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The Torah Is Eternal, And Its Lessons Are Eternal

The *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*^[1] teaches a fundamental concept that, since the Torah is eternal its lessons are always applicable to every generation, no matter the time or place. The lessons of the Torah apply to all of us, and our job is to learn how to apply its wisdom to our own situations. Based upon this, let us explore the various laws of the *lulav* brought in the *Mishnah* in Tractate *Sukkah*^[2].

A “Stolen Lulav”

In the *Mishnah* which explains the laws of *lulav*, the first *halachah* taught in the *Mishnah* is that a stolen *lulav* is disqualified for use of the *mitzvah*.

Upon face value, this teaches that a person does not fulfill the *mitzvah* of *lulav* with a stolen *lulav*. But there is a deeper meaning which can be uncovered through understanding the “*pnimiyus*” (inner world) behind the *lulav*.

The *Zohar*^[3] teaches that *lulav* comes from a combination of the words “*lo*” (“to him”) and “*lev*” (“heart”), to show that “one’s heart [his spiritual heart] must be in his jurisdiction.” In other words, a person needs to be in control of his own heart.^[4] In other words, a person’s heart should not be swayed by the hearts of others, especially in relation to our way of serving Hashem. Our service of Hashem has to come from within us, an expression of our own individuality, and we should not ‘steal’ our *Avodas Hashem* from others.

Thus, on an inner level, a stolen *lulav* refers to “a stolen heart.” Any service of Hashem that is not a true representation of our own individual selves is considered “disqualified,” just like a stolen *lulav* is disqualified, for the heart of a person [which we need to use in our service to Hashem] should be our own and not “stolen.”

Copying Another Person’s Avodas Hashem

There is a custom to shake the *lulav* in all four directions. But one needs to inspect himself: When shaking the *lulav* in all four directions, is he acting from within himself, or he is merely copying the way other people are doing it?

Once there was a *tzaddik* who would *daven* as a *baal tefillah* at the *Kosel*. At particular points in his *davening*, he would move a certain way. After this *baal tefillah* passed away, someone else took over his role and led the *davening*. The new *baal tefillah* copied the *tzaddik*’s same movements at the

particular points in the service. However, a *gadol* who regularly davened at this *minyán* stopped doing so when he noticed that the new *baal tefillah* was copying the *tzaddik's* movements.

This story teaches us that a person should not copy how another person serves Hashem. When we shake the *lulav*, we should not merely be copying another person's movements. Rather, our performance of the *mitzvah* should be our own act of self-expression. Does our shaking really reflect our own, unique soul – or are we just mimicking others?

Consider a five-year-old child who comes to *shul* and does not know how to daven. He may watch others and imitate their body movements. He stands when everyone stands, he sits when everyone sits. He covers his eyes when they cover their eyes. This mimicry resembles a stolen *lulav*. It's a stolen heart! If a person's *Avodas Hashem* is merely a reflection of others rather than personal and heartfelt, it is as if he is acting like a monkey who copies other people. Though his body may be moving, his heart and soul are not. Thus, his actions are not true.

Copying Is Really Stealing

Imagine one man walking quickly down the road. A second man notices this man's pace and also quickens his pace. He catches up to the first man, walking alongside him until the first man reaches his house, walks inside, and shuts the door. The second man is left standing on the street. He cannot follow the other man all the way into his own, private house.

When we shake *lulav*, the fundamental question is whether we are doing this *mitzvah* from an inner, personal place in ourselves, or are we just copying the external motions of everyone else? If so, eventually our imitation catches up with us and becomes worthless.

During the year, we often subconsciously copy other people's movements or body language. We may presume this is acceptable since we are not copying anything negative. However, upon reflection, one may realize that copying another person in any way is a form of stealing. And more importantly, it does not represent one's personal *Avodas Hashem*. When we serve Hashem, we have to give Hashem a service that came from us, not something that was copied from others. Thus, our service, such as waving the *lulav*, has to originate from our own individual soul. Otherwise, it resembles a stolen *lulav*, which is invalid for use.

A "Dry Lulav"

The next law of the *Mishnah*^[5] relating to *lulav* is that "a dry *lulav* is disqualified" for the *mitzvah*. The commentaries discuss the meaning of the term "dry." However, on a deeper level, as we explored above, we can also learn the implications of a "dry *lulav*" for our souls in our *Avodas Hashem*.

Shaking the *lulav* is a way to give praise to Hashem. A person praises the Creator for giving him the *mitzvah* of the four species. The *Talmud Yerushalmi*^[6] states that a dry *lulav* is invalid because it is written, "The dead do not praise Hashem."^[7] In other words, a dry *lulav* is considered to be like a dead *lulav*. "The dead do not praise Hashem," as opposed to the living who do praise Hashem.

On Yom Tov, there is a *mitzvah* to rejoice. "And you shall rejoice before Hashem your G-d."^[8] Although this verse describes the joy standing in the *Beis Hamikdash*, this requirement of *simchah* applies to all of the *mitzvos*. All of the *mitzvos* need to be done with joy. A person is required to hold the four species when he recites *Hallel* and then shake them when he recites *Hodu L'Hashem Ki Tov*^[9]; one can certainly shake them already beforehand, upon making the *berachah* over the *lulav*^[10], but the main time to shake the *lulav* is by *Hallel*,^[11] since the main aspect of the *mitzvah* of the four species is to praise Hashem with them. When we experience true, authentic joy when

performing this *mitzvah* from deep in our hearts, this gives us the life which in turn enables us to praise Hashem with feeling – in contrast to the verse, “*the dead do not praise Hashem.*”

Acting By Rote

When a person shakes the *lulav* as he says the words “*Hodu LaHashem, Ki Tov,*” he can ask himself whether he truly feels gratitude to Hashem. If he does, his *lulav* is “alive” and it’s “valid” for the *mitzvah*.

However, if he is just saying the words without concentration and meaning, it is like: “*With his mouth and lips he honors Me, but his heart is far from me, and their fear toward me is like commandments learned by rote.*”^[12] Such a person is [considered] among “the dead” who do not praise Hashem! It is one thing to utter the words of *Hallel*, but the question is whether one really feels a vitality in saying them? This is the ultimate question that sums up a person’s *mitzvah* performance and *Avodas Hashem*.

Consider a person salivating over a delicious piece of food. When he then eats this food, he feels a vitality and enjoyment. He’s not just chewing the food, he’s enjoying the experience.

A person should also experience the same vitality (*chiyus*) and enjoyment from shaking *lulav* during *Hallel*. Is he merely going through the motions, or is he feeling vitality from those movements? Is he doing it with *chiyus*? If he does not feel a *chiyus* as he shakes *lulav*, he is like a “dry *lulav*.” His *lulav* might be technically kosher for use of the *mitzvah*, but his absence of *chiyus* means his performance is essentially dead, and “*the dead do not praise Hashem.*”

The level of dryness of the *lulav* is an analogy for the level of “dryness” of a person’s performance of this *mitzvah*. The performance of shaking the *lulav* has to be done with spirit, with life, with *chiyus* inside – otherwise, it is “invalid” for the *mitzvah*.

The *Gemara*^[13] teaches that in Jerusalem it used to be common for people to leave their house holding the *lulav*, take it with them to *shul*, hold it while reciting *Shema* and *Shemoneh Esrei* and while visiting the sick or comforting the mourners. When he came to the *beis midrash* to learn, he would let his son or servant hold the *lulav* for him.” Anyone who took the *lulav* with him wherever he went obviously derived *chiyus* from the *mitzvah* of *lulav*. A person does not deliberately carry around a sack of stones wherever they go because the stones do not provide him with any *chiyus*. Analogously, shaking the *lulav* only has meaning when one is performing the *mitzvah* with *chiyus*.

A Lulav Used For “Idol Worship”

The Mishnah^[14] also teaches that a “*lulav of Asheirah* (a kind of idol worship) is disqualified for use of the *mitzvah*.” What does this mean on an inner, deeper dimension?

As we brought from the Zohar, the word “*lulav*” comes from the words “*lo*” (to him) and “*lev*” (his heart), in other words, the heart of a person has to be “his.” This applies not only to avoiding copying others, but to the extent to which our words are heartfelt. Our words and speech have to reflect our hearts.

For instance, when one *davens* in *Shemoneh Esrei* for a person who is sick, *rachmana litzlan*, he generally has a lot of *kavannah* (concentration) when he *davens* the prayer of “*Refoeinu*” (Heal us). His words are heartfelt and represent his deep and honest desires for healing. In contrast, many of us may *daven* the blessing of “*Hoshiva Shofteinu*” (Return our Judges), without truly desiring, deep in our hearts, that Hashem will return our judges to us.

How does this apply to idol worship?

The *Gemara* says, "A person should not hire himself for idol worship purposes, and he should not come to need people. What is idol worship? Anything which is strange to him."^[15] The *Gemara* gives the example of someone who had a prestigious job, such as a doctor, and now he needs money. It teaches that the person should not take the job of cleaning the streets to make money. Such a job would be like *avodah zarah* for this person, like idol worship, because he's doing something that's "strange" (*zarah*) for him to do. However the *Gemara* does qualify this by saying that he is permitted to take a job that's beneath his dignity rather than become a beggar.

When a person does something that is not truly appropriate for him, his heart deep down is cringing. His actions contradict what his soul truly wants, and thus he suffers inside.

Are our hearts happy or are they cringing because the shaking of the *lulav* feels like a strange practice to us? On the surface, our deeds appear to be serving Hashem. But the question is whether our actions represent the true desires of our heart? Are our hearts filled with thoughts of holiness, with yearnings for Hashem and for His Torah and *mitzvos*? Or are our hearts, *chas v'shalom*, so materialistic and affected by all kinds of negative influences that they remain distant, recoiling from our holy actions?

In order for our *mitzvah* of *lulav* to be "valid," we must shake it with sincerity. By shaking the *lulav* with our whole heart, our *avodah* is valid and acceptable to Hashem. In contrast, if we have desires for strange things, then when we shake the *lulav*, it resembles a *lulav* used for idol worship. The shaking of the *lulav* becomes invalid and causes spiritual harm in the process. As he shakes the *lulav*, instead of sanctifying himself through the *mitzvah*, the contradiction between his actions and his heart's desire causes him to sink lower into the impurity of his evil desires, *Heaven forbid*.

An Adult With A Childish Heart

When a person has strange desires in his heart that are contrary to *Avodas Hashem*, shaking *lulav* can endanger himself and cause Heaven to examine his deeds.

The Torah teaches us that "*the inclination of a man is evil from his youth.*"^[16] When a person matures, does his heart change too? Does his head control his heart or vice versa? Has he begun to move towards "the righteous, whose hearts are in their control, in contrast to the wicked, who are controlled by their hearts?"^[17]

Consider a father who gives a treat to a child on the condition that he says "thank you." The child, of course, says "thank you" but without any true feeling of gratitude. In actuality, all he wants is the treat. Aware of the emptiness of the words, the father does not value the "thank you." However, since he is a child, the father hopes that he will mature one day to the point where his gratitude is genuine.

Yet, adults may be guilty of the same issue. Though mature on the outside, some people's internal *ruchniyus* has not matured and instead remains stunted. In order to grow, these people must continue to practice their external *avodah* but also have the desire to mature. If a person fails to work on increasing the genuineness of his internal *ruchniyus*, then shaking the *lulav* will awaken Heaven to judge him.

If the heart of a person truly desires things other than *Avodas Hashem*, the heart is getting *chiyus* from those other things instead of holiness. Such a heart resembles a *lulav* used for idol worship, and it cannot get *chiyus* from the *lulav*.

"How Is It Going...?"

A person's words reveal his life's orientation.

For instance, consider a common scenario these days. A person who meets his friend in the street and asks him, "So, how's it going?" Presuming he is referring to his financial situation, his friend answers, "Oh, *Baruch Hashem*; I'm making it." He never even entertains the thought that maybe he is being asked about his spiritual situation, that is, how his *Avodas Hashem* is going. His answer reveals his values and focus in life which is on livelihood, making money, paying his debts, and materialism.

In contrast, if he was not worshipping money, and instead was practicing and obtaining *chiyus* from pure *Avodas Hashem*, he would have interpreted his friend's question differently. Being focused on *Avodas Hashem* himself, he would have presumed his friend was also referring to that subject. Thus, he likely would have told his friend about his successes and his failures in his *Avodas Hashem*.

Let's explore another example. Consider a person with a sick child who *Baruch Hashem* subsequently recovers. If he was asked "What's new?" he is likely to think immediately of his child's health because that is the issue foremost on his mind. Thus, he answers about his child's health. However, if his primary focus is not on his *Avodas Hashem*, then he is unlikely to answer his friend by describing his spiritual struggles and achievements.

Consider a third example revealing a person's true orientation. One friend may ask another "So, how was your Yom Tov?" His friend may respond: "I went on this trip and that trip. I visited my parents and my in-laws, etc." His answer reveals his true focus of the *chag*. In failing to interpret the question as an inquiry about his spiritual experience or his fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of rejoicing on Yom Tov, this person reveals his [personal] *avodah zarah*, that he worships his family and travels more than Hashem.

This is not a condemnation of such visits and trips during *Chol HaMoed*. Rather, it is to reveal his primary focus and priority in life. Is a person living his life for *Avodas Hashem*? In the depths of a person's heart, does he really value *Avodas Hashem*? Is this his priority or not?

A person sees what he wants to see and a person hears his heart's desires. A person's answer to such general questions about their welfare reveals their true focus, values and priorities. In other words, where their *ratzon*, their desire, is strongest. By interpreting these questions as referring to their children, their work, their finances, their family etc., they reveal that these are their true "*avodah*," an *avodah* that is strange to Hashem. In contrast, someone whose heart and mind is constantly and primarily focused on Hashem would interpret such general questions about their welfare as referring to their spiritual welfare.

In summary, since *lulav* is a combination of the words *lo* (his) and *lev* (heart.), then performing the *mitzvah* of *lulav* reveals our true heart's desires. In order to serve Hashem properly, a person's heart has to be primarily focused on his *Avodas Hashem*. Valuing other things above *Avodas Hashem* constitutes "idol worship" on an inner level, and "invalidates" his *lulav* shaking.

Lulav From A "Condemned City"

The *Mishnah*^[18] then teaches that a *lulav* from an "*ir nidachas*" (a city condemned to be burned, due to a majority population of idol worshippers) is invalid for use of the *mitzvah*. In contrast to the previous *halachah* discussed above regarding a *lulav* of *Asheirah*/idol worship, this *halachah* refers to the public (as opposed to the individual).

Let's consider a modern-day, practical example demonstrating public idol worship. Imagine a newspaper headline which reads "People are working hard." Most people would interpret this statement as referring to physical and financial work. It is highly unlikely that many people would

interpret this “hard work” as work of *Avodas Hashem*. Such a presumption serves to expose a mainstream focus on materialism and physical “work,” rather than a spiritual “work” of *Avodas Hashem*.

Our Physical Heart And Our Spiritual Heart

Let’s consider another hypothetical, contemporary scenario which reveals the Jewish mainstream’s current position. If a person were to ask another “Is your heart okay?” most people would presume that this question concerned their physical health and would answer “*Baruch Hashem*, I don’t get heart attacks, my heart is fine.”

However, a general reference to our “heart” could also refer to our spirituality, our *Avodas Hashem*. It is taught^[19] that the right chamber of our heart houses our *yetzer tov* (good inclination) and the left chamber of our heart houses our *yetzer hora* (evil inclination).^[20] Thus, this question about our “heart” could also be an inquiry about the struggles between good and evil taking place in our heart....

Unfortunately, in reality, most people are not inquiring about another’s spiritual level. In fact, it would be rare for a person these days to ask another “How much evil have you managed to expel from your heart recently? How much has your *yetzer tov* overpowered your *yetzer hora*?”

A Lulav With Its Tip Chopped Off

The *Mishnah* teaches that a *lulav* with a severed tip is invalid for use. What is the deeper meaning of a *lulav* with a severed tip?

The *halachah* is that the *lulav* has to be shaken in the way it is grown.^[21] The *lulav* grows on the date tree with its leaves pointing upwards. Thus one has to shake the *lulav* with its tip pointed upwards. Shaking the *lulav* with its leaves pointing downwards does not fulfil the *mitzvah*. In relation to our inner world, a person has to constantly strive to grow upwards rather than downwards in his *Avodas Hashem*. The *mitzvos* are performed in order to elevate a person. Just like a *lulav* has to be shaken with its tip pointed upwards (“in the way it grows”) in order to be valid, similarly a person’s *Avodas Hashem* must be growing upwards in order for it to be meaningful.

Interestingly, the leaves of a *lulav* grow sharper towards the tip. This natural growth process may also be used as a hint towards our *Avodas Hashem*. Everyone has some growth, but most people reach a certain point where they stop growing. A few rare individuals reach the sharpest, uppermost point. However, despite our current level, we should all be aspiring to reach our maximum potential, our personal best.

Regardless of results, there is a significant difference between those who do and do not aspire to reach the highest level of *Avodas Hashem*. Those who lack the drive and desire to achieve their highest possible level of *Avodas Hashem* (for reasons some of which will be discussed below) resemble a *lulav* with a severed tip.

People with high aspirations are often dubbed by others as “delusional” or “unrealistic.” Admittedly, some people do delude themselves in their *Avodas Hashem* and act unrealistically as a result. However, though we must be authentic about our current level and capabilities, we must always be aware that our purpose in this world is to keep growing in order to perfect ourselves and reach our maximum potential.

A person can always be growing spiritually, like “a righteous person, who blossoms like a date tree.”^[22] Though we will always experience ups and downs in life (as it is written, “a righteous person falls seven times and rises”^[23]), we should always be striving to move toward a higher point

than our current position. One needs to have an ambition to reach the highest level he can reach in *Avodas Hashem* (This does not negate the difficulties involved and that we must *daven* and cry out to Hashem to help us reach it). A *lulav* with a severed tip resembles a person who lacks ambition to reach his maximum potential in *Avodas Hashem*.

We Must Have A Desire [For] Human Perfection

The design and shape of a *lulav's* leaves represents how we must try to reach the pinnacle of growth. They grow higher and sharper until they reach the highest, sharpest point. However, some people are content with only achieving or stagnating at a mediocre level with regard to their *Avodas Hashem*.

The whole purpose of Creation is that people should perfect themselves. Since the Torah teaches us that the purpose of Creation is to perfect ourselves, it must be that it is possible for us to perfect ourselves. Thus, one of the greatest sins is when a person has no aspiration whatsoever for human perfection.

One reason a person may give up or fail to aspire higher is that he may feel broken-hearted if he is not perfect yet. If this is the case, we must remind ourselves that it takes the whole of one's life to reach perfection. Another reason one may fall into this trap of apathy is that one may falsely believe that they are not capable of being a *tzaddik* or that such extensive work is beyond them.

This hope and striving for perfection must always be alive in a person's heart. The lower the aspiration, the lower the achievement. For instance, Reb Yisrael Salanter said about himself "I aspired to become like the Vilna Gaon, and therefore I became Reb Yisrael Salanter. If I would have aspired to become Reb Yisrael Salanter, I never would have become who I am today." In other words, focusing on an even greater level than is actually achievable right now can actually help us reach our own personal best.

By adopting the erroneous belief that it is impossible for one to reach the ultimate perfection, one ices himself up inside spiritually, like an evil force of "*Amalek*" within. This mentality that "It's hard enough just to be on an average level of *Yiddishkeit*" creates a lukewarm, lethargic feeling toward *Yiddishkeit*. Though we must be aware that not everyone can reach the level of a *tzaddik*, adopting the apathetic attitude that "I'll never be a *tzaddik*" interferes with the ambition to strive to perfect ourselves and our world. Such an attitude contradicts the fundamental purpose of Creation.

The Ponovozher Rov zt"l once planned to open a yeshiva for intellectually gifted students. However, the Chazon Ish did not agree with his idea because, "every person has to believe that he is an excellent student. If you open up a yeshiva that is exclusively for the best students, you are basically sending a message to boys who aren't in this yeshiva that they are hopeless."

Aspire For Perfection, Daven For The Results

A fundamental point to bear in mind in our striving for perfection is that we cannot ever achieve any goal through human efforts alone. As the *Mishnah* in *Avos*^[24] states, "The task is not upon you to finish, nor are you exempt from it." While we must do whatever we can to reach perfection, achievement is a gift from the Creator. Of this, it is written, "*I toiled, (thus) I found.*"^[25]

We cannot reach perfection by ourselves alone, and thus Hashem does not demand us to be perfect. However, we must aspire for perfection, to try our hardest in order to reach it! After we try our hardest, we should step back and discover whether Hashem considers this to be the right path for us at this time. The Torah teaches us to try our hardest, and then to "find" what is actually best for us. Yet, without trying, a person will definitely never "find."

Perfection Is Attained In Stages

One should be very clear in our goals for our own *Avodas Hashem*. On the one hand, we need to aspire for the greatest self-perfection. On the other hand, we must not act too much above our current level. It is not delusional to aspire for higher levels – it is crucial.

We never know when or if those aspirations will finally be realized. We have been waiting for this for at least 5770 years, and we still have not reached perfection yet. But in the end we must believe that we will get there. The *lulav's* tip represents our faith that we will ultimately reach self-perfection. A *lulav* without a tip represents a person whose inner essence is lacking the drive to even aspire towards self-perfection.

However, self-perfection is attained in gradual, authentic stages. Each time a person reaches his goal, he can shift the bar slightly higher and only then endeavor to reach for this next higher spiritual level. Though the ultimate goal is to perfect himself and his world, he must carry this out one gradual step at a time.

These levels of perfection in *Avodas Hashem* can be compared to the stages and processes of our lives. For instance, when a person is a child, he strives for the perfection represented by his *bar mitzvah*. The next main life's goal may involve the higher aspiration of marriage – a man is like “half a body” until he gets married. After he gets married, he may aspire to become a father. However, it would be premature and untimely for a child under *bar-mitzvah* to aspire to get married or be a father.

Similarly, with *Avodas Hashem*, there are different stages in life. One should aspire to achieve the next consecutive goal after an attainment of their current level. A person must repeat this sequential order of achievement until he reaches his personal, greatest perfection, a total *d'veykus* (attachment) with Hashem. All other areas of perfection are only partial perfection in comparison to this highest achievement.

Realistic Aspirations

In life and in *Avodas Hashem* in particular, we have minor goals which are all self-contained. However, each of these goals is cumulative like steps on a staircase, and we must continue to aspire for the complete and ultimate perfection.

Consider increments of time. A week is complete in and of itself. However, when our goal becomes a month, then a week becomes an incomplete portion of this goal. Similarly, a month is a complete period of (approximately) four weeks. Yet, one month is but an incomplete portion of a whole year. And each year is only a seventh of *shemittah*, and *shemittah* is only a seventh of *yovel*.

Aspirations in *Avodas Hashem* are necessary. Yet they must be carried out incrementally. One problem with high aspirations is that those with unrealistic expectations may be presumed to be delusional, mentally unstable or disconnected from the tangible world. How can we avoid this problem? In our quest for spiritual perfection, we need to stay grounded and realistic by being aware of our limits, working gradually and knowing ourselves.

A person has a three-fold job. First, a person has to be fully aware of his actual level in *Avodas Hashem*. He needs to be painfully honest with himself as to where he is currently holding on a spiritual level. He should be aware of his Divinely given qualities, as well as weaknesses. He has to have no delusions about his current status and the distance between it and his ultimate potential.

Being thus grounded in reality, a person then has to believe that he is fully endowed to have a

relationship with Hashem and serve Him in every moment to the maximum level possible for him to attain. He must do his best to achieve this goal. Finally, a person must have the awareness that only Hashem can bestow on him the gift of perfecting himself, and the acceptance and *emunah* that perfection can only come from Hashem.

The Restrictions Of Believing "I'm Realistic"

We must always be climbing the ladder of growth which is "*footed on the earth, but its head reaches the heavens.*"^[26] However, by mistakenly believing that high aspirations are delusional, many people slack off from trying to perfect themselves.

Other people may make a grave mistake of failing to achieve their potential due to their lack of awareness that we were created precisely to perfect ourselves. Had Adam not sinned, he would have gone straight into the ultimate Shabbos of Creation, and the greatest perfection of man would have been reached. But since he failed the test, it has been man's job to bring ourselves and the world back to perfection. Though the road is long, Hashem has guaranteed that man will achieve this ultimate goal no later than the year 6,000.

Finally, there are those people who avoid reaching for perfection in themselves because they are painfully aware of their deficiencies. "*A heart knows the bitterness of its soul*"^[27]. By avoiding to attempt to fulfill their maximum potential, a person is denying the purpose of why we were created. This negative focus encourages them to give up on reaching that perfection. In their despair, they resemble a *lulav* whose tip has been severed. Such people comfort themselves by arguing that "It's enough if we are just settle with who we are. We should just be happy the way we are."^[28]

It is true that a happy person is one who is "happy with his lot,"^[29] but his contentment refers to someone who really believes with *emunah* that though he is not yet spiritually complete, Hashem has given him all the tools he needs to achieve his maximum potential. He knows he will indeed have everything in the end, and he trusts that Hashem will help him get there.

Ultimately, a *lulav* with its tip intact is represented only by those people who are both simultaneously aware of their current level and yet strive for their greatest spiritual heights because they have *emunah* that Hashem has endowed them with the ability to achieve perfection.

A Lulav With Severed Leaves

There is another *halachah* in the *Mishnah* that a *lulav* with severed leaves is invalid. *Rashi* explains that this refers to a *lulav* where the leaves have become separated from the spine so that there is nothing connecting the leaves to the source. Technically, the leaves could be tied to the spine or may even be able to survive independently without the spine. However, the Gemara learns from this that the Torah requires that the leaves of the *lulav* must obtain their nutrients and energy from the spine, in order for the *lulav* to be deemed valid for the *mitzvah*.

What is the deeper meaning behind this *halachah* and how can we apply it to our *Avodas Hashem*?

Are We Connected To Our Mitzvos?

Each of us may perform many admirable *mitzvos*. However, the question is whether they are connected to us? If so, what source is connecting us to these actions? Does a person feel that his *mitzvah* performance is his very life? Or is he just forcing himself to do the *mitzvah* and yet he remains detached from the action?

When we eat, we may feel very connected to our food because we realize we are obtaining vitality

from the food. When a woman puts on perfume to go to a wedding, she may feel very connected to her perfume and be energized by it. However, when a person puts on *tefillin*, does he feel connected to this act to the extent that it energizes us? Is *Tefillin* just being worn on us, or is the person wearing the *Tefillin*? If one is just wearing his *Tefillin* as a superficial act, he resembles a *lulav* whose leaves have been severed. Though his actions may be technically perfect and follow the letter of the law, he lacks connection to the *mitzvos* because he is not being energized by them.

Chazal refer to this problem of disconnection as “His wisdom is more than his deeds.”^[30] He might have been taught all the *mitzvos* or he has read about the *mitzvos* in the *sefarim*. He may perform the *mitzvos* out of fear to avoid punishment. However, he can never grow from the deeds he is performing because he is not being watered by them.

Performing the *mitzvos* in this way can be compared to a father who cares for his child’s physical needs (feeding him and clothing him and buying him toys) but who does not feel an emotional connection in his heart toward the child. He is missing the natural love and warmth that a father is supposed to have toward his child. Perhaps he gives physical nourishment to the child out of obligation, or fear of punishment for neglect. Naturally, the child feels this lack of love and may grow up stunted as a result. But more relevantly for our analogy, the father too misses out on the connection he could have had with the child, so he does not grow as a father. Thus, the father’s parenting is lacking because it does not include the vital element of emotional attachment and love.

A Lulav With Spread Out Leaves

The *Mishnah* teaches a *halachah* that a *lulav* with leaves that are spread out in different directions is kosher, but it is only considered kosher *b’dieved* (fulfilling the requirement after the fact but not in the optimal way). Though this type of *lulav* is not deemed invalid like the examples above, it is not the ideal, it is not “*mehudar* (aesthetically enhanced).” The leaves of the *lulav* are supposed to all point in one direction. However, when the leaves of the *lulav* are spread out, they are pointing in all directions.

Let’s explore how this can be applied to our soul. There are times when a person is generally heading towards the right direction in life. In general, he is aware of his life’s purpose and he has a good plan for steering himself in the right direction. However, though he starts off with a worthwhile goal and good intentions, as he is actively pursuing this goal he becomes caught up in various distractions which deter him from his ambition.

For instance, a person is motivated to emulate Hashem who is kind and merciful and so he opens up a *chessed* organization. When he starts the organization, his intentions are pure and his ambitions are real. As the money begins to pour in, he distributes it to the needy. But as the money accumulates, he slowly becomes tempted and begins to wonder “What’s wrong if I make a little profit in the process?” This hypothetical example is actually quite a common phenomenon. Though many people start *chessed* organizations with completely pure intentions, they ultimately dip into the profits themselves. They may be tempted by unanticipated financial pressures or other factors that distract them from their original *chessed* goal.

“They Seek Many Calculations”

How do we fix this “spread out *lulav*” in ourselves?

According to this same *Mishnah*, Rebbi Yehudah says that spread out leaves of a *lulav* should be tied together from the upper part. (We do not practice this in actual *halachah*). Applying this solution to our *Avodas Hashem*, this may be interpreted to mean that a person has to take all his weaknesses,

and connect them all together, giving them a united focus.

Though this may be feasible, on occasion one's weaknesses have "spread out" so much that they cannot be fixed in the regular way. In this case, the only solution is to start over again from scratch. If we start an act with good intentions and have an earnest desire for something worthy, but then find ourselves being distracted from our goal along the way, we must try to return to the original, straight path. We should remind ourselves of where we come from and where we are going. We must try to prevent other interests and temptations swaying us away from our goal.

The spine of the *lulav* is naturally straight. Hashem created us as straight-minded people, as the *possuk* says, "G-d made man upright."^[31] A *lulav* which has grown with its leaves spread out resembles the end of the *possuk*, "And they seek many calculations." The "many calculations" (*cheshbonos rabim*) in a person are his *negios*, his other personal interests or temptations that sway him from his original, straight path.

Yaakov Avinu was able to deal with Lavan the crook and yet stay honest and truthful. However, most of us are not on the level of Yaakov Avinu! Thus, we would find it difficult to withstand such temptations and distractions. Being placed in compromising situations, such as in a situation where we feel required to lie (for instance, to the government) presents a danger to our souls. Our souls are pure and straight. Any act that encourages us to deviate from following the path of truth is risky. For instance, apparently the Brisker Rav was against joining the Knesset, not because of the ideological reasons of the Satmar Rebbe, but because he believed that being in the government would negatively affect the purity of his soul.

Lulav Of The Har Habarzel

The *Mishnah* then teaches the *halachah* that the *lulav* which grows on the *Har HaBarzel*^[32] is kosher. The *Gemara*^[33] clarifies that the validity of this type of *lulav* depends on how the leaves grow. *Lulavim* with the bottom leaf covering the next adjacent leaf are deemed kosher. However, *lulavim* with lower leaves that do not touch the next ones adjacent to them are deemed invalid. Let us explore how this teaching can be applied to our own soul.

The leaves of the spine on the *lulav* may represent a person's offspring, because leaves grow out from the spine like children are produced from a couple. However, like those *lulavim* of *Har HaBarzel* that have separated leaves, the leaves of the *lulav* do not always stay united with each other. Similarly, a person's children do not always stay connected. Often siblings and family members are spread out all over the world. Families that are disconnected from each other resemble the category of *lulavim* of the *Har HaBarzel* that the *Gemara* deems invalid, due to its separated leaves.

In other words, ideally, everything that emanates from a person is supposed to be connected. This concept also includes our *mitzvos* which all have to be connected to each other as well as to the source. Our *mitzvos* must be interrelated, not merely isolated, separate acts.

Chazal^[34] state that even the emptiest Jew contains as many *mitzvos* as the amount of seeds in a pomegranate. And the *Malbim*^[35] points out that a pomegranate can contain 613 seeds, which totals the amount of all the *mitzvos*. A famous question is posed as to how any Jew can be considered "empty," if they are full of *mitzvos*? According to Rov Dovid Povarsky zt"l,^[36] a pomegranate's seeds exist independently from each other. Though there are many seeds, many *mitzvos*, they are all meaningless if each act is disparate from each other.

These types of people resemble the *lulav* of *Har HaBarzel*, whose leaves do not overlap each other. Their actions are not "one piece" because they lack a fundamental unifying force behind them.

Designating Our Heart Towards Hashem

In the *Tefillas Geshem* (Prayer for Rain) of *Sukkos*, we refer to Yaakov Avinu as a “*yichad lev*” – one whose heart was designated totally for Hashem. The *Gemara*^[37] says that if one dreams about a *lulav*, it is a sign that “he only has one heart, towards his Father in Heaven.” Similarly, the *Gemara*^[38] says that a *lulav* comes from a date tree because “just as a date tree has only one heart, so do the Jewish people have only one heart, towards their Father in Heaven.”

The *Rokeiach* teaches that the Torah hints that *lulav* comes to unify all of a person’s desires for Hashem. The first letter of the Torah is *beis*. The last letter of the Torah is *lamed*. The first letter of *Nevi'im* is a *vov*, and the last letter is a *lamed*. This spells the word *lulav*. Thus, *lulav* unifies the entire Torah (including *Nevi'im*) together. Similarly, the actions of someone who only has “one heart towards his Father in Heaven” are unified and purposeful.

As we mentioned earlier, *lulav* is a combination of the words *lo* and *lev* which can be interpreted as one’s own heart or owning one’s true desires and actions. If someone is in control of his heart’s desires, he is considered someone with “one heart, towards his Father in Heaven.” In contrast, those whose hearts are controlled by other variables (various passions or other people) do not have only “one heart towards his Father in Heaven.” Rather, their hearts are governed by other variables and factors.

According to the *Gemara*,^[39] “before a person eats and drinks, he has two hearts. After he eats and drinks, he only has one heart.” On a simple level, this may describe a hungry person as anxious whereas a satiated person feels physically calmer.^[40] But on a deeper level, the *Gemara* may be referring to spiritual food and drink. Before a person “eats” and “drinks” spiritually, he has two hearts because essentially his *yetzer hora* and his *yetzer tov* are fighting and are thus not unified. However, once a person is satisfied spiritually, this means his *yetzer hora* has subsided, leaving the person with one, unified heart dedicated to Hashem.

One way of viewing the *yetzer hora* is as a person’s various extraneous desires that attempt to block him from carrying out Hashem’s will. Specifically, these *retzonos* (desires/passions) confuse a person, so that all his actions do not emanate from the same, single Divine source. When a person carries out different activities to please his *yetzer hora* (for instance, music, candies, trips, etc.), there is no unifying purpose binding together all these activities. Rather, they simply represent a bunch of disparate desires that are carried out on impulse. In contrast, a person constantly acting *l’sheim Shamayim*, (for the sake of Heaven) only has “one heart.” His actions and choices all emanate from one central point.

We shake the *lulav* in four directions, including up and down. Why do we shake it up and down as well? We can compare this to someone building a structure, with four sides. Four walls alone will not suffice. The house needs a roof and a floor as well. The roof and the floor connect the four walls together.

In summary, a *lulav* with separated leaves which grows on the *Har HaBarzel* represents a person who has a lack of connection between the *mitzvos*. Though this *lulav* may be technically kosher *b’dieved* (fulfilling the requirement after the fact but not in the optimal way), it is incomplete and thus fails to be *mehudar*, a beautiful *lulav*. So too with our *Avodas Hashem*. Only a beautiful and complete *avodah* which has no deficiencies, even *b’dieved*, is a proper representation of the revelation of the purpose of Creation.

Lulav Is One Heart – One Desire

Hashem chose the Jewish people as His people. He gave us the Torah. The first letter of the Torah is *beis*, and the last letter of the Torah is *lamed*. Rearranging these letters spells the Hebrew word *lev* – “heart.” May it be the will of Hashem that He help us receive the Torah in the inner depths of our heart, that we may merit to have only one, unified heart, and ultimately that our sole desire is to carry out the will of our Father in Heaven.[\[41\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) *hakdamah* to *sefer Toldos Yaakov Yosef* by one of the first and most dedicated disciples of the [Baal Shem Tov](#) ^[1]

[\[2\]](#) *Mishnayos Sukkah*, 3:1 (Talmud Bavli *Sukkah* 29b)

[\[3\]](#) *Zohar I*: 267b; *Zohar II*: 271a

[\[4\]](#) *Beraishis Rabbah* 34: 10

[\[5\]](#) *Mishnayos Sukkah* 3:1

[\[6\]](#) *Yerushalmi Sukkah* 12b

[\[7\]](#) *Tehillim* 115: 17

[\[8\]](#) *Devarim* 12: 18

[\[9\]](#) *Shulchan Aruch: Orach Chaim*: 651: 8

[\[10\]](#) *ibid*

[\[11\]](#) *Sukkah* 37b.

[\[12\]](#) *Yeshayahu* 29: 13

[\[13\]](#) *Sukkah* 41b

[\[14\]](#) *Sukkos* 32b

[\[15\]](#) *Bava Basra* 110a

[16] Beresihis 8:21

[17] Bereishis Rabbah, 34: 10

[18] Sukkah 32b

[19] Sukkah 29b

[20] Zohar, Terumah 162b; see Tanya chapter 9.

[21] Sukkah 45b

[22] Tehillim 92:12

[23] Mishlei 24:16

[24] Avos 2: 16

[25] Megillah 6b

[26] Beraishis 28:12

[27] Mishlei 14: 10

[28] See Mesillas Yesharim, chapter 4.

[29] Avos 4:1

[30] Avos 3: 9

[31] Koheles 7: 29

[32] "Iron Mountain", an area in Eretz Yisrael in which the lulav grew in an unusual shape.

[33] Sukkah 32a

[34] Berachos 57a

[35] Malbim, Shir HaShirim 4: 13

[36] Rosh Yeshivas Ponovozeh.

[37] Berachos 57a

[38] Sukkah 45b

[39] Bava Basra 12b

[40] Rabbeinu Gershom and Rashbam, ibid.

[41] *To reveal your inner will, see Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, Vol. 4, Chapters 15-22.*

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/succos-018-lulav-our-heart>

Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baal_Shem_Tov