

What Does the King Want After the Victory?

The Four Minim, the King's Soldiers, and the Reward of Sukkos

Day One Drush • Slot 2 • Shabbos, 15 Tishrei 5787

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Two questions in the Midrash. Why does it name lulav and esrog, but omit hadas and aravah? Why specify that the victor holds his spear **in his hand**, and that Israel carries its lulav and esrog **in its hands**?

The Midrash's missing minim

The Midrash says:

מִשָּׁל לְשֵׁנִים שְׁנֹכְסִין לְדִין, וְלִית אֶבֶן יָדַעִין מֵאֵן נִצָּח.
מֵאֵן דָּנְסִיב כִּידוֹן בְּיָדֵיהּ, אֶבֶן יָדַעִין דְּהוּא נִצָּח דִּינָא.

Two people enter a courtroom. We do not know which one won. Then one comes out with a **kidon**, a spear or javelin, in his hand. Seeing him carry it, we know that he prevailed.

After the judgment of the Yamim Noraim, says the Midrash, the Jewish people come out before Hashem carrying **lulavim and esrogim**. We see the sign of their victory.

Two details ask to be explained. **First**, why only lulavim and esrogim? **Where are the hadasim and aravos?** Without them, we cannot perform the mitzvah. **Second**, why does the Midrash tell us that the victor carries his kidon **in his hand**? Where else would he carry it? And in the nimshal, why stress that the lulav and esrog are **in our hands**?

The days themselves give us the setting for these questions. Rosh Hashanah is followed by the days of teshuvah, Yom Kippur, Sukkos, and then Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah. How do these days belong together? To see their order, listen to a mashal about a king and his soldiers.

Today is the first day of Sukkos, but because it is Shabbos, we have not taken the four minim. Tomorrow, please God, we will take all four together. Today we can ask what they will mean when we lift them.

Four soldiers in one army

Imagine a king who calls his people to war.

He tells them what he wants: **his honour and his kingship should spread throughout the world**. This cannot be accomplished in a single campaign. There will be other battles.

Four groups of soldiers answer him. The first wants the king's honour to spread. They love him and are ready to stand with him. The second loves the king, but also wants the reward he has promised. Their loyalty is genuine; so is their hope of being rewarded.

The third is thinking principally about the reward. They will fight, but what they expect to receive occupies their thoughts. The fourth is afraid to refuse the king. They wear the uniform and march with the army, but fear brought them there.

From the roadside, you see four groups marching in the same direction. **You cannot see why each soldier came.**

We know this about ourselves. People can be sitting beside one another in shul, saying the same words, while their minds are in very different places. One is thanking Hashem. One is pleading for someone at home. One has come because the day matters deeply to him. Another has come because he could not quite bring himself to stay away. Only Hashem knows the whole story of each person's heart.

Why the king does not pay in full

The soldiers win their first battle. The king promised them a reward. Why does he not give all of it now? Because **there are more wars to fight**.

He fears that if they receive everything immediately, some will say, "I have enough. Why should I go into battle again?" So he gives each one **a little now**, and promises the rest when all the wars have been completed. The king has not forgotten his soldiers. He is keeping them with him for the work still ahead.

It is a sharp observation about human nature. When we need help desperately, we know how to pray. We know how to promise that life will be different if Hashem helps us. Then a worry eases, a little money comes in, a frightening result turns out better than expected—and how quickly ordinary life takes over again.

The question is whether receiving a gift brings us closer to the Giver, or makes us feel that we can now manage without Him.

The battles of the Yamim Noraim

Rosh Hashanah is described here as a **milchamah**. Accusations are brought against Israel. The seventy nations and their heavenly representatives stand against the Jewish people. Opposition to Hashem's people is bound up with opposition to Hashem and His kingship. This is a battle in which His honour and our fate are joined.

But Rosh Hashanah is the **first battle**. We still have the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. We must confront the accusations that arise from our own actions as well. We have time to return, to repair what we can, and to ask ourselves why we have come before the King.

By Yom Kippur, Hashem sees more than the fact that we stood in His army. He sees what each of us sought, and whether these ten days have changed us.

Think back to Yom Kippur in this shul. Some people prayed for most of the day. Some made every effort to be here for Ne'ilah. Some were carrying a worry about a parent, a spouse, or a child through every tefillah. Some were asking how they would meet the needs of their family in the coming year.

We were right to bring those prayers. A person does not have to pretend not to need help in order to serve Hashem sincerely. But the king's soldiers leave us with another question alongside our requests: **As I ask Hashem for what I need, what place does Hashem Himself have in my life?**

From judgment into the King's shade

Then comes Sukkos. We leave the courtroom and enter the Sukkah: צֶלֶן ה'—**Hashem is your shade.**

One person enters grateful for relief already received. Another enters still waiting for an answer. One feels close to Hashem. Another wants very much to feel close, but cannot yet say that he does. All enter beneath His shade.

The four minim show what can happen to the very person who entered. The **esrog** resembles the **lev**, the heart: ל. The **aravah** resembles the **peh**, the mouth: פ. The **lulav** resembles the **shidrah**, the spine: ש. The **hadasim** resemble the **einayim**, the eyes: ע.

Those letters spell ל-פ-ש-ע—**lepesha**, toward transgression. The heart wants. The mouth speaks. The eyes look. The spine holds us upright and carries us toward wherever we have chosen to go. These are central parts of a person, and each can draw us toward wrongdoing.

Teshuvah does not give us a new body. We bring that same heart and those same eyes into the Sukkah. But the letters can be rearranged: ע-ל-ש-פ—**leshefa**, toward a flow of blessing.

A heart that once wanted the wrong thing can begin to care for someone else. A mouth that spoke carelessly can say the words that repair a relationship. Eyes that quickly found faults can notice another person's pain. The strength with which we pursued one thing can be used to pursue something better. That is **lepesha becoming leshefa**: the same human being turning in a new direction.

Taste, fragrance, and reward

Now look at what we will take in our hands tomorrow. The **esrog** has both taste and fragrance. The date palm, from which we take the **lulav**, gives fruit with taste. **Hadas** has fragrance. **Aravah** has neither taste nor fragrance.

In this teaching, **taste** represents a reward enjoyed in **Olam Hazei**, this world. **Fragrance** points toward **Olam Haba**, the world to come—something precious that we cannot yet take and taste.

The esrog points to a person hoping for reward in **both** worlds. The lulav points to reward in **this** world. The hadas points toward reward in the **next** world. And the aravah, with neither taste nor fragrance, can represent service out of love, without making reward the reason for serving.

These are not labels for us to place on other people. We may find several of these wishes within one heart. We ask Hashem for health and livelihood here. We hope for the world to come. And sometimes we do a mitzvah simply because we want to do His will.

That last moment may be quiet. Nobody sees the patience we show when we are tired, the honesty that costs us something, or the promise from Yom Kippur that we keep on an ordinary weekday. Yet in those moments, we are helping the King's honour spread into our small part of the world.

Why the Midrash names only two

Now we can answer **both** of our opening questions. The Midrash describes a **visible sign of victory**. The lulav and esrog are associated with **taste**, with reward that can be experienced in this world. When blessing is given here, people can see something of it. The victor has emerged carrying his spear; Israel emerges with lulav and esrog.

And this is why it says **in his hand**, and **in our hands**. A person can show the spear he is holding. We can show the lulav and esrog that we hold. What can be seen and received in this world is, as it were, **in our hands**. The reward of Olam Haba cannot yet be held up for everyone to see; neither can anyone see whether we served Hashem out of love without seeking reward. The hadas and aravah are essential to the mitzvah, but they point to what is **not visible in our hands** today. Tomorrow, we will take **all four** minim, joining what is visible to what remains hidden.

And remember the king's promise. What is given now is not everything. There are more battles ahead. Someone who came out of Yom Kippur still waiting for an answer should not be told to pretend that every prayer has already been fulfilled. The King has not left His soldiers because the campaign is still underway.

The joy given beneath the Sukkah

What does Hashem give as His people gather beneath His shade? He gives **simchah**. The joy of the days of Sukkos grows toward Shemini Atzeres and Simchas Torah.

Yet Hoshana Rabbah is still before us, and the warning remains: וַיִּשְׁמְנוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּבְעֹט. A person can receive plenty and forget the One who gave it. The joy of Sukkos is meant to help us remain with Hashem for the battles and the work of the year ahead.

A mother, a son, and the same four minim

I want to finish with an account from the family of a great Jerusalem rosh yeshivah. His mother, Rebbetzin Simcha Tzedaka, loved the mitzvah of the four minim. Each Sukkos she took them with deep feeling and recited the **kavanos** associated with the mitzvah.

Her son, Rabbi Yehuda Tzedaka, was troubled by her practice. Women are exempt from this time-bound mitzvah, he said; how could she speak of the spiritual effects of her taking the minim in the same way as someone who is obligated? His question came from a serious understanding of the mitzvah. His mother, though, knew what this act meant to her and was distressed by the suggestion that she should set those kavanos aside.

She brought the question to Rabbi Ezra Attiya. He called her son and asked him something searching: **How do you know what your mother's mitzvah accomplishes in the upper worlds?** A person who does a mitzvah gives pleasure to the Creator.

Three people were thinking about the same four minim. A son was carefully considering obligation and its spiritual consequences. His mother was thinking about coming close to Hashem through a mitzvah she loved. Their teacher asked them to consider the joy the act gives its **Maker**.

That last question takes us back to the soldiers. One thinks about the reward. Another thinks about the battles ahead. Another asks what the King wants. We do not need to guess what is in the heart of the person standing beside us with a lulav tomorrow. We can ask what we ourselves are bringing.

Tomorrow we will take all four minim together. We will bring our requests for this world, our hopes for the next, and whatever love we have managed to grow. **May Hashem answer the prayers we brought before Him. May He turn our heart, mouth, spine, and eyes from lepesha to leshefa. And may the joy He gives us beneath His shade help us bring honour to Him long after Sukkos has ended.**

Source credits

Vayikra Rabbah 30:2; Ginzei Yosef, Sukkos, pp. 37-39 of the supplied extract. Closing account: Aharon Surasky, Vezos LiYehuda, vol. 1, pp. 66-67.