

What are the Lulav and Etrog *Really* About?

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Because I know we are all getting a little “yontiffed-out”, I thought I would bring you some thing fun this morning. As we have shaken and marched around with lulav and etrog now for two days, it is time to once again ask:why?! I will admit that I often feel awkward or silly shaking these four species around. I question the meaning of the ritual and how it is not anything BUT a pagan ritual! I share with you some different interpretations and midrashim on the meaning and message of the Lulav and the etrog in an attempt to better understand these symbols.

The first: The four species represent four different kinds of Jews:
the etrog—with both taste and smell, those who both study Torah and do good deeds;
the lulav or palm branch—with tasty fruit but no smell, those who study Torah but don't do good deeds;
the hadasim or myrtle branches—with a smell but no taste, those who do good deeds but do not study Torah;
and the aravot or willow branches—with neither taste nor smell, those who do neither.

You will notice that all four species are held together and required for the blessing. None is given priority or low status. They are all essential. This is representative of a community. Each person comes with their own strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, interests and turn-offs. Just as it is difficult to balance and hold together all four species at one time; it is difficult to maintain community. It is difficult to serve everyone's needs and satisfy everyone's desires. But we strive to do just this, because we strive to be a community. We do the best we can—and the best is really juggling. Each person in their uniqueness is essential, just as each member of the Arba Minim, the four species is essential.

Joining all four together reflects our hope that our respective strengths will enable us to complement one another and overcome our individual limitations.

Another interpretation of the four species understands them not to represent four individuals in a community but four aspects of one complete person.

The lulav stands for the spine of a person, the myrtle the eyes, the willow the mouth and the etrog the heart. We combine all four species like we combine all four parts of ourselves in praise of God. With our spine we stand up in reverence for God, with our eyes we behold God's gifts of the harvest, with our mouths we sing God's praises and with our hearts we observe Sukkot's rituals and celebrations.

A third interpretation connects the symbols of Sukkot with the nature of the holiday as a harvest festival. The four species represent land and settledness, fruit and fertility in contrast to the sukkah, which represents wandering and rootlessness, dryness and sand. The one in contrast to the other is meant to evoke the historic as well as the agricultural aspects of the holiday.

A mystical, kabbalistic interpretation of the lulav and etrog views them as unification of masculine and feminine imagery which when united are supposed to bring blessing. In Kabbalah the actions you take not only symbolize holy action but are meant to induce holy action. So, by uniting the lulav and etrog one is uniting the different aspects of God—the masculine and the feminine—and therefore drawing God into the world. Another kabbalistic interpretation is that each of the four species represents a letter of the divine name of God. The etrog represents the letter yod; the soft, curving myrtle represents a hey, the tall and springy lulav represents the letter vay, and the soft and curving willow represents a second hey. When we combine them, we create a channel through which God can flow into this world.

In the end, you will choose what this ritual means to you. Whether it connects you with the earth or with God in the heavens, with your fellow Jews or with the internal dimensions of your self, there is a purpose to lulav and etrog. May we each be blessed with a healthy and happy new year and may the lulav and etrog inspire us in our practice of Judaism beyond Sukkot. Hag Sameah!