

The Prominence of the Willow

This year we had an unexpected trip to Kew Gardens Hills on Thursday, and I will have another one sometime in the next three days. In order to make life easier on Marc Mishan and I, we were going back to ordering *lulavim* and *etrogim* from a distributor who would also send us the *hoshanot*, the set of 5 willows that we beat on *Hoshana Rabba*. That was not meant to be, however. On Thursday September 6, Galit received a call from *The Esrog Headquarters* that 15, 000 lulavim and etrogim had been destroyed by the Customs DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration). All of these were from Israel, requiring *The Esrog Headquarters* to try (in a scramble with all the other distributors) to get more from Morocco and Italy. The receptionist at *The Esrog Headquarters* said if we receive the etrogim from them they will **not** be ripe. Without a second thought, I called Marc Mishan and planned our pilgrimage for the second year in a row to Kew Garden Hills.

The reason I was so eager to change course (after vowing next year not to go back to Kew Garden Hills) deals with the *halachot* (laws) of

the lulav and etrog. Let us begin by looking at the etrog.¹ The etrog should primarily be turning yellow (ripe) rather than green (unripe). The peel cannot be punctured through in any spot, nor can it lack any of its inner skin. The peel cannot be overly soft, cracked, dry or peeled. The shape should preferably be like a tower – wider at the bottom and narrow at the top. The last and most important *halacha* is as follows: If this particular Esrog grew with a protruding stem (called a *pitom*), then that stem cannot be broken off. **However, if the etrog grew in the first place without a *pitom*, it is still kosher.** Many etrogim in Israel are genetically engineered to not have a *pitom*, which certainly helps. If the *pitom* breaks, however, it is not as big a deal as people make it **as long as it breaks after the first day.** After all look at the verse from this morning's Torah reading: “On the **first day** you shall take the product of *hadar* (beautiful) trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your G-d

¹ Halachot found on <http://www.aish.com/h/su/wt4s/48969641.html>. I generally like to look up *halachot* independently in the Shulhan Aruch (in this case *Hilchot Lulav*) but did not have time before the holiday began.

seven days.”² The verse specifically mentions the *hadar*, or beautiful aspect, of the fruit on the **first day**.

Going in order of the verse we turn to the lulav (כפות תמרִים). The most important *halacha* is one often violated: the center-most leaf is not split, but rather is closed (at least half-way down). One should not shake his/her lulav particularly hard to avoid the leaves splitting. The top of the *lulav* cannot be cut off, and the lulav should be at least 16 inches long. The *lulav* cannot be dried out and the straighter it is, the better. The holder which contains the *lulav* (in the center), the myrtle (in the right) and the willows (in the left) needs to be made from *lulav*, as do the ties to hold the lulav in place.

Next up is the myrtle or *hadas* (ענף עץ עבות). Three myrtle branches are on the right-side of the lulav and is higher than the willow. A kosher myrtle has a pattern of three leaves coming out from the same point in the branch. This three-leaf pattern must be repeated over at least half the

² Levitius 23:40

length of the branch. Each branch should be at least 11 inches (29 cm.) long, and the branch cannot be dried out.

Finally we get to the willow (ערבי נהל), two branches on the left side of the lulav. These branches need to be cared for greatly (I take them out, wrap them in a wet paper towel, refrigerate them every day) as without that they turn black. For the willows, the stem should preferably be red, and it should be at least 11 inches (29 cm.) long. The leaves should be oblong, not round in shape. They should have a smooth edge, not serrated. Willow leaves often decay, turning black during the 7 days of Sukkot. For this I take some consolation from Midrash Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, comparing the willow to Joseph, “for just as the willows decay and dry out before the other three species, so did Joseph die before his brethren.”³ Luckily we will get sets of five fresh willows known as Hoshanot to beat on Sunday for Hoshana Rabba-which if you haven't attended before, this is your year 😊.

³ Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 28. From Rabbi Robert Schienberg
<http://rabbischeinberg.blogspot.com/2017/10/keeping-willows-alive.html>

Now I'm sure you're thinking "Very interesting Rabbi, but what does this have to do with us?" Just as there is the interesting Midrash about the willows so too are there those about the 4 species. I want to teach a new one, not the classic one about Torah/good deeds or about the parts of the body, but one from Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson. He writes that The *lulav* Jew is immersed in study. But, as our sages say, *true* learning brings one to *action*. This leads to the myrtle Jew, the person who's doing good deeds. That, by necessity, implies knowledge! You have to *know* what Torah requires in order to fulfill its requirements. By the same token, the willow Jew *does* study and *does* act.⁴ All three types of Jews are bound together in the *Lulav*, giving each one the opportunity to learn from the others, with the willow in its simplicity despite its fragility being the exemplar to follow.

This Sukkot and beyond, let us not go for the glamour, the etrogim in our daily life or the prominent lulav, but rather find simplicity in the willow. May we find that we can learn from even the most fragile things in life, rather than pushing them aside or viewing them as unimportant.

⁴ Sefer HaMaamarim 5710, p. 4.

These willows that we will hit on Sunday, marking the true end of the High Holy Day season, have an important lesson to teach us-if only we take the time to care for and nurture them.