

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 29

Hoshaana Rabba

The Context:

Aside from the mitzvah of taking the four species on every day of Sukkos, there was an additional mitzvah of taking a separate aravah, a willow branch, in the Beis Hamikdash. These willow branches were first propped up against the altar by the Kohanim while the shofar was blown, following which the willows were brought to the people to hold as well. This mitzvah is not commanded explicitly or implicit in the Torah, it was a tradition passed down from Moshe at Sinai. (Rambam, Laws of Lulav 7:20-21)

On Shabbos, the willows were not taken, but when the seventh day of Sukkos coincided with Shabbos, the ritual was performed. After the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, the taking of the willow is no longer practiced on Sukkos, besides for on the final day of Sukkos — Hoshanah Rabbah.

If Hoshanah Rabbah coincided with Shabbos, we would not take the willow

branch, just as we don't take the four species on Shabbos after the destruction. However, because the taking of the willow is not explicitly commanded by the Torah, and is therefore vulnerable to lax treatment and belliteling, the sages decreed that Hoshana Rabbah never coincide with Shabbos, so that the willow can always be taken. When the calendar was sanctified in perpetuity, it was designed so that Hoshanah Rabbah never coincided with Shabbos.

The Question:

Besides the practical concern about the diminished status of the mitzvah of the willow, there must be some deeper reason why its observance was deemed so critical as to alter the very structure of the Jewish calendar. What is the significance of the willow?

The Explanation:

The talmud records a dispute regarding the origin of the mitzvah of the willow. The verse describing the willow as one of the four species states, "willows of the river" in the plural. Abbah Shaul derived from this both the willow of the four species, and the willow taken each day at the altar. The

Rabbis, however, maintain that the willow taken at the altar is a tradition transmitted by Moshe at Sinai.

According to Abba Shaul, because both mitzvos are derived from the context of the four species, it seems that the willow at the altar belongs to the same category of mitzvah as the willow branch that is taken with the Lulav. Taking the willow at the altar is just another action, an extension, that is to be performed with the willow branch that is taken with the lulav.

According to the Rabbis, however, who locate the origin of this mitzvah with a distinct tradition from Moshe, the taking of the willow at the altar is a distinct mitzvah from the four species with its own classification and qualifications.

How is the willow at the altar distinct from the willow that is taken with the other species?

The Previous Rebbe once said that the willow represents the “simple Jews who perform mitzvos only with sincere faith.” This is connected to the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov — that the simple faith of a simple Jew reflects the simplicity of G-d’s Essence. The esrog, lulav, and hadas, all allude to Jews who excel in the intellectual or emotional domains. Their developed personality thus occludes the simplicity of G-d’s essence. The simple mitzvah observance of the “willow” Jew reflects a sincere, non-composite, clear connection with the essence of G-d.

The overall theme of the four kinds is unity between Jews, which is why each of the species personified unity in its very physical composition (the lulav with its bounded leaves to its spine, the myrtle with its cluster of three leaves to each stem, the esrog which is a perennial fruit, growing in each season). But the willow is unique in its expression of unity — it grows “in brotherhood,” with other willows. Unlike the other species whose unity is reflected in their individual qualities, the willow’s unity is reflected in its fraternity with others.

Thus, the “willow Jew’s” unique ability to experience and express the Divine unity is due to his unadorned, simple faith.

When the willow is taken as part of the four species, this simplicity is compromised by the sophistication of the others. It partakes of the wisdom and emotional nuance of the esrog, lulav, and hadas. But when the willow is taken alone at the altar, that is when its simplicity shines. Without the distraction of the three other species, the willow’s sincere faith and egoless bond with others is on full display.

This is why such effort was made to preserve the custom of taking the willow on Shemini Atzeres, even to the point of engineering the calendar to avoid Shemini Atzeres falling out on Shabbos — because the enduring simplicity represented by the willow has to be constant, without interruption, to fully express the consistency of the simple faith of the Jew.
