

WHAT DOES THE ARAVAH BRING?

Belonging to the Jewish People
Before We Have Achieved Anything

הערבה העריבה

The aravah may possess neither taste nor fragrance, yet it carries the one quality without which the other species can never become a mitzvah: it belongs.

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The Question Hidden in the Pasuk

Before turning to the familiar symbolism of taste and fragrance, we must read the Torah's words carefully. Each species is introduced by a phrase that defines what must be present for the mitzvah:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפֹּת תְּמָרִים
וְעֵנָף עֵץ עֵבֶת וְעֵרְבֵי נָחַל

“You shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of a beautiful tree, branches of date palms, a branch of a thickly leaved tree, and willows of the brook.”

The descriptions are not poetic decoration. In the first three species, the Torah's words establish qualities that the object must actually possess. The ma'alah cannot remain an idea or a potential; it must be present in the species before us.

The esrog must be hadar

The Torah does not say merely “a fruit.” It says pri etz hadar. The fruit must possess the halachic quality of hadar. An esrog that is not hadar is not an esrog for this mitzvah. Period. It does not help that it once possessed beauty, that beauty lies somewhere within its potential, or that it might become beautiful later. The defining quality must be present now.

The lulav must be kapos temarim

The Torah does not say merely “a palm branch.” It says kapos temarim. It must come from the kind of palm that bears dates, and it must possess the form expressed by kapos, with leaves capable of remaining gathered with the central spine. If those defining qualities are absent, we do not say that the potential is enough. It is not the lulav the Torah asked us to take.

The hadas must be avos

The Torah does not say merely “a myrtle.” It says anaf etz avos. Its leaves must grow in the halachic pattern of avos, three leaves emerging at the same level and covering the stem. A myrtle that is not avos is not the hadas the Torah defined.

The first three species are defined by the ma'alah they actually reveal. If the potential is not realized, they are not what they are supposed to be. Period.

The Aravah Breaks the Pattern

The fourth phrase appears to follow exactly the same structure: arvei nachal, willows of the brook. If hadar, kapos and avos impose halachic requirements, then nachal should also impose one. The willow before us should have to grow beside a stream.

But it does not. The halachah rules that an aravah is kosher even if it grew in a desert or on a mountain. The Rambam explains that the Torah calls the species arvei nachal because it normally grows by water; it is the kind of tree associated with the brook. Yet this individual branch need not prove that it actually grew there.

Why is the aravah the only species whose Torah-given description need not be visibly fulfilled in the branch before us?

Now the Midrash Becomes Much Deeper

The Midrash compares the four species to four kinds of Jews. Taste represents Torah knowledge; fragrance represents good deeds. The esrog, possessing both, represents a Jew of Torah and mitzvos. The lulav's date has taste but no fragrance, representing Torah. The hadas has fragrance but no taste, representing good deeds. The aravah has neither taste nor fragrance, representing the Jew in whom neither Torah learning nor mitzvah achievement is presently visible.

Read together with the halachah, the comparison is exact. The esrog Jew joins as an esrog because the beauty of Torah and good deeds is actually present. The lulav Jew must truly possess the taste of Torah. The hadas Jew must truly carry the fragrance of mitzvos. Each brings a distinct, developed ma'alah to the agudah.

The aravah is different. It does not enter the bundle by displaying an achievement. It brings something prior to achievement: the essential fact that this person is a Jew, a child of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, bound at the root to Hashem and to Klal Yisrael. That identity is not earned, and it does not disappear when nothing impressive is yet visible.

The first three species must become what their potential demands. The aravah remains an aravah even when it has not reached the water.

A Willow Far from the Water

The phrase *arvei nachal* now becomes luminous. Water is the aravah's natural home, and our Sages teach that water signifies Torah. This particular willow may be standing in a desert; this particular Jew may have grown up far from learning, mitzvos and Jewish life. Yet distance from the water has not changed the species.

This applies especially to a Jew whose alienation was never truly chosen, a *tinok shenishbah* raised without access to the inheritance that was his. We are not permitted to say: "First grow beside the river. First acquire taste or fragrance. Then you may join us." Halachah itself tells us that an aravah need not first present proof of the brook.

The Torah therefore insists that the aravah be bound together with the other species now. Its Jewish essence is already sufficient for belonging. And precisely through that embrace—through *ohav es habriyos*, loving another Jew simply as one of Hashem's creations—we may reach *umekarvan laTorah*, drawing that person toward the water that has always been his natural source.

This is why the aravah is indispensable. The bundle would be spiritually false without the Jew whose only visible claim is the deepest claim of all: "I am part of this people."

A Knock Before Kol Nidrei

Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles presents the following Chassidic account, adapted from *Sichat HaShavua*, concerning Rabbi Menachem Kalish, the Amshinover Rebbe.

Only a short time remained before Yom Kippur. The *beis midrash* in Amshinov was already crowded. Some people were reciting *Tehillim*; others were reviewing their deeds and quietly confessing. Everyone was waiting for the Rebbe to enter so that *Kol Nidrei* could begin.

The Rebbe was still at home, surrounded by his family, who had gathered to receive his blessing. Suddenly, someone began pounding urgently upon the door.

The village blacksmith and his wife stood outside, both crying bitterly. Their son had been drifting away from Jewish life for several years. He had rejected their guidance, spent his time among local non-Jewish youths and now intended to convert. The ceremony had been arranged for the following morning - Yom Kippur itself.

The parents did not even dare ask the Rebbe to prevent it entirely. They begged only that he approach the local priest, who respected him, and request a postponement until after Yom Kippur.

The Rebbe listened and then dictated a respectful letter in Polish. His daughter-in-law Sarah, who wrote polished Polish, put it onto paper. The Rebbe handed the letter to his attendant, Reb Yudel, and instructed him to deliver it directly into the priest's hands as quickly as possible.

Reb Yudel ran. The Rebbe took out his pocket watch and began counting the passing seconds.

The sun was dropping. The congregation was waiting. Yom Kippur was about to begin. Yet the Rebbe continued to wait for an answer concerning one young Jew who apparently wanted nothing more to do with the Jewish people.

At last, Reb Yudel returned. The priest had agreed to postpone the ceremony.

Only then did the Rebbe leave for shul. He entered in the final moments before sunset, dressed in white and wrapped in his tallis. Those who regularly davened with him felt that the prayers possessed unusual intensity. The Rebbe appeared to be struggling for the soul of a Jew whom almost everyone else had already regarded as lost.

The Young Man at the Door

Yom Kippur ended. The Rebbe sat at the head of the table surrounded by his chassidim. His face was radiant, as though he had returned victorious from a difficult battle.

Suddenly, the doors flew open. A young man rushed inside. His hair was dishevelled, his clothes were crumpled, and a worn yarmulke rested awkwardly upon his head. He ran toward the Rebbe and cried that he was torn apart inside. He regretted what he had nearly done and begged the Rebbe to save him.

Several chassidim knew who he was, and they began to murmur. After all the anguish he had caused his parents, after delaying the Rebbe before Kol Nidrei, how could he now burst in and disturb the gathering after Yom Kippur?

The Rebbe heard them.

He rose from his chair and walked toward the young man. There was no anger on his face and no demand that the young man first prove his sincerity. The Rebbe extended his hand, brought him to the head of the table, seated him beside him and poured him a cup of wine.

"Make a berachah," the Rebbe told him. "And say l'chaim."

The young man recited the berachah, and the Rebbe answered "Amen" with all his heart.

That welcome changed the direction of the young man's life. He attached himself to the Amshinover Rebbe, began learning Torah diligently, davened with sincerity and became fully integrated among the chassidim.

The chassidim later said that the Rebbe's letter had succeeded in postponing the conversion, but only the Rebbe's prayers and tears on Yom Kippur could have returned that wandering soul to its source.

Bind Him First

When the young man entered, the chassidim could detect neither taste nor fragrance. They did not see Torah learning or a record of mitzvos. They saw only how far he had wandered and how much pain he had caused.

But the Amshinover Rebbe saw an aravah.

He did not tell him, "Change your life, and afterward you may sit among us." He placed him at the table while he was still an aravah. He bound him into the group before the young man had earned a place through accomplishment.

And because he was first shown that he belonged, taste and fragrance eventually began to grow.

Sometimes a Jew can begin to change only after we have shown him that he already belongs.

What the Aravah Asks of Us

This teaching makes two demands, and we must not use either one to erase the other.

When we look at another Jew, the aravah teaches us that belonging does not wait for achievement. We may not exclude a Jew until he has acquired taste or fragrance. We draw him close *mimkomo hu*—from where he stands now—because his essential Jewish identity is already whole.

But when we examine ourselves, the other three species teach the opposite lesson: potential is not enough. If we wish to be an esrog, the hadar must be present. If we wish to be a lulav, we must truly possess the taste of Torah. If we wish to be a hadas, the fragrance of good deeds must actually emerge from our lives. A *ma'alah* that exists only in theory is not yet a contribution to the bundle.

We must never turn the aravah's unconditional belonging into an excuse for an esrog to live like an aravah. The aravah teaches how we receive a Jew who presently has neither taste nor fragrance. It does not lower the demand placed upon the Jew who has been given the opportunity and potential to develop them. An esrog without hadar has failed to become an esrog; a lulav without its Torah has failed to become a lulav; a hadas without its fragrance has failed to become a hadas.

Thus ahavas Yisrael never means indifference to growth. Hillel's order is exact: ohev es habriyos—first love the person without demanding credentials—and then umekarvan laTorah—bring him close to Torah. The embrace is unconditional; the aspiration is unlimited.

The esrog, lulav and hadas also need the aravah. Their visible gifts become a mitzvah only when they join an agudah aches, one united group. The aravah reminds every accomplished Jew that beneath all achievement lies the same unearned covenantal identity.

The One Quality We Cannot Do Without

The Shulchan Aruch records that although an aravah not taken from a stream is kosher, it is good and beautiful to seek a fresh one from the brook. The halachah itself preserves both truths: the distant willow is already an aravah, and the place beside the water is still where it can flourish.

The aravah may presently reveal its connection to Torah, or that connection may lie buried beneath distance and confusion. But it remains an aravah—a member of the species whose roots remember water.

Our task is to recognize that identity, draw it close and bind it together with the rest of Klal Yisrael.

The aravah may possess neither taste nor fragrance, but it carries the one quality without which the other three species can never become a mitzvah: it belongs.

And once it knows that it belongs, we may yet discover how much taste and fragrance were waiting to emerge.

Sources and Acknowledgements

1. Torah and halachah: Vayikra 23:40; Sukkah 31a-33b; Rambam, Hilchos Shofar, Sukkah VeLulav 7:3; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 645-648.
2. The four species as four kinds of Jews: Vayikra Rabbah 30:12.
3. Water as Torah: Bava Kamma 17a, based upon Yeshayahu 55:1.
4. Principal conceptual source: Rabbi Eliyahu Wolf, Me'at Min HaOr - Mo'adim, Sukkos, "Ha-Aravah Ha-Areivah," pp. 53-56. This is an English adaptation and development of his central idea.
5. The Amshinover account: As Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles describes it in "The Knock Before Kol Nidre," translated and adapted from Sichat HaShavua no. 1342; www.myascent.org/the-knock-before-kol-nidre/.