

Parsha Ponders

Hoshana Rabbah | October 8, 2020 | 20 Tishrei 5781

Love independent of deed¹

ביום שביעי שהוא הושענא רבה נוהגים להרבות במזמורים כמו ביום טוב וכו' ונוטלים ערבה ביום זה מלבד ערבה שבלולב

On the seventh day [of Sukkos], which is called *Hoshana Rabbah*, the custom is to increase in Psalms, like we do on a Yom Tov...and we take a willow branch on this day, besides the willow found in the four species²

The last day of Sukkos is one of the strangest days of prayer on the calendar. It is known as *Hoshana Rabbah*. On the one hand, it's still Sukkos, so we shake the four species. Like the other days of *Chol HaMoed*, it's like a weekday in that some creative work is permitted³, and some even wear *tefillin*. However, it's not like the other "weekdays" of Sukkos. We add extra prayers, those that are usually only said on Shabbos and Yom Tov. Tunes from the High Holidays are used. A lot of literature has been written on Hoshana Rabbah, likening it to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Something unique about Hoshana Rabbah is, after we take our four species like on the other days of Sukkos, we take the *aravos*, the willow branches, on their own. This practice was instituted by the Prophets⁴. We do this in commemoration of what happened in the Temple. On *Hoshana Rabbah*, the Kohanim⁵ would circle the Altar with *aravos* seven times⁶. Why was specifically the willow branch chosen? What makes it different than the other three of the four species? What message are we conveying with this practice of taking the *aravos*?

Chazal give different suggestions as to what the four species symbolize. One suggestion⁷ is they resemble parts of the body. The *lulav* resembles the spine, the *hadass/myrtle* branch resembles eyes, the *aravos* resemble the mouth/lips, and the *esrog* resembles the heart. Another suggestion is they resemble a spear in the hands of someone triumphant from battle⁸. A third suggestion is they represent different types of Jews⁹. An *esrog* has both taste, symbolizing someone with Torah knowledge, and smell, symbolizing someone good deeds. A *lulav* has taste (meaning, the dates it grows with), but no smell. The *hadass* has smell but no taste. The *aravos* have no taste, or no smell. That is, they represent someone with no Torah knowledge, and no good deeds. The *aravos* seemingly represents the worst of us. Again we can ask, why is this what is specifically singled out on *Hoshana Rabbah*?

¹ Based on *Shem MiShmuel Moadim Hoshana Rabbah* 5679 s.v. ענין הערבה שנטילת בפ"ע

² *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 664:1,2

³ Cf. *Rema ad. loc.*, who writes: וואין רגילין לעשות מלאכה של חול עד אחר יציאה מבית הכנסת. The *Levush ad. loc.*, brought by the *Magen Avraham ad. loc.* § 1 and *Mishnah Berurah ad. loc.* § 5, says that people even remove money from their wallet on *Hoshana Rabbah* morning. See also *Pri Megadim Eishel Avraham ad. loc.*

⁴ *Sukkah* 44a

⁵ *Ibid* 43b with *Rashi* and *Tosafos s.v.* שלוחי בית דין

⁶ *Ibid* 4:5 (they would encircle the Altar only once on the other days). Cf. *Tosafos Yom Tov ad. loc.*, who brings a dispute if they encircled with *aravos*, or the four species. Either way, the *mishnah* says they would specifically take *aravos*

⁷ *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:14

⁸ *Ibid* § 2 with *Mattanos Kehuna* and *Maharzu*, quoting *Aruch* § בייך (Cf. *Anaf Yosef ad. loc.*); *Midrash Tanchuma Emor* § 18

⁹ *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12

The first time that we see Hashem interacting with Avraham, no context is given¹⁰. Hashem simply commands Avraham to leave his home. How did Avraham merit to prophecy? What righteous acts did he do to reach such spiritual heights¹¹? We aren't told. Furthermore, Hashem promises Avraham that tremendous rewards await him if he leaves his homeland. Why was Avraham deserving of wealth, prosperity, and blessing¹²?

The Maharal gives an interesting answer¹³. Avraham was arguably the first Jew. He was also exceedingly righteous. If the Torah told us about all the good deeds that Avraham did, and then told us that Hashem chose him and his descendants to be Hashem's representatives in this world, we would be misled. We would think that Hashem chose Avraham due to his righteousness. It would be a relationship that's dependant on something, where if that something is gone, the relationship withers away¹⁴. If Avraham's descendants didn't measure up in their righteousness, they could lose that relationship with Hashem.

The Torah doesn't give any context to Avraham's prophecy and selection, to teach us that this relationship is without conditions. Hashem didn't choose Avraham because of his righteousness. Rather, He chose Avraham without some apparent reason. There was something intrinsic to Avraham's soul¹⁵ that made him and his descendants worthy of this mission. So even if his descendants aren't as righteous as their forefather, this special relationship is just as strong.

Perhaps this message is alluded to with the *aravos*. The *aravos* have no taste and no smell, representing those Jews without any Torah knowledge or good deeds. Even these Jews are part of the four species. More than that, they are specially held on *Hoshana Rabbah*. This is to convey that Hashem chose the nation of Israel, not for their righteousness, but because of their intrinsic essence. Even the simplest of Jews have a very close relationship with Hashem. On *Hoshana Rabbah* we're trying to engrain this message into ourselves. Even in this bitter exile, where we might think that Hashem has abandoned us, especially as we're not as great as our ancestors, there's no reason to despair. Hashem is just as close to us as He was with Avraham.

Chag Sameach!

¹⁰ [Genesis 12:1](#)

¹¹ [Ramban ad. loc. v. 2](#)

¹² The [Maharal](#) in his [Drashas Shabbos HaGadol](#) p. 205 *col. 2* says this is what was bothering *Chazal* in [Bereishis Rabbah 39:1](#)

¹³ [Netzach Yisroel](#) Chapter 11; [Derech Chaim 5:17](#); [Gevuros Hashem](#) Chapter 24; [Drashas Shabbos HaGadol loc. cit.](#)

¹⁴ [Avos 5:17](#).

¹⁵ The [Maharal](#) didn't specify this part. This is the [Shem MiShmuel's](#) understanding of the [Maharal](#). I couldn't get a clear grasp of the [Maharal's](#) understanding of why Hashem chose Avraham. The [Maharal](#) writes: כי הש"י בחר באברהם ובזרעו מצד עצמו...כי הבחירה באברהם ובזרעו היה מצד עצם אברהם ובזרעו מבלי מעשה