Secrets Of Succot

Contributed by Tzvi Fishman
Thursday, 27 September 2012
Last Updated Thursday, 27 September 2012

In our previous articles on the High Holy Days, we traced their connection to Tikun HaBrit, the rectification of the covenant of sexual purity between G-d and the Jewish People. We saw that both the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShana, and the service of the Kohen HaGadol on Yom Kippur are designed to cleanse the Divine channel of illumination, the sefirah of Yesod, which becomes blocked because of our sins.

In the spiritual world of the sefirot, where man is considered the microcosm of Creation, it is the Yesod that parallels the organ of the Brit milah. When viewed with this understanding, the High Holy Days come to help us rectify this very fundamental aspect of our lives. As we approach the holiday of Succot (the Feast of Tabernacles), we will present some basic Kabbalistic explanations of the four species, and of the succah (tabernacle), to show how the festival of Succot continues this process of rectification.

Amongst the four species, the lulav commands center stage, not only in towering above the etrog, myrtle leaves, and willow branches, but the blessing that we recite in performing the mitzvah is over the "waving of the lulav." The lulav is taken from the long, straight, upper branches of the date palm. In the holy Zohar, we find that the date palm, or tamar, represents the Tzaddik, the righteous individual who conducts his life in utmost sexual purity, as in the case of Yosef, who was called Tzaddik, because he overcame the temptations of Potifar's wife.

To quote the Zohar:

"Rabbi Yitzhak explained the verse, "The tzaddik (righteous man) flourishes like the date palm; he grows like a cedar in Lebanon" (Psalms, 92:13). Why is the tzaddik compared to a date palm? Just as a date palm, when cut down, takes a long time for another to grow again, so too when the world loses a tzaddik, it takes a long time before another rises in his place. For this same reason, the tzaddik is also compared to a cedar in Lebanon.

"Regarding, 'flourishes like a date palm,' just as a date palm does not grow (and bear fruit) unless the male be planted by the female, so the tzaddik cannot flourish save when husband and wife are united, when the male aspect of tzaddik, is united with the female aspect of tzaddik, as with Avraham and Sarah" (Zohar, Bereshit 82a).

The Tzaddik is associated with the sefirah of Yesod, as its says, "Tzaddik yesod olam," meaning "the Tzaddik is the foundation of the world" (Mishle, 10:25). Thus Yosef, who guarded his sexual purity, became the earthly channel of the Yesod to bring the blessing of G-d's bounty into the world. From this we see that the lulav, in its spiritual connection to the sefirah of Yesod, is a powerful tool in rectify sexual transgression and drawing down Divine goodness to mankind.

Just as the Tzaddik towers over and shelters his generation, so too the lulav branch of the date palm rises above and looks over the three accompanying species. In waving the upright, male symbol of the luluv, the embodiment of the Yesod, we activate the female aspect of the Yesod above, drawing down Divine blessing. Accordingly, the holiday of Succot is also known as the Festival of the Harvest, or the Ingathering, when we harvest our material and spiritual blessings at the start of the year. The Hebrew word for "the Harvest," ÔÐáÙã, has the same numerical value as Yosef, ÙÕáã, once again hinting at the connection between sexual purity and the bounty of the Festival of the Harvest.

In its inner, spiritual essence, the lulav is like a healing laser beam whose light soars upward with our wavings to the furthest reaches of Heaven, healing the damaged Yesod and releasing its life-sustaining blessings. We wave the lulav toward the four directions of the compass, and up and down, a total of six directions, which parallels the Yesod, the sixth of the lower sefirot. There are many Kabbalistic meanings of the lulav and its wavings that come to remind us that our connection to G-d is directly influenced by our level of sexual purity, symbolized by the lulav, in its mystical association to the Yesod and the organ of the Brit.

For readers who enjoy discovering the wonders hidden in the Hebrew letters, Rabbi Yekutiel Zalman Zev points out that the lulav can to be seen to represent the letter vav. Pictorially, the letter vav is long and straight, like the lulav and the organ corresponding to the Yesod. The letter vav has the numerical value of six, paralleling the sixth sefirah of Yesod. By waving the lulav three times forward and three times back, for a total of six wavings, we actualize the flow of the Yesod.

Aiming our secret spiritual weapon toward the six directions multiplies this flow of bounty into our lives. Also, it is the letter vav in the middle of G-d's Name (shem havaya) that connects the first two letters, Yud and Hai, representing the upper spiritual worlds, with the final letter Hai, representing our world. Once again, this hints that the vav-lulav-Yesod represents the channel that brings Divine blessing from the upper worlds to our world ("The Secret of Hashmal," pg. 429; see also, Tikunei Zohar, 134a).

In his halachic exegesis, the Maharil ("Laws of Lulav") notes that the first and last letters of the Torah, bet and lamed, and the first and last letters of the Tanach, vav and lamed, make up the letters of lulav. This once again hints that the lulav-yesod is the central axis that joins one end of our holy writings with the other, encompassing the entire Torah.

The father of modern day Kaballah, the Arizal (1534-1572), points out that the word, lulav (ÜÕÜÑ) has the same gematria (numerical value) of 68 as the word "chaim" meaning life (×ÙÙÝ). This is because of the life force that flows from the male principle of the lulav-Yesod, to the feminine principle of Malchut, represented by the etrog, which symbolizes the fruit of the womb (Shar HaKavanot, Succot, 5; and see also, Zohar, Pinchus, 266b). When we raise the lulav and etrog together, we unite the male and female principles of Creation in a spiritual unification, called Yichud.

This union of the lulav and etrog helps to rectify the spiritual blemishes caused by sexual transgressions whereby the holy, life force of the seminal seed was not channeled from the Yesod of the husband to the Malchut of the wife in the proper Torah fashion. Such transgressions include masturbation, pre-marital sex, forbidden familial relations, adultery, sexual relations with gentiles, and other sexual wrongdoing.

Because this exalted unification and tikun is central to the performance of the mitzvah, the Kabbalist elder, Rabbi Eliahu Leon Levi, stresses the importance of grasping the lulav at the bottom of its stem, and not in the middle, so that the hands do not act as a barrier separating the upper spine of the lulav (the Yesod) from the etrog (the Malchut). Rather, the lulav and etrog should be held together at the bottom of the four species, so that the flow of Divine illumination from the Yesod to the Malchut, stimulated by the waving, is not interrupted.

According to the Arizal, the three hadassim represent the sefirot of Chesed, Givorah, and Tiferet. When combined with the two aravot, symbolizing Netzach and Hod, all of the seven lower sefirot are united in a perfect Yichud. For these reasons, before performing the mitzvah of waving the lulav, most communities recite a brief Kabbalistic prayer stating our inner intention to unite the Holy One Blessed Be He with His Shechina, the ultimate cosmic union.

Since the holiday of Succot is a full seven days, we will lengthen our glimpse at the esoteric significance of the festival to mention some aspects of the Succah itself.

In the Talmud (Succah 11b), Rabbi Eliezer cites his opinion that our succah booths parallel the Clouds of Glory that protected and nurtured our forefathers in the wilderness after the Exodus from Egypt. The Zohar teaches that these Clouds which extended like pillars towering over the encampments of the Jews, embodied the all-encompassing flow of Divine energy contained in the Yesod (Tikkunim 148b).

The Arizal states, (Shar HaKavanot, Succah 1), and it is recorded in the Mishna Berurah, that it is preferable to recite the blessing over the lulav, and to wave it, inside the succah. This brings about a powerful union between the all-encompassing aspect of the Yesod, represented by the succah, with its inner aspect, represented by the lulav, the symbol of the spine which lies inside the body. Thus the succah becomes an electric power plant of high-voltage spiritual energy from both within and without, generating the supreme joy and renewal of the holiday.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook, the first chief Rabbi of Israel, writes that: "The succah inspires such supernal joy that it cannot be a permanent dwelling, only temporary. Light waves of joy continuously flow, one wave ascends and immediately, without pause, a second wave, brighter and more joyous than the first, descends and spreads." (Olat Re'iyah 2, pg. 368, translation from "Celebration of the Soul" by Pesach Yaffe).

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov teaches that this supreme, climaxing joy of the holidays, attained in the mitzvah of succah, can only truly be experienced by the person who has rectified his sexual sins (Likutei Halachot, Laws of Succah, 1). "After Yom Kippur, when we merited the seal of the holy Brit through the rectification of the Brit and our prayers, immediately after this, we begin to build the succah, because the succah depends on Tikun HaBrit because the succah represents the Clouds of Glory, and those who damaged the Brit through sexual transgression were cast out by the Cloud."

Even though the Jews were protected by the invincible Clouds of Glory on their departure from Egypt, the evil nation of Amalek succeeded in its unprompted attack, as the Torah records: "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way of your leaving Egypt, how he met you (karcha) by the way and killed the hindermost of you who were feeble in your rear" (Devarim, 25:17-18). Rashi explains the word "karcha" in its root meaning of "keri," an impure emission of semen. Rashi relates that Amalek seduced the weaker Jews into sexual transgression, and when the holy Cloud vomited them out, Amalek pounced on them and killed them. Only those Jews who guarded their sexual purity were protected by the Cloud. So too, Rabbi Nachman explains, only a Jew who guards the Brit in sexual purity can experience the transcendental joy of the succah.

May it be the will of the Almighty that with our lulavs upraised in our hands, we all be triumphant in our war against the spirit of Amalek, which lurks in the impure cultures of the world, seeking to blemish our holiness.