

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 19, 2004 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

THE SAGES' EGALITARIAN (YES, YOU READ THAT CORRECTLY) UNDERSTANDING OF THE LULAV

© Judith Z. Abrams, 2004

Just when you think you have the sages figured out, you come across a startling and wonderful text that makes you fall in love with them all over again. Soon, during Sukkot, we'll take up the lulav and etrog in fulfillment of this verse from the Torah:

And you shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees: branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.
(Leviticus 23:40)

The sages struggled to understand the symbolism of these branches just as much as we do today. They offered these beautiful explanations:

Another exposition of the text, "the fruit of the *hadar* tree." *Hadar* symbolizes Abraham, whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honored (*hiddero*) with good old age; as it says, "And Abraham was old, well stricken in age (Genesis 24:1)" and it is written, "And honor (*vehadarta*) the face of the old man (Leviticus 19:32)". Branches (*kappot*) of palm-trees" symbolizes Isaac who had been tied (*kafut*) and bound upon the altar. "And boughs of thick trees" symbolizes Jacob; just as the myrtle is crowded with leaves so was Jacob crowded with children. "And willows of the brook" symbolizes Joseph; as the willow wilts before the other three species, so Joseph died before his brothers.

Another exposition of the text, "the fruit of the *hadar* tree." *Hadar* symbolizes Sarah whom the Holy One, blessed be He, honored (*hidderah*) with a good old age; as it says, "Now Abraham and Sara were old (Genesis 18:11)." "Branches of palm-trees" symbolizes Rebecca; just as the palm-tree contains eatable fruit as well as prickles, so Rebecca brought forth a righteous man and a wicked one. "And boughs of thick trees" symbolizes Leah; just as the myrtle is crowded with leaves so was Leah crowded with children. "And willows of the brook" symbolizes Rachel; just as the willow wilts before the other three species, so Rachel died before her sister. (Leviticus Rabbah 30:10)

There is much punning on Hebrew words in this passage but the central ideas come through:

The citron = Abraham and Sarah
The palm branch = Isaac and Rebecca
The myrtle branch = Jacob and Leah
The willow branch = Joseph and Rachel

Discussion Questions:

1. If we leave the citron/etrog out of the equation, we see that the tree branches with which we are to rejoice are the palm tree, which requires little water, the myrtle branch which requires a moderate amount of water and the willow, which requires great amounts of water at all times. Sukkot is when we begin to pray for rain. So what do

these plants symbolize? What is their connection to water?

2. An Israeli student, with whom I was just recently holding a class through the Siegal long distance learning program, noted that if he were to bring a bouquet of beautiful branches, it would hardly be these three. He noted, rightly, that there are many more beautiful branches that might have been used, e.g., branches from cedar trees or stems of rosemary. Do you find the four species appealing? If you could choose four species to bring together to symbolize your happiness on Sukkot, which species would they be?

I look forward to your answers, as always. And, should you want to do some tsedakah during the Ten Days of Repentance, Maqom could surely use the help.