Four Species that Once United a Nation

View PDF



Edward Fram is a professor in the Department of Jewish History at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where he holds the Solly Yellin Chair in Eastern European and Lithuanian Jewry. His most recent book is The Codification of Jewish Law on the Cusp of Modernity, published by Cambridge University Press (2022). This article appears in issue 45 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

It is probably safe to say that the dominant symbol in contemporary Jewish life today is the Star of David. It appears on or in almost every synagogue worldwide, no matter what its affiliation, hangs around the necks of an untold number of individuals, and is the focal point of the flag of the State of Israel. However, the Star of David was not always a Jewish emblem, let alone the central symbol in Jewish life. Surviving mosaics floors from synagogues of the Roman-Byzantine Period, such as those in Beit Alfa and Sussia, often depict other symbols, including three ritual objects: the seven-branched candelabra (*menorah*), the ram's horn (*shofar*), and the so-called four species that the Torah commands Jews to take on the Festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles, Lev. 23.40; see below).

The menorah was a centerpiece of the Temple. Fashioned from gold and lit daily, it was such a well-known Jewish image that the Romans recognized it and placed it on the Arch of Titus without any explanatory caption to symbolize Titus's victory over Judea. The *shofar* was connected to Rosh Hashanah but also played an essential role in the history of the Jewish People (e.g., the conquest of Jericho; see Josh. 6) and in public prayer in times of distress. However, the use of the four species seems to have been limited to the Festival of Sukkot. While it is often difficult to say why certain symbols are adopted, it is particularly strange that the four species attained such an important place in ancient Jewish self-consciousness, given their limited place in Jewish life. A fresh look at the character of the commandment may shed some light on why these plants assumed a place in Jewish self-identity that went far beyond the Festival of Sukkot.

Leviticus 23.40 commands, "And on the first day you should take the fruit of a beautiful tree, the branches of the palm, the bough of the thick tree, and willow of the brook and rejoice before the Lord your God seven days." Jewish tradition has understood this as an order to take an etrog (*citrus medica*), a palm branch (Heb., *lulav*), three myrtle branches (*hadassim*), and two willow branches (`*aravot*) and hold them together on the fifteenth day of the Hebrew month that is now called Tishrei. This and sitting in the *sukkah* (tabernacle, hut; see Lev. 23.42) have become the defining rituals of the festival.

The Torah offers no reason for taking the four species, and this exegetical vacuum left the rabbis of the Midrash to suggest numerous possibilities for what underlies the precept. One explanation suggested that the four species represent the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph; another that they represent each of the Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. One rabbi proposed that each of the variety of plants corresponds to parts of a human being that are central to the worship of God. According to this view, the *lulav* represents the spine, the *hadassim*, eyes, `*aravot*, the mouth, and the etrog, the human heart. Yet another approach focused on the taste and smell of each plant and used them as metaphors for different types of Jews. In the etrog, which has both taste and smell, the author of the midrash saw Jews who were knowledgeable in their traditions and did good deeds. Other Jews are like the *lulav* that has taste but no smell. Such Jews are familiar with the Torah, but it does not translate into good deeds. According to this midrash, the *hadassim*, which have a smell but no taste, represent Jews who do wonderful things but lack awareness of the Torah. Finally, Jews who are not knowledgeable and do not do things to help others are like the willow that has neither taste nor smell.

These and other explanations enjoyed great popularity in Jewish homiletical literature, for they saw the four species as symbols of humanity, pivotal figures in the historical consciousness of the People of Israel, and reflections of the relationship between God and Israel. However, at least to the modern mind, they hardly explain the Torah’s rationale in creating this precept, let alone how the four species evolved into such an important symbol in Jewish life. Moreover, why

these four plants? There was undoubtedly other important flora in the biblical world. The Torah itself asserts that the Land of Israel is a land of seven species: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and fruit honey (generally interpreted by the Rabbis to be dates; Deut. 8.8). This characterization of the produce of the land, echoed in several biblical passages (e.g., Isa. 36.16–17), imbued these seven crops with a unique standing in Jewish tradition yet none of them was included in the precept of the four species. That four plants that otherwise have no place in Jewish ritual as outlined in the Torah came to be an integral aspect not only of the Festival of Sukkot but of Jewish self-definition in late antiquity demands some rethinking of the precept. Instead of accentuating metaphors that extend beyond nature as the Midrash does, it may be productive to consider the four species simply for what they are: the flora of four distinct topographical regions of the Land of Israel.

To people living in the agrarian society of biblical Israel, these plants represented different areas of their country. The palm tree grows in the relatively harsh desert zones of the south and the Judean desert. Jericho was famous for its palms and, in biblical times, was called “the city of palms” (Deut. 34.3). The moniker stuck for in 2 Chronicles 28.15 Jericho is again referred to as the “city of palms.” Jericho was not the only place in the region known for its trees. Ein Gedi, about 30 kilometers south of Jericho on the eastern border of the Judean desert, also had a second name that was connected to what must have been one of its essential agricultural products: the palm (see 2 Chron. 20.2). When the prophet Ezekiel described the southern borders of the Land of Israel, he twice referred to a town

in the Negev called “Tamar,” or palm (47.19, 48.28). Palms were, and still are, part and parcel of the arid regions of the Land of Israel.

The Hebrew word “hadar” or beautiful, is used to describe the tree from which a fruit was to be taken and used as one of the four species. It is difficult to know what specific tree the Torah refers to, for there are many “beautiful” trees. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the “beauty [*hadar*] of the Carmel and the Sharon” (35.2), and when he warned of destruction, he said the Sharon would become like the Arava (barren land) and the Carmel would lose its fruit (33.9). The prophet did not use the word “Carmel” to refer to the mountainous area around Haifa as the word is used today, but rather to the region that is a choice place for fruit trees (see too, 2 Kgs. 19.23). To this day, the Sharon, or coastal plain, is famous for its agricultural produce. When Jeremiah wanted to speak of the bounty of fruit and goodness in the land the Israelites had entered, he described it as “the land of the Carmel” (2.7). The “beautiful” or *hadar* tree, whose fruit was to be used in the four species, likely came from the “beautiful” or *hadar* region of the Land of Israel, the fertile area along the coastal plain.

Concerning the willow branches, Leviticus already makes clear that this species was to come from the “nahal” signifying a low area where water gathers to form a stream or a creek, even if only seasonal. In some ways, the “boughs of the thick trees,” or the fragrant myrtle branches, are the opposite of the willow. This variety of myrtle grows in high places, as the prophet Ezekiel alluded to when he complained that the House of Israel worshiped on every high hill they saw and at

every *`ez `avot* (“thick tree,” 20.28). “Thick trees” were associated with high places and, indeed, when Ezra and Nehemiah told the people to go out to collect material for the building of *sukkot* (pl. of *sukkah*), they told them to go towards the mountain where they would find, among other trees, *`ez `avot* (Neh. 8.15), the tree also mentioned for use in the four species. To this day, choice myrtles used on the holiday come from the high regions of the land, such as Safed and the Golan Heights. Not surprisingly, one can infer from the words of Isaiah that the *hadas* could only flourish in the desert by a miracle (see Isa. 41.19).

The topographical divisions that characterized the Land of Israel were part and parcel of biblical terminology. “The Land of the Negev” (Josh. 15.19) was the arid land of the Judean desert and the south. In Deuteronomy 8.7, the Land of Israel is specially referred to as a “land of streams of water” (*nahaley mayyim*), the very place where willows grow, and in Deuteronomy 11.11 Israel is called “a land of mountains,” precisely the place where the myrtle grows. As for the coastal plain, it was called the *shefelah* or “low land” (Josh. 10.40, 11.16). Thus, biblical terminology often reflects the varied nature of the place.

The four species represent the different regions of the land to which agrarian society was attuned. The etrog grows in fertile zones, the palm in arid regions, the willow in low areas of the *nahal*, and the myrtle in the high places. This is not to say that palms, for example, cannot grow in other locations, for they certainly can (see, for instance, Neh. 8.15). However, just as maple trees are native to Asia, Europe, and North America but have very much become associated with eastern

Canada and New England, so too, as the above-noted citations from the Bible make clear, these four species were primarily related to specific topographical areas of the Land of Israel.

The local nature of the four species may be precisely why the so-called “seven species” had no place here. Wheat and barley grow in many conditions, albeit with different levels of success, and fruit honey can come from any number of fruits. Grapes, figs, olives, and pomegranates can be seen in many places in Israel , from the north to the south. The prophet Amos, who was born in Judah but prophetized in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, spoke of peoples’ vineyards, figs, and olives (4.9), just as the prophet Haggai spoke of vines, figs, pomegranates, and olives to the people of Judah some centuries later (2.19). These were typical crops in the more temperate zones of the Land of Israel well before drip irrigation. In biblical times the seven species characterized the Land of Israel; the four species used on Sukkot were associated with specific regions.

Why was it so important to include the different topographical regions of the Land of Israel in a biblical commandment, and why was it so important for the Festival of Sukkot? Sukkot was unique among the three pilgrimage holidays because Jews were commanded to spend the entire festival in Jerusalem. Deuteronomy 16.15 notes this holiday, “Seven days will you celebrate to the Lord your God in the place that the Lord will choose…” Indeed, King Solomon sent the pilgrims who

had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Sukkot in the Holy City back home after the entire holiday (1 Kgs. 8, cf., 2 Chron. 7.9–10). The Festival of Sukkot was significantly different from the other pilgrimage festivals. The Passover sacrifice had to be brought to Jerusalem at a specific time, but the Torah notes that one could go home after the paschal lamb was brought and consumed. “And in the morning,” after having brought the sacrifice, “you shall turn and go to your tent [i.e., home],” says the verse in Deuteronomy 16.7. The Festival of Passover lasted seven days, but one was only obligated to be in Jerusalem for the first night and no more. The holiday of Shavuot (Pentecost) was only one day, but on Sukkot, the Jewish People were commanded to remain in Jerusalem for the entire week. Herein lays one of the essential reasons for the building of *sukkot*, the temporary huts that are the source of the festival’s Hebrew name. “You must sit in *sukkot* for seven days; every full member of Israel shall live in *sukkot*” (Lev. 23.42).

Sukkot were not used exclusively for the holiday. Quite the contrary. They were well known in the Bible and were most often used for non-ritual purposes. Isaiah speaks of a *sukkah* as being for shade (4.6). Jonah made himself a *sukkah* when he left the city to protect himself from the sun (4.5). They were also temporary shelters used by people on the move, such as in times of war (2 Sam. 11.11). During Sukkot, pilgrims who came to Jerusalem needed short term accommodation and they made *sukkot* as a place to stay during the holiday. With no modern hotel chains to billet everyone, where was everyone to stay in Jerusalem for seven days? A sort of “hut city” sprouted up around the Holy City,

likely on the Mount of Olives and the other hills surrounding the town, where pilgrims could quickly enter the city and participate in the festivities. Granted that the Levitical text makes the *sukkah* a mnemonic device with which to remember that the Israelites lived in *sukkot* when God took them out of Egypt (Lev. 23. 43); however, sitting in the huts during the seven days of the festival was first and foremost a practical matter.

Bringing a nation together for a week-long festival in Jerusalem was a challenge. Old rivalries would no doubt come to the fore, and new ones could certainly begin as people from across the country crowded into a city built for far fewer people than crammed its streets during the week-long festival. There was a need to unite the people who came together from disparate places, and the four species were an attempt to do so. Four very different regions were represented in this ritual, and each needed the other to perform the precept. Each group could take pride in its area’s contribution and recognize the importance of others to the whole. An agrarian society focused on what it knew best: agriculture. The four species symbolically linked the nation.

There is little doubt that other aspects of Israelite society were important in instilling a sense of national unity. The Temple service, the Kingship, and the belief in God were probably far more important than the four species. However, little things can also be important. On a holiday that brought much of the nation together for a week in one place, the four species let each group take pride in its

region while giving the group a sense of cohesiveness. The central place given to the four species as a Jewish symbol in later times suggests that this message may ultimately have been internalized.