

Hoshana Rabba Gems | Part One

Tuesday's teaching · A day to stand before the King

What happens on Hoshana Rabba?

Hoshana Rabba is the seventh and final day of Sukkos, still a day of Chol Hamoed, yet its morning in shul feels different. The davening is longer and more elaborate. We add psalms with a Yom Tov flavour; parts of the Torah service and the Kaddish after Musaf are said in a Yom Tov manner. We take the four species and, instead of the usual single circuit, make seven hakafoes around the bimah with the Hoshanos, calling to Hashem for salvation. The service also includes the separate aravah and its customary beating.

The Shulchan Aruch describes additional prayers for water, for Sukkos is a time of judgment concerning water. The Aruch HaShulchan calls Hoshana Rabba the gemar hadin, the concluding judgment, and explains that water also embraces livelihood and other needs. Its prayers carry the gravity of a final decision for the year, together with the closeness and joy of Sukkos.

The Rema records the custom of leaving ordinary weekday work until after one has left shul. Ideally, if one can arrange it, one should set aside the entire day from work, allowing the davening the unhurried time one gives a Yom Tov morning. Even if work is unavoidable afterward, the service should not be squeezed into a hurried weekday schedule. Hoshana Rabba remains Chol Hamoed: Yom Tov's full melachah restrictions do not apply, while the rules of Chol Hamoed still do. The day itself deserves our full attention.

The Aruch HaShulchan also records the custom of a festive meal with good food on Hoshana Rabba. After the hakafoes and davening, one can carry the day's Yom Tov flavour to the table. He cautions against eating so heavily that one loses the appetite for the Shemini Atzeres meal that evening. Thus the morning's earnest pleading leads into gratitude and celebration.

Set aside real time for Hoshana Rabba: the final judgment is approached through prayer, hakafoes, and the joy of the festival.

What is “great” about Hoshana Rabba?

The word rabba means “great.” But what is great? The teachings offer three answers, each placing the emphasis somewhere else.

First, the salvation is great. We are asking for much more than assistance with one difficulty. We ask for a year of life and for help with the needs that will arise within it. Second, the One who saves is great. Our confidence rests on the greatness and mercy of Hashem, not on the strength of our own plea. Third, a great many people need salvation. We call out with all of Klal Yisrael, including people whose needs we may never know.

Thus the congregation’s cry holds all three meanings: a great salvation, from the Great One, for a great multitude.

A fourth explanation turns to the word na in “Hosha na.” Its letters, nun (50) and aleph (1), have a gematria of 51. Hoshana Rabba is the fifty-first day of this season of pleading, counting from the beginning of Rosh Chodesh Elul. Through Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, the request has continued: “Please save us.”

After fifty-one days of prayer and the mercy of Yom Kippur, why are we still asking for salvation?

The Merchant Who Refused to Have His Debt Canceled

A wealthy merchant supplied merchandise to smaller businessmen throughout the surrounding towns. They received their goods on credit, sold them, and were expected to repay him from their earnings. Each year, the wealthy merchant set aside a day to review their accounts and calculate what each businessman owed.

One year, he discovered that their unpaid debts amounted to many thousands - far more than they could afford to repay. Being a generous and compassionate man, he announced:

“All your old debts are forgiven. From today onward, we will begin a new account.”

The businessmen rejoiced. What an extraordinary kindness! Their accumulated debts had disappeared, and they could begin again.

But one businessman approached the wealthy merchant with a surprising response.

“I certainly owe you thanks for your kindness,” he said. “Nevertheless, I do not want you to cancel my debt. Let us examine the account and see who is in the right.”

“What is there to examine?” the wealthy merchant replied. “You took merchandise from me on credit, and you have paid me nothing!”

“Yes,” answered the smaller merchant, “but calculate how much merchandise you gave me during the year, and how much profit I could earn from it. You supplied me with only a small amount. With so little merchandise and so little profit, I could not repay my debts.

“Try something different from today onward. Give me a large supply of merchandise, so that I can earn a substantial profit. Then you will see that I can repay everything - **the new debts and the old debts as well.**”

His request was remarkable. He appreciated the forgiveness, but he wanted something more: the means to become a successful businessman and fulfill his obligations.

What We Are Asking of Hashem

Hashem gives us the resources of life: *banei*, *chayei*, *umezonei* - children, life, and sustenance. These blessings enable us to fulfill mitzvos, perform acts of kindness, and serve Him. They are the “merchandise” with which we are meant to produce a spiritual profit.

But the year does not always unfold as it should. Through our sins and shortcomings, we fail to use those gifts properly. We have received so much, yet we have not produced the mitzvos and good deeds that we should have.

Then come Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the days of judgment and accounting. Hashem, in His abundant kindness, forgives our sins.

We are deeply grateful. Yet the teaching places a further plea in our mouths:

“Ribbono Shel Olam, You have forgiven us - but **we still want to repay what we owe**. We want to fulfill our responsibilities and make up for the opportunities we missed.

“Consider how difficult the past year has been. The blessing we received was limited, and earning our livelihood demanded so much effort. We were occupied with financial worries, illness, and the struggle to meet our daily needs. So much of our strength went into simply getting through the day.

“Please give us abundant blessing this coming year. Give us health, ample sustenance, and the peace of mind to serve You with spaciousness and ease. With those blessings, we can fulfill Your will, and we can also do teshuvah and repair what was lacking in the past.”

The teaching acknowledges our sins while asking Hashem for the conditions that will help us do better. We want His gifts to bear fruit in Torah, mitzvos, tzedakah, and kindness.

Hoshana Rabba: An Abundant Flow of Blessing

This is the deeper meaning of **Hoshana Rabba** in this teaching: we ask Hashem for an abundant flow of blessing - *hashpa'ah rabbah* - so that we can fulfill His will without obstacles holding us back.

Our plea is:

“Give us abundant blessing, so that we can produce abundant spiritual profit.”

This also gives meaning to the word *hakafah*. Besides describing a circuit, it can refer to receiving goods on credit. As we make the *hakafos*, we can hear the merchant’s plea in our own prayers: “Please entrust us with the resources for another year. Give us generously, and help us use Your gifts well.”

That is a powerful reason to be present for the Hoshana Rabba services and to pray with attention. We are asking for the blessings that will sustain an entire year of service to Hashem - and for the opportunity to turn those blessings into lasting spiritual achievement.

Dovid HaMelech: grateful, yet still asking

Hoshana Rabba is the day of Dovid HaMelech among the ushpizin. He had received astonishing help from Hashem: rescue from danger, kingship, and salvation again and again. Yet Tehillim is full of new pleas. Dovid never concluded, “Hashem helped me yesterday, so today I can manage on my own.” Every earlier rescue made him more aware of the Source of the next one.

That is Dovid’s humility. Past help gives us reason to thank Hashem and confidence to turn to Him once more. A person may say, “I have asked so much since Elul; how can I ask again?” Dovid teaches us to answer: Because I know how much Hashem has given me, I know how much I still need Him. Gratitude and pleading belong together.

The late petitioners and the departing king

A mighty and compassionate king ruled many lands. He would visit one of his cities, and his coming was announced well in advance. The people assembled their petitions: one needed help with a burden, another protection, another the means to live. The king welcomed his subjects and heard what each had to ask. Some who had done wrong also approached him humbly and received his mercy.

Yet there were people who never came. Perhaps they were ashamed; perhaps they thought they still had time. The days passed, and suddenly the city heard that the king was leaving. The procession was already making its way out. They hurried after him, conscious both of their need and of their missed chance.

At this point they could not approach as though the visit had only just begun. The appointed period for personal requests was over, and the king was taking leave. Wise people showed them another way. A plea concerning the king’s honour and the welfare of his kingdom was still fitting, even at the end. They could stand before him now if they spoke for what would serve his reign.

This is the decisive turn of the mashal. We have had the days of Elul and the Yamim Nora’im to confess, repent, and speak of our needs. We have spent Sukkos under Hashem’s shelter. Now the festival is nearing its end. Our request rises beyond “Give me what I want” to “Lema’ancha Elokeinu, Hosha na” - “For Your sake, our God, save us.”

We ask for health so that we can use our strength in His service. We ask for livelihood so that Jewish homes can be sustained, tzedakah can be given, and others can be welcomed. We ask for peace and salvation for Klal Yisrael so that His name will be honoured in the world. The words lema'anacha invite us to ask sincerely what we want the coming year for.

The merchant asks, “Entrust me with more.” The petitioners add, “Let that more serve Your kingdom.”

Why come to Hoshana Rabba davening?

The day calls for our presence. Its name speaks of many Jews raising a great voice. Its seven hakafof ask us to enact our plea, returning to it again and again. Dovid teaches us to bring gratitude for the help already received alongside our need for help today. And at the close of the season, the king mashal gives us a prayer we must not leave unsaid: Lema'anacha.

If you davened deeply on Yom Kippur, come to carry that teshuvah into the new year. If the days passed without the concentration you hoped for, come now. The late petitioners in the mashal could not reclaim the earlier days, but they could stand before the king while he was still there.

Bring the needs of your family and of all Klal Yisrael. Join the congregation's cry. Make the circuits. Ask for a good year - and for the wisdom and strength to make that year a source of honour to Hashem. Then, when we part after the service, we may wish one another “Pitka Tava” - an Aramaic wish for a good heavenly note - or “a gut kvittel” in Yiddish. It expresses our hope for a favourable final decision and a year of life and blessing.

On the fifty-first day, we still say “Hosha na”: Give us life, and help us use it for Your sake.

Hoshana Rabba Gems continues Wednesday and Thursday. Join us for the next teachings and for Hoshana Rabba services.

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz · Westmount Shul & Learning Centre

Sources: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 664:1-4; Aruch HaShulchan, Orach Chaim 664:11-13. A collection of teachings from the sefer Otzar Peninei HaChasidus, various pages on Sukkos and Hoshana Rabba.

HOSHANA RABBA · PART TWO

The Binding We Need to Remove

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A Small Change to the Lulav

On Hoshana Rabba, some have the custom of removing one of the upper bindings around the lulav. It takes only a moment. Someone watching might think we are merely adjusting the lulav before the final hakafo. Yet Rabbi Avraham Simcha of Baranov related what his grandfather, the holy Rabbi of Ropshitz, said as he removed the binding. He turned to the people and asked: “Do you know why we remove it?”

He told them to look at our condition. We are scattered and separated among the nations. We need Hashem to have compassion on us and gather His people. When they heard him speak, the congregation began to weep.

Why should a little ring around a lulav make people cry? Because it gives us something we can hold while we contemplate a pain too large to hold. Our people are dispersed. And even when Jews live close together, a family can be divided, a community can be divided, and two people can stand side by side in shul while an old grievance keeps them far apart.

The Rabbi of Ropshitz speaks of our dispersion and asks for Hashem’s mercy. His teaching also leaves us with a question: **If I pray for Hashem to remove the distance between Jews, is there a distance I have helped create?** Perhaps I heard one remark and decided what sort of person said it. Perhaps I saw one action and turned it into a judgment about an entire life. I may have been right that the action was troubling. But did I leave room for what I did not know?

Before asking Hashem to loosen the bonds of galus, can I loosen one binding in my own heart?

The Ring Around Nature

Another teaching notices that a taba'as, a ring, calls to mind teva, nature. It adds that lulav has the numerical value of chayim, life. The ring surrounding it can picture a human life enclosed by the ordinary limits of the natural world. From within the boundaries we can see, our situation can seem fixed: galus has lasted so long; divisions have grown familiar; people have settled into their habits. We begin to speak as though nothing can change.

On Hoshana Rabba we dare to ask Hashem for more than our calculations can promise. Removing the ring becomes a prayer that His mercy reach beyond the limits of nature. But that request must change the way we see people. When I say, "That is simply how he is," I draw a circle around another person. When I say, "This is simply how I am," I draw one around myself. **If we ask Hashem to bring us beyond the limits we can see, we must not treat anyone's present conduct as the limit of his future.**

Whose Hand Holds the King's Seal?

There is a second, distinct reading of the ring. It is the king's signet, the instrument with which a decree is sealed. Megillas Esther tells us that Achashverosh **removed his ring from Haman and gave it to Mordechai**. The power once held by the man who sought the Jews' destruction was placed in the hands of the man who sought their rescue. Mordechai and Esther could then write on behalf of the Jews and seal the writing with the king's ring.

The teaching about Hoshana Rabba sees the king as an image of Hashem. When we remove the ring from the lulav, we ask that the seal of judgment no longer remain with an accuser. Let it be placed with those who seek a merit for Israel, who will write and seal good for the King's children. The source describes Hashem entrusting the tzaddikim with the power to write for the Jews and seal what is good in His eyes. The gesture with the lulav makes that appeal visible.

Now the Baal Shem Tov's story, which we will hear shortly, has an added depth. The disciple's harsh thought had made him an accuser. On Hoshana Rabba he became the very person who found a merit and undid the accusation. **What a different verdict can be written when the ring passes from an accusing hand to an advocating one.**

We stand before the King, make seven hakafo's, and call again and again, **Hoshana—please save us**. We ask Him to see all of us: our struggle, our regret, our intentions, and what we may yet become. Have I allowed that same fullness to another

Jew?

I ask the King not to define me by one bad moment. Have I defined someone else that way?

Dovid HaMelech: “You Are the Man”

Dovid HaMelech, the guest associated with this seventh day of Sukkos, once faced a judgment he had pronounced on another man. Nasan HaNavi came to him with a story. Two men lived in one city. One was rich and owned many sheep and cattle. The other was poor and had only one small lamb. He had raised it in his home. It ate from his food, drank from his cup, and lay close to him. To the poor man it was like a daughter.

A traveller came to the rich man. He needed to prepare a meal, but he would not take an animal from his own abundant flock. He took the poor man’s one lamb and served it to his guest. Dovid heard the story and burned with anger. A man with so much had taken the only cherished possession of a man with so little! He declared that the rich man deserved punishment and must repay fourfold, for he had shown no pity.

Then Nasan said: **“You are the man.”** The story was no longer about someone across the city. Nasan had held up a mirror. Dovid could see a wrong clearly when it was described as someone else’s conduct. Now he had to bring that clarity to his own life. His answer was brief and honest: **“I have sinned against Hashem.”**

We can often explain exactly why another person’s action was selfish or hurtful. When a similar truth approaches our own lives, we remember every complication and pressure surrounding what we did. Dovid teaches us to bring moral clarity inward. The next story teaches the other half: to bring patience and a fuller view outward.

The Snuffbox: A Judgment on Rosh Hashanah

The story begins on Rosh Hashanah in the beis midrash of the Baal Shem Tov. His disciples were standing in prayer, each before Hashem on the day of judgment. In the middle of the tefillah, a small object slipped from one disciple’s hand and fell to the floor. It was his tobacco box. He bent down, picked it up, and took a pinch of tobacco, as people commonly did in those days.

Another disciple saw him. This man cared deeply about prayer. He watched the other man retrieve the box and use it, and resentment rose within him: On Rosh Hashanah?

In the middle of tefillah he stops for tobacco? He did not confront or publicly shame the man. The entire judgment occurred silently inside his heart.

But the Baal Shem Tov saw through ruach hakodesh what had happened beyond the view of anyone in the room. The resentment of this righteous disciple had become a kitrug, an accusation against his fellow in Heaven. A decree was issued that the man with the tobacco box would die during the coming year, Heaven forbid.

The Baal Shem Tov made an aliyas neshamah, an ascent of the soul. He pleaded before the Heavenly Court. He offered many arguments for the man, searching for an opening through which the decree could be overturned. He did not succeed.

Rosh Hashanah passed. Yom Kippur passed. Sukkos arrived. On the **night of Hoshana Rabba**, the Baal Shem Tov ascended again. He argued and cried out until he obtained one possibility: **if the disciple whose resentment had brought about the accusation would himself find a merit for his fellow, the man could be released from the decree.**

That condition matters. The Baal Shem Tov had pleaded for the man, but the repair had to reach the heart in which the accusation began. Someone else could not merely instruct the disciple to judge favourably. He had to come to see his fellow differently himself.

A Night When the Words Would Not Enter

The Baal Shem Tov returned to the beis midrash. He found the disciple who had felt the resentment occupied with the night's tikkun, learning Mishneh Torah, the book of Devarim. The Baal Shem Tov took away his ability to concentrate. The disciple tried to continue, but the words would not settle in his mind. He could not recite the tikkun with the devotion he wanted.

He rose and walked to and fro. If he could not focus on the text, he could at least think about the greatness of Hashem, His unity, and the purposes hidden in His creation. As he walked, an unexpected question came to him: Why had the tobacco plant, used for taking snuff and for smoking, become known particularly in these later generations? Could there be a spiritual purpose in it that I have never considered?

He thought in the spiritual language of his world. Perhaps there were precious souls that could not find their tikkun through something coarse or substantial. Perhaps their elevation required something delicate, connected to scent and taste. He recalled the Torah's words about "a pleasing aroma to Hashem."

Then he remembered Rosh Hashanah: the sound of the box falling, the man bending to retrieve it, and the flash of resentment in his own heart. Now he questioned the certainty with which he had judged: What did I actually see? I saw a man take tobacco. What did I know of the thoughts accompanying his action? What did I know of his avodah? Who can say what precious soul or spiritual matter he might have elevated through that scent?

He was not claiming to know what was in the other man's heart. **He realized how much he did not know.** Regret replaced his earlier certainty. He found a possible merit for his fellow. The man he had reduced to one troubling moment in tefillah became again a whole person, whose inner life was fully known only to Hashem.

The Question on Hoshana Rabba

The account adds that on Hoshana Rabba the Baal Shem Tov was especially joyful and would answer the questions his disciples prepared for him. A person might bring a question in Torah, halachah, or another matter. This disciple prepared the question that had occupied him during the night: Why had tobacco appeared in these generations, and what might its spiritual purpose be?

He approached the Baal Shem Tov and asked. The Baal Shem Tov explained the depth of the matter and drew out the disciple's further thoughts. The disciple then recounted the incident on Rosh Hashanah. He told of the fallen tobacco box, his resentment, the thoughts that came to him during the night, and the merit he had finally found for his fellow.

At that moment, the kitrug and the decree against his fellow were annulled.

Only after the decree was gone did the Baal Shem Tov tell him what had taken place: what his resentment had brought about, how the Baal Shem Tov had pleaded, and how his own change of heart had made the repair possible. He warned him always to judge a God-fearing Jew favourably, lest he awaken judgment against him.

The turning point of this story takes place **on Hoshana Rabba**. Rosh Hashanah's judgment was still being addressed after Yom Kippur. The person who had made an accusation became the person who found a merit. We cannot claim to see what occurs in Heaven when we have a critical thought. But we can ask: Is there someone whose one action I have replayed so often that I have forgotten how little I actually know? Can I make room for a merit I refused to consider?

Dovid had to hear, **“You are the man.”** The disciple had to ask, **“Who am I to say that I know this man?”** Both questions belong in our Hoshana Rabba davening.

The King’s Son: What the First Visit Concealed

A further mashal explains why we remove the binding from the lulav. A king had an only son who was not conducting himself as a king’s son should. He sent the son to a distant land, hoping that separation from his father’s table would cause him to reflect and choose a better path.

When the son arrived, the people of that land treated him cruelly. They made him perform hard labour, withheld good things from him, and tormented him with hunger and thirst. They dressed him in coarse, shabby clothing. His life became so painful that he grew weary of it.

The king waited for news that his son had improved, so that he could bring him home. Eventually he could no longer bear the separation. Near the end of the year he travelled to see both how his son was behaving **and how the people of that country were treating him.**

The people realized the king was coming. Immediately they removed the son’s filthy clothes. They washed him, dressed him in fine garments, and gave him food and drink. They made him look like a king’s son. When the father arrived, he saw a well-dressed, well-fed young man. He thought: My son is doing well here. Perhaps a little longer in this place will help him improve his ways. He told his son that he would come the following day to say goodbye, and then return home.

The son was devastated. His father had come, yet was preparing to leave him with the very people who tormented him. He went to a trusted friend for advice. The friend understood the mistake: Your father saw you washed, dressed, and fed. He thinks you lack nothing here. He has not seen your hunger or your wounds, or how you live through the year. If he knew, he would bring you home. When he comes tomorrow, let him see.

The Son’s Second Appearance

The next day, before the king came to take leave of him, the son hurriedly removed the fine garments his tormentors had put on him. He dressed again in his filthy, torn clothes. When his father arrived, he fell at the king’s feet and wept.

“Father, look at me. This is how I go about all year. Did you think I always wear fine clothes and eat well, as a king’s son should? They dressed and fed me yesterday only

to make me look good in your eyes, so you would leave me here. Throughout the year they force me to labour. They strike me and leave me with wounds and bruises. They deny me food and drink. Now that you see how I truly live, how can you leave me here without mercy?"

The son was not denying that he had needed to improve his ways. He was asking his father to see what had been hidden during the first visit. **The fine clothes were real clothes, but they had given the king a false picture of the son's life.**

Why We Remove the Binding

The mashal's explanation speaks directly to Hashem. During the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos, we gather for prayer and mitzvos. Like the species held together in the lulav, we stand together before Him. In these days we can feel ourselves close to Hashem, bound to Him in our avodah. That closeness is genuine. Yet it does not show how His children live through the rest of the year. Our gathered appearance during the chag is like the son's fine clothing during his father's first visit: it is what the king sees, but it is not the whole picture.

Therefore, on Hoshana Rabba, **we remove the binding from the lulav as the king's son removed the fine clothing and put on his torn garments.** The now unbound lulav shows our Father what the festive binding conceals: through the year we are scattered, and we struggle to remain bound to Him with the same deveikus we know at this moment.

"Do You think that throughout the year we can fulfil Your mitzvos and serve You, remaining attached and bound to You? Look at us: poor and empty, scattered and separated among the nations, like this lulav now without its bindings."

That is the source's plea. We are in their hands, subject to their will, without peace even for ordinary needs, and all the more so in our effort to fulfil Your mitzvos. **See the lulav without its ring: we are not held together as we wish to be, nor are we cleaving to You throughout the year as we do when we gather for the chag.** Do not leave Your children in a condition that makes such closeness so difficult. Gather us and bring us near, so that we can serve You with deveikus.

The son exposed his torn clothing because his father had mistaken one carefully arranged day for his life throughout the year. Our act with the lulav does the same. We ask for health, livelihood, rain, and safety, but the larger plea is to be brought close

enough to Hashem to live as His children in every season, not only during the days when we are gathered in shul.

Now we can return to the Rabbi of Ropshitz at the beginning. He removed the binding, spoke of a people dispersed and divided, and the congregation wept. The king's son mashal adds the inner cost of that dispersion: **when the bonds among us are loosened, our sustained bond of avodah and deveikus with Hashem becomes harder as well.** Our outward unity during the chag should become a real commitment to one another when the chag ends.

Dovid heard Nasan say, "You are the man," and answered honestly. The Baal Shem Tov's disciple went back to the moment he had judged another Jew and found a merit where he had seen only a fault. Those are ways we can begin to repair bonds between people: to admit what is ours to repair, and to give another person a fuller, kinder hearing. A single act will not end galus. It can, however, keep us from adding another strand of separation to it.

The king's signet gives us one final image. A ring that had been in Haman's accusing hand passed to Mordechai, who could write and seal for the good of his people. We ask that the judgment of this day be entrusted to advocates who find our merit. And we can choose to speak of another Jew as an advocate rather than an accuser.

As we make the hakafof and cry **Hoshana**, let the unbound lulav speak for us: **Father, see how scattered we are, and how hard it is for us to remain bound to You. Gather Your children, strengthen the bonds between us, and bring us near enough to serve You with deveikus throughout the year.**

Sources and attributions

The seven hakafof: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 664:1. Dovid and Nasan: II Shmuel 12:1-13; Dovid's response in Tehillim 51.

The binding and the people's tears: Rabbi Avraham Simcha of Baranov concerning the Rabbi of Ropshitz, Chamar Tava. The ring as teva and the king's seal: Otzar Pninei HaChassidus, Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres, p. 385; the signet's transfer: Esther 8:2, 8:8.

The snuffbox account: Rabbi Yitzchak Yehudah Yechiel of Komarna, Heichal HaBerachah / Otzar HaChaim, Parashas Kedoshim. The king's son mashal: Otzar Pninei HaChassidus, Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres.

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Hoshana Rabba Gems | Part Three

Which Aravah Do We Strike? • Teshuvah, the End of Evil, and Gilgul

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz | Thornhill, Ontario

Two Questions Before We Strike

On Hoshana Rabba we take a bundle of aravos apart from the arba minim and beat it. Why use other aravos? The lulav already contains two. They have accompanied us in a mitzvah through Sukkos. The principle ho'il ve'is'avid bah mitzvah chada, le'is'avid bah mitzvah achariti encourages us to use something that served one mitzvah for another. We even preserve the bread of eruv tavshilin to use again at the Shabbos meals. Why not add those two aravos to the bundle we are about to strike?

And why do we say **no berachah** over chibbut aravah? Rabbinic mitzvos receive berachos: we say one when lighting Chanukah candles. Surely something associated with the Nevi'im seems worthy of one. Yet the Gemara describes the aravah being taken without a berachah. What does that absence tell us? [1]

Two aravos have lived in the company of the other species. The separate aravos have not. The difference will determine which ones we strike.

There is a halachic qualification. The Gemara distinguishes the separate aravah from the aravos while they remain bound in the lulav; the poskim discuss whether branches removed from that bundle can be used afterward. The branches are not intrinsically disqualified forever. The teaching here asks why we ordinarily choose a separate bundle and what that choice might mean. [2]

The Two Verses That Seem to Pull Apart

Rabbi Meir prayed for the demise of wicked neighbors who caused him distress. Beruriah asked him to read the verse carefully: **"Yitamu chata'im min ha'aretz"** - let sins cease from the earth. Pray that they repent; then **"u'resha'im od einam"** - there will no longer be wicked people. Their wickedness can disappear while the people live. Rabbi Meir prayed, and they repented. [3]

Yet the Gemara also discusses Dovid HaMelech's praise at the downfall of the wicked. The Tzintzenes Menachem places these statements alongside one another. Is our prayer that the sinner change, or that the rasha be removed? The answer depends on whether the person will relinquish the evil. [3, 4]

The Aravos That Stayed With Us

The two aravos in the lulav were joined to the esrog, lulav and hadassim. In the familiar Midrashic reading of the four species, the aravah represents a Jew who lacks visible Torah and good deeds, while the other species possess one or both. But an aravah bound into the group is affected by that company. Our author reads the aravos of the lulav as people who have been drawn toward teshuvah. We must not strike the very aravos that have spent the festival with the righteous. [4]

Now take a different bundle. These aravos were not bound with the other species. They portray people who have persisted in wickedness despite opportunities to change. Striking them becomes an image of ending the evil that still threatens the world. The contrast between the two bundles gives Beruriah's words their full force: **if teshuvah is possible now, we pray for it now.** [4]

The aravah that entered the agudah is a person we hope to reclaim. The aravah we strike stands for wickedness that has refused to cease.

What If Teshuvah Never Comes?

It would be easy to say that we always want the person spared. But victims cannot be asked to wait while violence continues. We pray that those who plan and direct murder lose the power to do it, and that the danger itself be ended. When a wicked life ends without repentance, however, Beruriah's prayer raises a further question: is every possibility of that soul's correction gone?

Here the Tzintzenes Menachem brings in **gilgul**, the return of a soul in another life for its tikkun. He relates this to Iyov's phrase, "pa'amayim shalosh im gaver" - "twice, three times with a person" (Iyov 33:29). In his reading, Hashem may give the soul further opportunities after a life that ended badly. He does not describe an endless cycle: a person cannot presume on boundless chances while choosing evil today. [4]

Gilgul is his way of reconciling the teachings about repentance and the downfall of the wicked. The wicked conduct must end, and a wicked ruler may be removed; Hashem may still bring a soul back for repair. He does not identify the blows of chibbut aravah as successive incarnations, or suggest that the struck branch physically depicts a soul returning. That would add a symbolic detail the scanned passage does not establish.

What We Ask For in Our Own Time

When we think of the leaders of Iran's regime who direct violent hatred toward Jews, we pray for their power to harm to be destroyed and for those in danger to be saved. This is a judgment about leaders and deeds, not about the Iranian people. The removal of destructive power is an urgent good.

When Jewish leaders take actions we regard as deeply wrong - including imprisoning Jews devoted to Torah learning - our first prayer is direct: let them stop, change their minds, and do teshuvah in this life. If anyone leaves this world without doing so, the possibility of a later tikkun belongs to Hashem. We cannot know that person's gilgul or assign an identity to a soul.

We pray for the evil to end without delay. We leave the soul's final tikkun in Hashem's hands.

The Berachah We Do Not Say

The Gemara gives the halachic answer: the aravah practice outside the Mikdash is described, according to the view followed here, as a minhag nevi'im, a custom of the prophets, rather than a binding yesod nevi'im, a prophetic enactment. We can say "ve-tzivanu" over a rabbinic mitzvah. The Gemara does not say it over this custom. [1]

The Tzintzenes Menachem adds a different layer. In the reading of the tochachah, our Sages say "ein omrim berachah al ha-pur'anut" - we do not pronounce a blessing over calamity. The aliyah begins before the rebukes and ends after them; it does not frame destruction as the occasion for a blessing. So too here: when the aravah is struck as a sign of the downfall of persistent wickedness, we do not bless the act of destruction itself. This is a derash explaining the ritual's meaning, alongside the Gemara's halachic reason for omitting the berachah. [4, 5]

A King Returns: The Midrash's Ox

A Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah begins with a stubborn ox. Its owner is leading it to be offered as a korban, but it refuses to move. People pull; the ox stays where it is. Then a poor man comes with a small bundle of teroksima, a kind of legume. He holds the food out to the animal. The ox eats it, retches or coughs, and expels a needle. Now it allows itself to be led to the altar. [6]

The following night the owner sees a message in a dream: **"The poor man's offering preceded yours."** The rich man owned the animal, but the poor man's modest handful made the offering possible. Had the needle remained inside, the animal might have been found unfit. The Midrash honors the poor man's apparently small act. It does **not** say who

the ox had been in a prior life. [6]

The Rama of Fano Opens the Hidden Story

Centuries later, the Rama of Fano, Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano, identifies this ox in Gilgulei Neshamot, letter nun, section three. In his mystical reading, its soul is that of **Nevuchadnetzar**, the Babylonian ruler who destroyed the First Beis HaMikdash. Once he wielded the power of an empire. Now he stands as an animal that cannot take a single step toward its own repair. [7]

The needle, says the Rama of Fano, signifies the false and corrupt beliefs still lodged inside him. Even as an ox brought toward the altar, he remains held back by what he has carried within. Why should a poor man be the one to free him? Here the story circles back across lifetimes.

Daniel had once advised Nevuchadnetzar to alleviate his sins through charity. The Rama of Fano says that one hungry man was sustained by that charity; without it, he would have died. That same man later appears with the legumes. He feeds the ox whose former life had fed him. The gift returns to its giver, but it returns transformed: the ox expels the needle, turns toward the korban, and goes willingly. [7]

This is the Rama of Fano's interpretation, not the Midrash's explicit identification. We cannot verify the identity of a returning soul by historical means. But the image is unforgettable. A ruler who brought devastation into the world was still met, in another life, by the consequence of one act that sustained life. Even that small opening could become the beginning of tikkun.

**The poor man fed the ox because the ruler had once fed the poor man.
What a person gives to the world can meet him again.**

What We Take Into Hoshana Rabba

Nevuchadnetzar ruled Babylon, in the region of present-day Iraq. We cannot declare that a particular leader today is his gilgul, or predict whose soul a future rasha may bear. The Rama of Fano's story does let us imagine that even a monstrous ruler's soul may have a path to repair that only Hashem can see.

That hope never asks us to leave evil in power. On Hoshana Rabba we plead for protection and for wickedness to end. We also pray that those who can repent will do so while they are still among us. The aravos that joined the other species need no blow. The separate aravos are struck. And beyond what our hands can do or our eyes can judge, the fate of each soul remains with Hashem.

Sources and Attribution

[1] Sukkah 44a-b, the distinction between yesod nevi'im and minhag nevi'im; Shabbos 23a, a berachah on a definite rabbinic mitzvah.

[2] Sukkah 44b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 664:6; Mishnah Berurah 664:21.

[3] Berachos 10a (Beruriah and Rabbi Meir); Berachos 9b-10a (Dovid and the wicked); Tehillim 104:35.

[4] Tzintzenes Menachem, Rabbi Menachem Mendel ben Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Mungerov (Węgrów), pp. 146-147 in the supplied scan, discussion of Hoshana Rabba, aravah, the wicked, and gilgul; Iyov 33:29. The separate-bundle and righteous-company explanation follows the author's derash.

[5] Megillah 31b, ein omrim berachah al ha-pur'anut.

[6] Vayikra Rabbah 3:5, the ox, poor man, legumes, needle, and dream.

[7] Rama of Fano, Gilgulei Neshamot, letter א, section א, his mystical identification of the ox and explanation of the poor man's act.