SUKKOT: The Lulab and the Etrog

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"And you shall take on the first day [of Sukkot] the fruit of a citron tree (etrog), branches of palm trees (lulab), a branch of myrtle (hadas) and willows of the brook ('araba), and you shall rejoice before HaShem, your God, for seven days" (Leviticus 23:40).

THE MITSVA. The Torah tells us to take four plants during the festival of Sukkot, three branches and one fruit: one lulab (a young branch of a date palm), two 'arabot (willow branches), three hadasim (myrtle branches) and one etrog (a citron, a fruit that looks like a lemon). The Mitsva is known as the four species (□□□□□□ □□□□□) or the Mitsva of lulab.

Performing it is called netilat lulab, "lifting" the lulab. The four species are taken in both hands, the lulab, the hadasim and the 'arabot in the right hand and the etrog in the left, held in the direction in which they grew.

THIS YEAR. The Mitsva is performed every day of Sukkot except Shabbat. Since the first day of Sukkot falls on Shabbat this year, the lulab is not taken on Saturday the 26th. The first time we take it will be Sunday, September 27, and that is the day for both blessings. One practical detail: have the lulab tied and assembled before sunset on Friday, because it cannot be tied on Shabbat or on Yom Tob.

THE BLESSING. On the first day we take the four species, this year a Sunday, we recite two blessings: *'al netilat lulab* and

shehecheyanu, thanking God for bringing us to this moment. On the other days of Sukkot only *'al netilat lulab* is recited.

Every Mitsva has to be performed after the blessing is said. That is why some people hold the etrog with its stem (the pitam) facing up before the blessing, and turn it into its proper position only afterwards. This way the berakha is not said over a Mitsva already fulfilled, which would make it a berakha lebatala, a blessing said in vain. Others prefer not to hold the etrog at all until the blessing is said.

WOMEN. Women are formally exempt from the Mitsva of lulab. Even so, in most communities it is customary for them to perform it as well, and that is considered meritorious. The traditions differ about the blessing: in the Sephardic tradition women do not recite it, in the Ashkenazic tradition they do.

THE NA'ANU'IM. After the blessing come the na'anu'im, the movements of the lulab in six directions. The Sephardic custom today is to move it without shaking it (*holakha vehaba'a*) toward the south, the north, the east, up, down and west. This order was established by the sages of the Kabbala and differs from the one Maimonides describes, which Ashkenazic Jews follow closely.

WHAT DO THE MOVEMENTS MEAN?

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Ribbi Yochanan explains that we move the lulab back and forth and then up and down to thank HaShem, "the One who owns the four winds," for the winds that brought the rain in its season during the harvest just ended. Why thank God for good winds on Sukkot? Because by Sukkot the Jewish farmer has already gathered in everything the year produced. Rabbi Abohab

explains that we give thanks precisely then, so as not to forget God at the moment when we have everything we need.

Ribbi Yose bar Ribbi Chanina reads the same movements differently. The lulab stands for the winds, and moving it is a prayer asking HaShem to protect the coming year's harvest: to spare us the destructive winds that bring drought and locusts, and the harmful rains that ruin the produce of the land.

Which opinion do we follow? Do we thank God for the past or ask Him for the year ahead? We do both, in the Hallel. To thank Him we wave and lift the lulab, as one would bring an offering, while saying HODU LASHEM KI TOB, KI LE'OLAM CHASDO. To ask Him for the year ahead we wave it while saying ANNA HASHEM HOSHIA NA, "Please, HaShem, save us," meaning: save us from the winds and the weather that could leave us with nothing to eat.

If prayers about wind and rain do not move us much, it is because we are lucky enough to live in an age of abundance. We have so much food, barukh HaShem, that it is hard to picture the hunger a single year without rain once brought to the people who worked the land.

Four plants that resemble each other in nothing, that grow in different places and need completely different amounts of water, are taken together and in one hand. If one of them is missing, there is no Mitsva.