

Shake, Shake, Shake... Shake your Lulav!

Probably one of the stranger commandments on Sukkot is to shake the Lulav, an elaborate bouquet consisting of a palm branch, myrtle leaves, willows, and a citron, known in Hebrew as an Etrog. During services, traditional Jews will shake this bouquet, pointing it in all six directions. They will also circumambulate the prayer podium grasping these bouquets in their hands, creating a procession of moving people and plants. As the worshipers rock back and forth in a prayerful trance, the lulav and etrog seem to dance with them.

Growing up, I always thought this custom was rather strange. What possible meaning could this ritual have? If one would not go around shaking bouquets of roses, why would one go around shaking a Lulav? On a more general level, what is the value of religious ritual anyway? Why wear a *talit* (prayer shawl), and why wear *tefillin* (phylacteries), and why eat *matzah*? What possible meaning could these strange actions have? Do they make us better people? This question bothered me for many years.

I only really understood the true meaning of ritual when I studied anthropology. Religious rituals do have meaning, but not in the literal sense, but in the artistic sense. In other words, there is meaning, but that meaning can not always be expressed in words.

In life we often appreciate the arts, because they somehow encapsulate life in a representational form. Many of us appreciate the beauty of dance, and may even be moved to tears, but if we were asked as to its meaning, we would probably respond in a rather puzzled way. Dance does not have a 'normative' meaning, but it is a drama that expresses deep seated emotions. When our heart misses a beat listening to the first notes of Beethoven's symphony, we are not only listening to music, but we are sensing something about the grandiosity of living and life.

Ritual is no different. Ritual is drama, but the performance space is not the theatre but our own lives. We are elevating who we are- our desires, our pain, and our spirit, and representing it artistically. Words cannot express all we want to say, and so we invoke our bodies, our voices, our movement, and the environment around us. Seen this way, when I live with ritual, I choose to live my life artistically, and to affirm the power and vitality of life.

So getting back to the Lulav and Etrog... what is the poetry we are supposed to feel? Living in the technological society that we do, it is hard to experience what our ancestors might have felt, but allow me to take you on a journey into the past. Look at the following as a dramatic reconstruction, based upon Biblical and rabbinic texts which relate to the holiday.

It is the fall in the Land of Israel. It is the harvest period, and a farmer named (insert your name here) comes to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot, which you call the Feast of Ingathering (Exodus 23:30). You take your choice crops to Jerusalem, to celebrate with God. It is not just you however; the roads stream with pilgrims. In Jerusalem you rejoice before God, and remember to share your bounty with family and servants (Deuteronomy 17:13-15). You realize that you are truly fortunate, and that your blessings cannot be taken for granted. You remember as a child the great famine, the starvation and suffering you saw, the nights when you did not have anything to eat. You realize that the nature of life is uncertain. You are reminded of the words of one of the

many preachers of your town. “How sweet is the light, what a delight for the eyes to behold the sun! Even if a man lives many years, let him enjoy himself in all of them, remembering how many the days of darkness are going to be. The only future is nothingness! (Ecclesiastes 11:7-8)”

You turn toward the sky, looking for a slight breeze. You have lived in the Land your entire life, and you know that ‘a blowing wind is followed by God’s showering the earth with rain’ (daily liturgy). When you return from Jerusalem, you will have to begin anew, planting tiny seedlings into the ground. Months of uncertainty will ensue. Will these seedlings ever reach maturity? Will you reap the fruit of your labor? (See Genesis 3:17-19) If the rains do not come, will there be sustenance for the coming year?

This realization creates anxiety. For a moment, in the midst of celebration, you realize the fragility of existence. You are really no different than the willows that blow by the river, which wilt without life sustaining water. Despite your attempts throughout your life to maintain the illusion that “my own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me” (Deut. 8:11), you know that you are not much different than the plants around you.

This truth hits you powerfully, and you ‘take the product of a beautiful tree, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook’ (Lev. 25:8) You arrange them into a beautiful bouquet. You suddenly realize that you have a symbolic body made up of plants- the strong spine of the lulav, the leaves of the myrtle which look like eyes, the leaves of willow which look like a mouth, and an etrog which looks like a heart. (Midrash Aggadah). You wave your lulav to the heavens- in all the directions, as if to say “God, have mercy on all of us! My body is as dependent upon you as this foliage.”

In your deep meditation, you realize you have wandered into the middle of an open field. You are shaking, and your lulav shakes with you. You are reminded of a verse in Deuteronomy 20:19. You realize that “humanity is like a tree of the field”.

Few of us today live as farmers, and few of us (fortunately) think about the possibility of not having water to drink. But are we that different? While we like to think things are permanent, we know deep down that everything is in flux, and we cannot stop it. This realization forces us to the conclusion that we should indeed count our blessings, and celebrate our lives. We celebrate and tremble simultaneously. We shake our lulav on the festival which the rabbis called ‘the time of our happiness’.

At Federation, we know these lessons from our daily experience. We dedicate our lives to helping those in need. Sukkot is an opportunity for us to recommit to the work we do, through the realization that we must always be there for one another, because while we have rain now, we never know when the next draught will come.

Chag Sameach (Happy Holiday)

Fred