

## Shaking a Lulav Until Some Meaning Comes Out Sukkot

By Rabbi Jason A. Miller

I have a confession to make. Now I know that a confession is an odd way to open a sermon, but nevertheless, I feel I must. My name is Jason Miller and I am allergic to the lulav. I swear I'm not making this up. It's true. As a rabbi, the lulav - that significant Jewish symbol - has become an occupational hazard for me. Because of this allergy, as you can imagine, Sukkot has never been one of my favorite chagim. Even before I became allergic to the lulav, I was never a big fan of Sukkot. Marching around in circles waving a plant and a shriveled lemon-looking fruit always struck me as pagan-like and silly. And don't even get me started about pine needles in my soup. At [JTS](#), one of the most popular holidays, Sukkot is met with excitement, dancing, and large festive meals. For me, it would be more accurate to say that I greeted Sukkot with itching, sneezing, and headaches.

In fact, a few years ago, I asked one of my rabbis at the Seminary what I should do about the lulav allergy. He advised me not to shake the lulav and etrog that year. And then, after Shacharit, there I was walking down Broadway in front of the entrance to Columbia University. I saw them from a couple of blocks away. And they obviously spotted me and my yarmulke walking their way, because as soon as I got close enough to them, they blocked my path on the sidewalk. "Did you shake a lulav today?" they asked. Chabad Lubavitch. The Mitzvah Police. I didn't know what to say. I was in a hurry and certainly didn't want to stop and explain my odd medical condition to these strangers. I considered telling a little white lie, saying that I had already performed the mitzvah of lulav that morning. But, I just couldn't bring myself to doing that. So, realizing I didn't really have a choice, I took his lulav and etrog, said the blessing, and showed those Lubavitchers that I could make a lulav shake as well as the next Jew. And then I was back on my way, sneezing and itching as I went. It was then that I decided to find some deeper meaning in the mitzvah of lulav and etrog.

Apparently, I am not the only one searching for some rationale behind the shaking of the lulav. In the midrashic text Pesikta D'Rav Kahana alone, there are five potential interpretations for the commandment to take the lulav. The one that rings truest for me is that the *pri etz hadar* refers to the Jewish people. Just as the etrog has both taste and fragrance, so within the Jewish people are those who have the merit of both Torah and good deeds. Just as a palm tree, the lulav, has a taste but no fragrance, so among the Jewish people there are those who are learned but have performed no good deeds. Just as a myrtle has a fragrance but no taste, there are those who are uneducated but active in demonstrating lovingkindness and good deeds; and, just as the willow has neither taste nor fragrance, there are those in the Jewish community who are uneducated and have not performed loving deeds.

The midrash makes the beautiful point that as these are all joined in a single bond, they will affect atonement for one another. Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh Lazeh - the entire Jewish people are responsible one for the other. By holding these seemingly different four plants together, we make the statement that God will consider us as a united entity and judge us together, recognizing our differences, but embracing our love and care for one another as well. This message could not be more appropriate during this season when we just finished uttering the confessional - the vidui - on Yom Kippur. We recited it in the plural form, in full knowledge that while we might not have committed all of those sins during the past year, *ashamnu*, *bagadnu*, *gazalnu*, we are to be held accountable nonetheless for our fellow community members. We stand up together, united, as the different plants of the lulav, each with our unique characteristics, but bonded together ready to be judged for another year.

After studying this beautiful midrash, I considered the directions in which we shake the lulav. The most common interpretation for the six directions in which we wave our lulav, and the one I learned as a five-year-old in day school, is that God is all around us and we are thus recognizing this belief as we offer our thanks. A nice interpretation, but in light of the midrash from Pesikta D'Rav Kahanna, I meditated on a different possible meaning for these six directions.

We must realize that our Jewish community does not end in this synagogue, or in New Jersey, or on the East Coast, or in North America for that matter. When we talk about a united Jewish people - Klal Yisrael - and when we state proudly that each of us is responsible for our fellow Jews, it is essential that we consider all of the Jewish communities around the globe, from Europe to South America to Australia to the most remote regions of Africa and Asia.

As I have been preparing for a course I am teaching this fall to our high school students - "A Virtual Tour of the Jewish World" - there's been one song that I cannot get out of my head. Maybe you've heard this song? "Wherever you go there's always someone Jewish. You're never alone because God made you a Jew." Indeed, it is a powerful statement for us to make as we take the lulav, a symbol of the collective Jewish people - our sisters and brothers - and metaphorically show it to the Jewish communities all over the world essentially saying "*hineni*" - "Here I stand with you ready to be judged together."

Sukkot has a completely new meaning for me now. The lulav has a completely new meaning for me. I guess I look back at that day when the Lubavitcher handed me his lulav to shake in a whole new light. Maybe, just maybe, in handing me his lulav, he was making a deeper statement about our people. It is a nice thought. So now I take my allergy medicine and embrace my newfound understanding of the power of Sukkot. I guess you just have to keep shaking that lulav until some meaning comes out.

Chag Sameach.