

WESTMOUNT SHUL & LEARNING CENTRE | SUKKOS 5787

Hoshana Rabba Gems | Part Three

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

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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.