



The Beauty of the Arava

In his book *Like Dreamers*, Yossi Klein Halevi tells the stories of IDF paratroopers involved in reuniting Jerusalem during the Six-Day War. One of those soldiers was Yoel bin Nun. Rabbi bin Nun was a founder of the settlement movement in Israel, including Alon Shvut and Ofra. He led a generation of Religious Zionists to study Tanach as a way of understanding contemporary Israel.

The young Yoel was learning at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, led at that time by Rav Kook's son, Rav Tzvi Yehuda. One day, Yoel was accompanying Rav Tzvi Yehuda through the streets of Geula when they came across a campaign rally for a Charedi political party. An activist was addressing a crowd of black-hatted men, whom he kept addressing as “the community of holy *etrogim*.”

There is a well-known Midrash that compares the Four Species to four types of Jews. The *etrog*, having both taste and fragrance, is compared to righteous Jews who possess both Torah knowledge and good deeds. The speaker was praising the assembled as “the community of holy *etrogim*.” Upon hearing this, Rav Tzvi Yehuda tightened his grip on Yoel's arm and said emphatically, “The *mizbeach* was not wrapped in *etrogim*.”

Rav Yoel did not hear his Rebbe at first. Rav Tzvi Yehuda began pulling Yoel away from the area as if he wanted to get away. “The altar was not wrapped in *etrogim*,” Rav Tzvi Yehuda repeated. “The altar was wrapped in *aravot*.”

Rav Kook was referencing another way *aravot* were used, as described in the Talmud Sukkah 45a:

“There was a place below Jerusalem, and it was called Motza. They would go down and gather branches of *aravot*, and come and put them on the sides of the altar, and their tops would be bent over the altar.”

“As Sukkot came to a close and people left the Temple, they would turn to the altar, adorned with the *arava*, for the last time, and proclaim, יְפִי לָהּ, מְזַבְּחָהּ; יְפִי לָהּ, מְזַבְּחָהּ – how beautiful the altar is, how beautiful the *aravot* were.”

In what way is the *arava* beautiful? By itself, there is nothing eye-catching about it. Its *hadar*, its beauty, is displayed when put together with the *lulav* and *hadassim*. The simple green leaves create an aesthetic look in context with the other *minim*. The *aravot* help create a pleasing and striking overall effect.

Similarly, when adorning the *mizbeach*, there is no need to use objects that are beautiful or impressive in their own right. The altar itself was a work of art. What are needed are some accents to create an overall pleasing effect. The *aravot* must not draw attention away from the altar but rather add a splash of green to the picture. Flower bouquets are that much more beautiful when combined with the simplicity of some green foliage – such is the beauty of the *arava*.

The beauty of the *arava* is found in the way it complements through its dependence on and interaction with other items. The *arava* is the neediest of the four *minim*. It is the most water-dependent. Its dependence is manifest not only in its appearance but also in its biology. This helps to explain why the *arava* plays a major role in our prayers

for rain, as our water needs are a good example of our dependence on G-d.

The word עֲרֵבָה is related to the Hebrew word for mixture, עֲרִיבוּב. Due to its own simplicity, the willow must constantly mix with others; whether with the other *minim* or with the *mizbeach*, to fully contribute and be fully appreciated.

An *arava* is also a geographic location, a plateau, one difficult to access and not useful in its own right, but useful as an artery connecting different places.

The *arava* benefits others without needing to be in the limelight. Its combination of humility and benevolence – contributing to others without being the focus of attention – is truly beautiful. The *arava* is our Jewish symbol of the beauty of servant leadership.

Traditional leadership often involves the accumulation and exercise of power by one at the “top of the pyramid.” By comparison, the servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform to the best of their abilities.

Making others look good while worrying less about oneself. This is servant leadership and this is the lesson of the *arava*. How beautiful is the *arava* indeed!

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