

# The Symbolism of the Four Species

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## The Symbolism of the Four Species

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### THE FOUR SPECIES & THE SEVEN SPECIES

"On the first day you shall take the fruit of a citrus tree, palm branches, boughs of thick trees and brook willows, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." (Vayikra 23:40)

This verse establishes the obligation to take on Sukkot four species – the lulav, etrog, hadas and arava. In practice, we actually take seven species: one lulav, one etrog, three hadasim and two aravot. We do not find any explicit reference in the verses to the number of each species required, but it is difficult to view this total of seven species as simply a coincidence. Rather, these seven correspond to the seven species enumerated in Sefer Devarim (8:8) as demonstrative of the superior quality of Eretz Yisrael.

Significantly, these "original" seven species are divided into four groups: three fruits (grapes, figs, pomegranates), two grains (wheat, barley), the product of olives (olive oil) and the product of dates ("devash" – referring to date nectar).[1] This parallel, between the species taken on Sukkot and those with which the Land of Israel was blessed, extends beyond the numerical similarity. The palm branches of Sukkot correspond to date nectar, the three hadasim parallel the three species of fruits, and the etrog – a fruit used not in its original form, but rather for its extract – resembles the olive, which is used primarily for its oil.[2]

The underlying significance of this parallel is clear. Sukkot, in one of its aspects, marks "Chag Ha-asif" – the festival celebrating the collection of produce into the farmers' homes and storehouses. Naturally, then, the central mitzva on this day when we give thanks to the Almighty for our bountiful yield alludes to the seven species that characterize the unique quality of Eretz Yisrael. In addition, however, the significance of this parallel may extend even further.

## THE SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS OF SUKKOT

In describing the musaf sacrifices offered on Sukkot, the Torah, in Parashat Pinchas, emphasizes the point that these sacrifices come in addition to ("musaf") the daily ("tamid") offering and its accompanying mincha (meal offering) and nesekh (libation). The precise formulation of this emphasis, however, changes from one day to the next, forming a chiasmic structure. Regarding the first, fourth and seventh days, the Torah writes that the musaf offering is required "in addition to the tamid burnt-offering, its meal offering and libation" (Bamidbar 29:16,25,38). When it comes to the second and sixth days, the reference to the libation appears in the plural: "ve-niskeihem" ("and their libations" – 29:19) and "u-nesakheha" ("and its libations" – 29:31). Finally, the concluding verses regarding the third and fifth days add the conjunctive "vav" ("and") when mentioning the mincha and nesekh: "in addition to the tamid burnt-offering, AND its meal offering and libation" (29:22,28). We thus have a chiasmic system, whereby the "outermost" sections (first and seventh days) parallel each other, as do the second and sixth, and the third and fifth. The middle section parallels the outer sections.

Of course, this chiasmic structure is imperfect, as the second and sixth days do not precisely correspond; regarding the second day the Torah employs the term, "ve-niskeihem," whereas for the sixth it writes, "u-nesakheha." More generally, this entire scheme requires explanation. Why didn't the Torah simply remain consistent throughout this presentation?

In light of these differences, we may perhaps conclude that the nature of the tamid offering changes from day to day, just as the Torah's expression referring to it changes each day. As opposed to the seven days of Pesach, which all require precisely the same musaf offering (see Bamidbar 28:24), each day of Sukkot features its own, unique korban musaf. And just as the musaf offering differs from one day to the next, so does the tamid offering of each day assume a different quality from the previous day's tamid.[3]

Sure enough, we find a special feature accompanying the tamid offering on Sukkot – nisukh ha-mayim (the water libation). The Gemara (Yoma 26b) writes that nisukh ha-mayim constitutes part of the morning tamid offering, despite the fact that we would logically associate it more with the musaf offering of Sukkot, which is unique to this festival. Nisukh ha-mayim – an expression of our prayer for rain – relates to the essential definition of the day, and not necessarily to its "festival" status. It is therefore associated specifically with the korban tamid, rather than with the korban musaf.

In truth, already Chazal draw this connection between nisukh ha-mayim and the different formulations concerning the offerings of the different days of Sukkot. The Gemara (Ta'anit 2b) notes that the extra letters ("mem," "yud" and again "mem") in three words in this section – "ve-niskeihem," "u-nesakheha" and "ke-mishpatam" – spell the word "mayim" (water), thus forming a subtle allusion in the Torah to the obligation of nisukh ha-mayim on Sukkot. (This allusion itself requires explanation, as these are not the only three superfluous letters in this section.)

## THE FOUR SPECIES AND WATER

If we divide the formulations concerning the tamid offering in this section into four groups, it turns out that the phrase "minchata ve-niska" appears three times, "u-minchata ve-niska" (with the conjunctive "vav") is used twice, and "u-minchata ve-niskeihem" and "minchata u-nesakheha" appear once each. Surprisingly enough, this arrangement of 1-1-2-3 corresponds precisely to the arba minim: one lulav, one etrog, two aravot and three hadasim. Chazal perhaps detected a connection between the four species and the verses dealing with the sacrifices of Sukkot, alluding to the fact that the nature and purpose of the "four species" relate to water.

The four species we take on Sukkot symbolize four different forms in which water appears in the world. The aravot, or "brook willows," symbolize the water in brooks and streams. The lulav is taken from the palm tree, which grows near fountains of water.[4] The etrog, as Chazal describe (Sukka 35a; Kiddushin 3a), "grows on any water," even through irrigation, and does not depend on proximity to a natural water source. Finally, the hadasim depend entirely on rainwater.[5]

In Eretz Yisrael, water serves a dual purpose. Beyond its standard function as a liquid critical for the existence of all living things, it also symbolizes God's close supervision over the Land of Israel:

"For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sow your seed and water it by your foot, like a vegetable garden. But the land you are about to cross into and possess is a land of hills and valleys – it drinks water from the rain of the heavens. It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end."  
(Devarim 11:10-12)

The festival of Sukkot relates to the Almighty's providence over Am Yisrael when they left Egypt and then entered the land. We therefore celebrate this festival by taking the four species, which symbolize divine providence as manifest through water.[6]

## OTHER GROUPS OF SEVEN

We find many other groups of seven that similarly divide into this arrangement of 3-2-1-1. In Parashat Pinchas, the Torah mentions seven occasions on which a musaf offering is brought: the three regalim (pilgrimage festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot), the two Yamim Noraim (Rosh Hashana & Yom Kippur), Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat.[7] Similarly, the seven "ushpizin" ("guests") whom we invite into our homes on Sukkot, divide into four groups: the three patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the two brothers – Moshe and Aharon, Yosef and David.[8]

Wherein lies the significance of this parallel between these groups of seven? Generally, kedusha (sanctity) manifests itself in the world in one of three ways: time, place and people. The highest level of kedusha is attained when these three forms of kedusha merge, when a sacred person enters a sacred place at a sacred time (such as the kohen gadol entering the kodesh ha-kodashim in the Temple on Yom Kippur, or Benei Yisrael's gathering in the Temple on the regalim). The ushpizin express the kedusha of people; the seven species signify the sanctity of the Land of Israel; and the festivals represent the kedusha of time. The unique sanctity of Sukkot combines all three categories of kedusha together with the four species – the symbol of God's providence.

Divisions of this type into the three categories of kedusha appear in many contexts; I will mention but one additional example. Several views exist as to how tzitzit are to be tied onto the garment. The prevalent view requires wrapping the string a total of thirty-nine times, in the following arrangement: 7-8-11-13. The intuitive association between the thirty-nine times the string is wrapped and the thirty-nine melakhot (categories of forbidden activity) on Shabbat reflects a fundamental connection between these two mitzvot, Shabbat and tzitzit. And, sure enough, the melakhot of Shabbat neatly divide into four groups: the eleven melakhot involving the preparation of bread, the thirteen melakhot involving the manufacture of wool garments, the seven melakhot related to leather<sup>[9]</sup>, and the final group consisting of the last eight melakhot. This division has a basis in the Gemara, which, albeit in a slightly different context, mentions precisely these numbers (*Shabbat* 74b).

In fact, the Torah itself already points to a connection between Shabbat and tzitzit. God introduces the mitzva of tzitzit in response to the incident of the Shabbat violator ("mekoshesh" - see *Bamidbar* 15:32-41).<sup>[10]</sup> The mitzva of tzitzit also relates closely to the Mishkan, as evidenced by the numerous parallels between the two. For example, the tekhelet-dye is placed on tzitzit and features prominently in the Mishkan, and the word "tzitzit" closely resembles the word "tzitz" (the kohen gadol's headplate). Thus, the numerical structure of 7-8-11-13 expresses the merging of the three categories of kedusha: of time (Shabbat), place (the Mishkan) and person (tzitzit).

#### NOTES:

1. We grouped wheat and barley together, but considered date nectar and olive oil as separate categories. No inherent connection exists between oil and nectar; they are used for different purposes and generally do not appear together. Wheat and barley, by contrast, both belong to the halakhic category of dagan (grain) and many times substitute for one another. For example, barley takes the place of wheat in a sinner's meal offering, and wheat substitutes for barley on Shavuot, when we offer the korban shetei ha-lechem from wheat, as opposed to the omer offering brought on Pesach from barley.

2. Interestingly enough, the Gemara (Sukka 12a) and Yerushalmi (3:2) raise (though subsequently reject) the possibility that "etz avot" (the tree of the arava) refers to the olive tree.
3. It emerges from a number of sugyot in the Gemara that the nature of the tamid offering changes from day to day, and the tamid offering of Yom Kippur differs from that brought on any other day.
4. For example, when Benei Yisrael came to Eilim they encountered "twelve fountains of water and seventy palm trees" (Shemot 15:27).
5. Some suggested associating the four species with the four geographic regions of Eretz Yisrael: the etrog corresponds to the northern section and the valleys; the lulav corresponds to the desert; the hadas parallels the mountains; and the arava relates to water. However, I prefer the symbolic structure described here due to its clear connection to Sukkot.
6. The prophet Zekharya (chapter 14) indeed draws a clear connection between Sukkot and water. (See also Tehillim 65.)
7. The presentation of the festivals in Parashat Emor differs from this section in Parashat Pinchas. In Emor the Torah makes no mention of the tamid or Rosh Chodesh offerings, and instead discusses the korban ha-omer.
8. It would appear that these seven personalities were chosen because of their role as "patriarchs": the three patriarchs of the nation, the patriarch of the Levi'im, the patriarch of the kohanim, the patriarch of the kings and the patriarch of two of the twelve tribes.
9. This group is customarily referred to as the "book melakhot," meaning, the melakhot required in producing books. However, Rashi defines "mechatekh" as cutting leather for straps and shoes, emphasizing that this group involves the manufacture of leather garments, not of books. If this group were to involve the production of books, it would consist of nine melakhot, as it would include as well the melakhot of writing and erasing.
10. The tzitzit section begins with the verse, "Va-yomer Hashem el Moshe leimor," an introduction that appears very rarely in the Torah, and in all instances it links the section it introduces to the previous section.

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