bar_Kokhba_Letters:_Day-to-Day_Conduct_of_the_Revolt

asking that one Yehuda son of Menashe, located at the still unidentified *Qiryat 'Arabayyah* in the Judaeen Desert, send transport to two other officers, located in Ein Gedi:

Shimon to Yehuda, son of Menashe at Qiryat 'Arabayyah:

I have sent you two donkeys [in order] that you send with them two men to Yehonatan son of Ba'yan and to Mesabala [in Ein Gedi, so] that they pack and send to the camp, to you, lulavin and etrogin.

And you are to send additional persons from your place and let them bring hadasin and aravin.

And prepare them [probably, "tithe them"] and deliver them to the camp, because the population [army?] is large.

Fare well (shelam)!

Lulavim were not just a symbol to be placed on a coin by Bar Kokhba, nor just a memory device to remind of the Temple, but a necessary procurement for his army at its encampment in time of war. The significance of the *lulav* and *etrog* was so great that Shimon himself saw to it that numerous sets were available to his troops. Was there enough for everyone? We cannot know. The letter provides that Yehuda son of Menashe send enough for two donkeys to carry, which was clearly quite a few!

The Bar Kokhba revolt ultimately failed, and Shimon son of Kosiba was reframed for ever more as the "son of Lies" (Bar Kozba). Nonetheless, what is striking in Bar Kokhba's Sukkot preparations is how similar they are to our own. Having grown up in an era not so long ago when *lulavim* were far from plentiful, I continually marvel and take note of this minor miracle each time I am surrounded by Jews with palm frond in one hand, a *siddur* in the other. Whether in once-distant San Diego, in New York, Yerushalayim or the most distant military base in *Medinat Yisrael*, *lulavim*, *etrogim*, *hadasim* and *aravot* now abound. It is no less of a miracle to behold as each of us raises up the *lulav* within our *minyanim* and with all of the generations before us--including, I might imagine, the soldiers of Bar Kokhba-- pronounce together, *ana ha-Shem hoshiya na*, "O Lord, redeem us"