



HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF
CENTER FOR JEWISH LEARNING

WHAT DO PALM BRANCHES HAVE TO TEACH US ABOUT ENGAGEMENT?????

MUSINGS ON THE MANY FACES OF
ISRAEL

&

THE FOUR SPECIES OF SUCCOT

A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN
RABBI HYIM SHAFNER, ST. LOUIS HILLEL CTR.

&

RABBI AVI WEINSTEIN, DIRECTOR, HILLEL'S JOSEPH MEYERHOFF CENTER FOR
JEWISH LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

The Torah teaches that on the festival of Succot we are supposed to "take" the following:

"... the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palms, and the boughs of thick tree-foliage, and willows of the brook."

The Torah does not tell us what to do with these objects once we have taken them. It also does not tell us what they symbolize. The following commentary by rabbis who lived during the Talmudic period endeavors to understand the symbolism of these objects. Note that all four objects are necessary in order to fulfill the commandment. If one of the four objects is not taken then it is impossible to do the mitzvah (to fulfill the commandment).

The Rabbinic Midrashic (Commentary) on Leviticus

...THE FRUIT OF BEAUTIFUL TREES: symbolizes Israel; just as the *etrog* has taste as well as fragrance, so Israel have among them people who possess learning and good deeds.

BRANCHES OF PALMS, too, applies to Israel; as the palm-tree has taste but no fragrance, so Israel have among them those who possess learning but not good deeds.

AND BOUGHS OF THICK TREE-FOLIAGE likewise applies to Israel; just as the myrtle (which is what the rabbis identified as being "boughs of thick tree foliage) has fragrance but no taste, so Israel have among them those possess good deeds but not learning.

AND WILLOWS OF THE BROOK also applies to Israel; just as the willow has no taste and no fragrance, so Israel have among them people who possess neither learning nor good deeds.

What then does the Holy One, do to them? To destroy them is impossible. But, says the Holy One, let them all be tied together in one band and they will atone for each other. If you have done so [says God], then at that instant I am exalted.

YOUR MIDRASH NAVIGATOR

1. How can one who has no learning and no good deeds atone for someone who has learning and good deeds?
2. Why do we not abandon the group that the "willows of the brook" represents?
3. If we think of the four species as the different kinds of Jews on campus, which of the species would be representative of the "engagement" group? Which wouldn't?
4. Is the object to bring the groups together, or do we "take" them separately?