SUKKOT and the Alliance of the Four Plants

FOUR JEWS, FOUR IDEAS

Our Sages said that the four plants we take on Sukkot stand for the Jewish community: four kinds of people, differing from one another in how much Torah they know and how much of it they keep.

The etrog, which has a good smell and a pleasant taste, stands for the Jew who knows the Torah and keeps it. The Sages read the metaphor this way. Taste stands for the study of Torah, since learning should be pleasant and sweet. Smell stands for keeping the Mitsvot, whose intention should always be selfless. The lulab, a branch of the date palm, comes from a tree whose fruit is very sweet but has no fragrance at all. The lulab stands for the one who studies Torah but does not fully keep it. The myrtle, hadas in Hebrew, has a pleasant smell but no taste (you cannot make tea from its leaves). The myrtle stands for the one who keeps the Torah but does not study it, and never reaches its depth. And then the willow, the ‘araba, with neither taste nor smell, standing for the Jew who is not observant and never had the chance to learn Torah.

The Jewish community, the Sages said two thousand years ago, is these four people. On Sukkot, carefully and with devotion, we put every member of the Jewish community together in our hands. If one of them is missing, we have not fulfilled this beautiful commandment.

What is the message in having every member of this varied community present?

THE CHALLENGE OF THE ETROG

First, the metaphor teaches that the etrog, already held apart from the other three plants, must not stay apart from the community. It has to join those who are less than it is, to stand next to those who do not keep or do not know the Torah. And by doing that, by staying joined instead of separating, it perfumes the others with its fragrance. Once the etrog joins the rest, we say the blessing and lift all four plants at once.

What turns the etrog into a good influence? The etrog has to be strict above all about everything that has to do with derekh erets: manners, honesty, humility and respect for other people. And if on top of that the etrog lives his observance with joy, he becomes impossible to resist.

Why did the Sages have to insist that the etrog not separate? In my opinion, because the opposite happens often enough. Many religious Jews choose to withdraw from the community and keep company only with other etrogim “like me.” The temptation is understandable. Will I be able to influence the rest of the community, or will I end up influenced by those who know and keep less than I do? According to this and other teachings of our Sages (see for example כל תענית שאין בה מפושעי ישראל אינה תענית שהרי חלבנה ריחה רע ומנאה הכתוב עם סממני הקטורת), pulling away from the rest of the community would be like trying to fulfill the Mitsva of lulab with four etrogim.

Sometimes this polarization is not deliberate but careless. If the etrog does not hold to the values of derekh erets with the same rigor he applies to ritual. If his observance is not matched by honesty, humility and unconditional respect for other people, his bad example can swing all the other plants to the edge. Or past it. As we read this past Shabbat in Haazinu, when the Torah comes across badly to someone watching or listening, it is because those of us who are supposed to represent it are representing it badly.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ‘ARABA

On the other side, the ‘araba, the Jew who knows less or does not keep the Mitsvot, has to keep an open mind and be willing to learn. To allow that his negative opinions about the Torah may be nothing more than prejudice. That he may have judged the whole tree of Judaism by a few rotten apples. That it is never too late to learn or to change your mind.

Do you know who taught me this? My father, z”l. Like a great many other Jews, my father grew up in a family that kept nothing. He never went to a Jewish school and never had the chance to learn to read Hebrew. My father was perhaps an ‘araba, but a beautiful ‘araba. Because although he was not religious, he was never antireligious. He never objected to his son learning more about Judaism or wanting to keep more. He was glad when I started studying Torah as a teenager. That attitude kept him inside the virtual community of the four plants his whole life.

Many non observant Jews, unfortunately, and for a long list of reasons I cannot go into here, cross to the other side. They cross the line of the ‘araba, the red line that separates them from tolerance, and their lack of religion turns into a toxic antireligious activism. When that happens, the sacred pact of the community of the four plants breaks, and the separation is unavoidable. The consequences of antireligion have always been catastrophic for the Jewish people.

All of us, the members of this brotherhood of four plants, have to do everything we can to practice respect and tolerance toward every single person in Am Israel. Our highest goal is to stay together. To grow and rise together. Understanding that what unites us counts for far more than what sets us apart.