Survival of the Weakest

I used to get frustrated each year when, on the last few days of Sukkot, I noticed how quickly the arava leaves lost their vitality, shriveled up and died. In my attempts to keep them fresh like the beautiful hadas branches, I kept them rolled up in a wet towel in the fridge, standing in a bucket of fresh water, even tucked away inside the freezer – but to no avail. Nothing seemed to really work. Recently, however, I have changed the way I look at those pale-green dried leaves. Here’s why.

At first glance, the arava is indeed the least impressive of the Four Species. According to our Sages, the arava is the least worthy when compared to the etrog, lulav and hadas. It has some value only if bound together with the other species, which are of higher importance and can therefore atone for it. How surprising it is, therefore, to find two Sukkot practices focusing on the arava alone:

a) the Murbiyot, the long arava branches – 5.5 meters tall – picked by a river outside Jerusalem and erected at the four corners of the altar in the courtyard of the Temple throughout the seven days of Sukkot, with their ends bent onto the top of the altar (Mishnah Sukkah 4:5), and b) the Chavata, the five aravot we tie together and beat on the floor in shul at the end of the Hoshanot on Hoshanah Rabba, a custom originated by the early Prophets (Rambam, Lulav 7:24).

So here is a fresh look at the arava: Sukkot is known as the “Judgement Day for Rain” (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2), and the arava, whose leaves are the fastest to dry once removed from a water source, is the most fitting tree through which to show our absolute dependence on rain, our primordial fear of famine and our inherent thirst for water – all of which are strongly felt in a desert land like Israel.

The Murbiyot branches of the arava, which naturally grow on the riverbanks and need lots of water to survive [the one growing in my own back yard consumes three times as much water as the rest of my fruit trees], are placed at the corners of the altar, not far from the large fire burning on top of it. Within a matter of minutes the fresh, beautifully-shaped leaves darken, twist and dry, hanging there lifeless and miserable in front of the massive celebrating crowds. Apart from being a catalyst for the upcoming Prayer for Rain recited on the last day of Sukkot, this sight serves as a symbolic reminder of our complete dependence on G-d, and of our thirst for Torah.

The same applies to the Chavata, the beating of the arava on the floor. When seeing how easily even the fresh leaves fall off the arava branches, we are reminded of our eternal state of mortal helplessness. I personally try to apply this idea to various aspects of Jewish practice, which include humbling experiences such as dipping in a mikveh or the horrible weakness I feel at the end of fast days.

The need for such visual effects and physical actions to reinforce and impress spiritual messages into our psyche is obvious. But it makes even more sense if we remember that there are six long months after Sukkot until all Jewish pilgrims gather again at the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate Pesach together. Since Sukkot is followed by the year’s longest break between holidays, it is imperative to raise awareness of our need for G-d’s loving, caring, protecting and providing hand in our daily lives while we are far from the Place He chose. The arava was selected, due to its evident weakness, as the medium through which to convey this important value in Jewish life. In that sense, I’m happy to see my aravot begin to dry.

I once saw a rationalist bumper sticker that read “Prayer is for Wimps.” True enough. Prayer can be such a powerful tool and connect us to G-d only after we admit our own powerless and stand before Him with a genuine feeling of constant need. This is what we learn from the arava. Indeed, the secret of tefillah rests in the awe-inspiring knowledge that we are absolutely dependent on G-d, every minute of every day.

This is powerful. For truly attaching ourselves to the Absolute Power rests on our understanding that we are absolutely powerless without Him.

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