

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

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