

Torah Weekly

ת"ב

The Four Mysteries of King Solomon

October 1-7, 2023
16-22 Tishrei, 5784
Torah: Shemini Atzeret/
Shabbat:
Deuteronomy 14:22 - 16:17
Numbers 29:35 - 30:1
Haftorah: Kings I 8:54-66
SUKKOT/SIMCHAT
TORAH

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

Three things are wondrous to me, and four I do not know.

Despite all the wisdom granted to [King] Solomon . . . he was mystified by the Four Kinds. As it is written: "Three things are wondrous to me"—these are the Passover offering, matzah and maror [eaten at the Passover seder]; "and four I do not know"—these are the Four Kinds [taken on Sukkot]. On Sukkot, the Torah commands us to take the "Four Kinds"—the *etrog* (citron), *lulav* (an unopened frond of a date palm), *hadass* (myrtle twig) and *aravah* (willow twig). As is often the case with the Torah's commandments, the "Written Torah" (the Pentateuch or "Five Books of Moses") conveys this mitzvah in a few cryptic words, leaving it to the "Oral Torah" (the traditional interpretation of the Written Torah taught by Moses and handed down through the generations) to decipher their meaning. In the Written Torah, the verse regarding the Four Kinds reads: *And you shall take for yourselves . . . the splendid fruit of a tree, fronds of dates, the branch of the thick-leaved tree and aravot of the river* . . . King Solomon, the Midrash tells us, was mystified by this verse. "Who says that 'the splendid fruit of a tree' is the *etrog*?" he queried. "All fruit trees produce splendid fruit! [As for] 'fronds of dates,' the Torah tells us to take fronds, in the plural . . . yet we take a *lulav*, the unopened heart of the palm. And who says that 'the branch of the thick-leaved tree' is the myrtle? . . . And concerning the 'aravot of the river'—all trees tend to grow near water." How, indeed, do we know that "the splendid fruit of a tree, fronds of dates, the branch of the thick-leaved tree and aravot of the river" are the *etrog*, *lulav*, myrtle and willow? The Talmud, which summarizes forty generations of the oral tradition of Torah interpretation, identifies the Four Kinds through a series of homiletic exegeses of the Hebrew words employed by the verse. The clue to the identity of "the splendid fruit of a tree" lies in the word *hadass* ("splendid"), which can also be read as *ha-dar*—"that which

dwells." The *etrog* is unique in that, while other fruits each have a particular season in which they grow, the *etrog* "dwells in its tree all year round," continuing to grow and develop under a variety of climatic conditions. As for the *lulav*, the Torah indeed writes, "fronds of dates," but the word *kapot* ("fronds of") is spelled without the letter *vav*, meaning that it can also be read *kapat*, "the frond of," in the singular. In addition, the word *kapot* also means "bound," implying that we are to take a closed frond ("the heart of the palm"). By these means, the Oral Torah identifies the second of the Four Kinds as the *lulav*. There are many "thick-leaved trees" in whose branches "the leaves completely cover the stem"; but the Hebrew word *avot* ("thick") also means "plaited" and "rope-like." Hence the "branch of the thick-leaved tree" (*anaf eitz avot*) is identified as the myrtle twig, whose overlapping leaves grow in knots of three, giving it the appearance of a plaited rope. There is another plant that meets this description—the *hirduf* (oleander, *Nerium oleander*)—but the Talmud rejects that possibility as inconsistent with the rule the "[the Torah's] ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its pathways are peace" (since the *hirduf* has thorn-like leaves and is a poisonous plant). The *aravot* of the verse are identified as willow branches, because of the willow's tendency to grow near water, and the elongated shape of its leaves (like a river).² Another identifying mark of the *aravah* is that willow bushes tend to grow in close-knit groups (*aravah* is related to the word *achavah*, "brotherhood"). So what was it about the identity of the Four Kinds that so mystified King Solomon? Surely "the wisest of men" was as proficient in the ways of Torah exegesis as the Talmudic sages whose analysis is summarized above. In any case, there are many cryptic passages in the Torah where laws are derived from double meanings and variant spellings of its words. Solomon's dramatic declaration regarding the *etrog*, *lulav*, myrtle and willow—"Three are wondrous to me and four I do not know"—must bode a deeper meaning, a meaning that relates to the inner significance of the Four Kinds taken on Sukkot.

Four Species of Man

The Four Kinds, says the Midrash, represent four types of people. Man's mission in life consists of two basic challenges, learning and doing; or, as these relate to Jewish life, Torah and mitzvot. The Torah is the vehicle by which we gain knowledge of our Creator and insight into the essence of life; the mitzvot, the divine commandments, are the means by which we build a better and holier world, developing the physical creation into a "dwelling for G-d." These two endeavors define the four personalities represented in the Four Kinds. The *etrog*, which has both a delicious taste and a delightful aroma, represents the perfect individual who both learns and achieves. The *lulav*, being the branch of the date palm, produces fruit that has a taste but no aroma; this is the prototype of the reclusive scholar who grows in wisdom but shuns the world of action. The fragrant but tasteless myrtle is the activist whose profusion of good deeds consumes all his time and energies. Finally, the tasteless, scentless willow represents the person who neither learns nor does, actualizing neither his intellectual potential nor his capacity to improve the world. On Sukkot, concludes the Midrash, these "Four Kinds" are "all bound together in one bundle," each an integral part of the community of G-d. **The Tormented Fruit:** In light of this, we can understand the four things that mystified the wisest of men. If the "splendid fruit" in the Four Kinds represents the harmony of learning and accomplishment, why is this the fruit that "dwells in its tree all year round"? One would expect such perfection from a fruit maturing in tranquility, in a climate that is singularly attuned to its nature and needs—not from one whose development is agitated by ever-shifting conditions. And yet, time and again we indeed find that the greatest lives are those beset by travail and challenge; that the most balanced personalities are forged by the need to deal with changing circumstances and to constantly adapt to new climates and environments. This, to King Solomon, was one of the great mysteries of life. How does vacillation fuel growth? Why is it that the individual who enjoys a tranquil existence is never as

“fragrant” and “delectable” as the one who is battered by the vicissitudes of life? **Pressed Leaves:** The *lulav*, too, perplexed the great mind of Solomon. Is not the very nature of intellectual discourse that it produces varied opinions and conclusions? In the words of the Talmud, “Torah scholars sit in numerous groups and study the Torah. One group deems a thing impure, and another deems it pure; one group forbids a deed, and another permits it; one group disqualifies something, and another renders it fit.” So when the verse speaks of “fronds of dates,” we are inclined to understand these words in their literal, plural sense. For if the second of the Four Kinds connotes the Torah scholar—the human mind enfranchised to assimilate the divine wisdom—should it not consist of two palm branches, in keeping with the plural nature of the intellect? Should not their leaves be opened and spread, pointing to the various directions that the rational examination of a concept will take when embarked on by the mind of man? And yet, the *lulav* commanded by the Torah is a single, closed frond, its leaves fused to a single rod pointing in a single direction. As the above-quoted Talmudic passage concludes: “Should a person then ask: How, then, might I study Torah? But all was received from a single Shepherd.” This was the second of the two mysteries pondered by King Solomon. How do the flock of opinions and perspectives of Torah relate to their “single Shepherd”? How can the divine wisdom be funneled through the multifarious world of human reason and remain the singular truth of a singular G-d? **The Plaited Twig:** The myrtle in the Four Kinds represents the “deed” aspect of life—the manner in which we fulfill the purpose of creation with the physical actions of the mitzvot, thereby constructing a “dwelling for G-d in the physical world.” Thus, the Torah identifies the myrtle by alluding to its “plaited” appearance, given it by the way that its leaves grow in clumps of three: the number “three” represents the realm of action, which is the third of the soul’s three “garments” or vehicles of expression (thought, speech and deed). Here lies what is perhaps the most profound mystery of all. How can the finite and mundane physical deed “house” the divine essence? Indeed, the plaited twig that comes to mind when thinking of the physical world is not the fragrant myrtle, but the barbed and poisonous *hirduf*! Yet it is the material world where G-d elected to make His home. It is the physical deed to which He imparted the ability to serve as man’s highest form of communion with Him. Why? To the wisest of men, this was one of the four phenomena to which he could only say: “I do not know it.” **A Brotherhood of Trees:** The fourth of Solomon’s mysteries concerns the willow, a plant with neither fragrance nor taste, devoid of learning as well as deeds. Why is this species counted among the Four Kinds? The verse itself answers that question by referring to the fourth kind as “*aravot* of the river.” The willow might not exhibit any positive qualities, but its roots are embedded in the banks of its ancestral river and nourished by the waters of its heritage. It, too, is a child of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; in its veins, too, course the love and awe of G-d that they bequeathed to all their descendants. Another hallmark of the willow is that “it grows in brotherhood.” This alludes to a unique feature of the human “willow.” Taken alone, he might exhibit not a single positive trait or achievement; but when gathered in a community, the aura of holiness that suffuses each individual soul suddenly comes to light. Thus our sages tell us that the divine presence rests upon a gathering of ten individuals (the number that comprises a “community”) even if they are not engaged in the study of Torah or the performance of a mitzvah. This is also the significance of the *minyan* (the quorum of ten required to recite certain prayers): ten individuals gathered together represent a quantum leap in holiness. Ten ignorant boors make a *minyan*, while nine pious scholars do not.

This is what mystified King Solomon about the willow. How does ten times nothing add up to something? If each on his own possesses no visible expression of his innate holiness, how does that change when ten of them come together? All trees grow on water, mused the wisest of men; what sets the willows apart, earning them a place among the Four Kinds? Simply the fact that they grow close together? **Impossible Truths:** If we think of these mysteries, they are as enigmatic and elusive as when King Solomon pondered them thirty centuries ago. But we usually don’t think of them at all, so deeply are they ingrained in our reality. Despite their logical incomprehensibility, these are obvious and ever-present truths in our lives. Why do vacillation and hardship fuel growth? How can contradictory ideas embody a singular truth? Why does a simple physical deed elevate us to levels of holiness and G-dliness unequalled by the most transcendent spiritual experience? How are a number of ordinary human beings magically transformed when knit into a community, greatly surpassing the sum of their individual parts?

King Solomon couldn’t explain these mysteries; certainly, we cannot. But we recognize these as axiomatic to our lives, as four cornerstones to our existence that bear the stamp of a Creator within whose infinite being opposites merge and paradoxical truths harmoniously reside.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, October 1, 2023-16 Tishrei, 5784

Passing of R. Moshe Zacuto (1697)

R. Moshe, known by the acronym Ramaz, was an Italian rabbi and Kabbalist, well-known for his erudition and piety. A scion of Portuguese hidden Jews, he authored numerous works, many of them on Kabbalah, as well as a number of liturgical hymns. Birth of Rebecca (1677-1556 BCE), wife of Isaac, mother of Jacob and Esau, and one of the Four Matriarchs of Israel.

Tuesday, October 3, 2023-18 Tishrei, 5784

Passing of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1810)

Passing of the famed Chassidic rebbe, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, Ukraine (1772-1810). A great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, he championed a unique path of divine service that entails simplicity, joy, and solitude. He left no successor, but his teachings remain influential more than 200 years after his passing.

Wednesday, October 4, 2023-19 Tishrei, 5784

Passing of Vilna Gaon (1797)

Passing of the famed Talmudist and Kabbalist, Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (now Vilnius), Lithuania (1720-1797), known as the “Vilna Gaon.” Rabbi Eliyahu was the leading figure in the opposition to the Chassidic movement in its early years.

Thursday, 20 Tishrei, 5784-October 5, 2023

Passing of R. Heshel of Cracow (1663)

R. Heshel was a Polish scholar known for his sharpness and depth of knowledge. Although most of his writings are not extant, his influence is greatly felt until today, as many of the classic Halachists of his day were his students, such as R. Shabtai Katz (the Shach) and R. David HaLevi (the Taz). Many stories are told about his quick-wittedness even as a young child.

Friday, October 6, 2023-21 Tishrei, 5784

Prophecy of Haggai Encouraging the Building of the Second Temple (353 BCE)

On this day, the prophet Haggai received a divine message to pass on to “Zerubavel son of She’altiel ruler of Judah, Joshua son of Jehozadak the High Priest, and the remnant of the nation” (Haggai 2:1)

Shabbat, October 7, 2023-22 Tishrei, 5784

Lubavitcher Rebbe Suffers Heart Attack (1977)

While celebrating the joyous holiday hakafot with thousands of chassidim in the central Chabad-Lubavitch synagogue in Brooklyn, NY, the Rebbe suffered a massive heart attack. In spite of the tremendous pain, the Rebbe remained calm and insisted on continuing the hakafot, and only after they concluded did he depart the synagogue. On the following day, the Rebbe requested that the chassidim celebrate the Simchat Torah festivities with the same joy and fervor as all other years, and so it was.

Nation Returns Home After Holy-Temple Dedication Festivities (827 BCE)

At the end of the 14-day dedication festivities celebrating the completion of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (see calendar entry for 8 Tishrei),