

# The Jewels Beneath the Surface

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A tribute to my mother Chaya Leah Bas Shaul A'H on her 5<sup>th</sup> Yartzheit

Let's take a closer look at the Arba Minim, the beautiful, vibrant set of four species we shake on Succos. It's a Mitzva that seems quite inexplicable and yet has so much hidden depth.

The Medrash in Vayikra Rabba (30:12) famously tells us that the Arba Minim represent different members of Am Yisrael. The Esrog has both taste and smell and represents those steeped in Torah as well as performing good deeds. The Lulav (date palm) tree produces the sweet tasting date but has no smell, representing a person who learns Torah but doesn't concretise that into good deeds. The Hadasim (myrtle) has a lovely fragrant smell but no taste, and represents those unversed in Torah who just perform good deeds.

It's the Aravos that I wish to focus on. The Aravos (willow) have neither taste nor smell. Seemingly the least valuable component of the set, they offer no Torah and no good deeds to society. What's interesting about the Aravos is that they are the most fragile of the whole Arba Minim bundle. They wilt the quickest, need the most care; just the right amount of moisture, and woe betide us if we move them one inch from their sacred position in the fridge! Perhaps there's a lesson here that my mother intuitively understood. We need to send *more* care and love to those struggling, to those who feel fragile, to those who don't feel they belong to the community. More care, not less. Instead of criticism or frustration for letting us down.

We would sometimes come home from school and there would be someone sobbing at the kitchen table, or the kitchen door would be shut tight and the sound of Mum's voice would drift outward, and we would know that another person had come seeking her wisdom. As a child I often found these people scary and used to run upstairs to avoid them, mildly annoyed that they'd taken up habitation in our kitchen. But Mum was giving them tea and a meal...and most of all her listening ear, her faith in Hashem, and her nurture, because she knew that they were the ones who needed it most.

The Medrash continues

ומה הקדוש ברוך הוא עושה להם, לאבדן אי אפֿשֿר, אִלָּא אָמַר הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יִקְשְׁרוּ כָּלֶם אֶגְדָּה אַחַת וְהָיוּ  
מְכַפְּרִין אֶלּוּ עַל אֶלּוּ, וְאִם עָשִׂיתֶם כֵּן אוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה אֶנִּי מְתַעֲלָה

*What does Hashem want us to do with these species? To leave out or lose any one of them is out of the question. Rather, Hashem says let them all be tied together in one bundle, and they will atone each for the other. And if you do this, in that moment I will be elevated.*

The amazing thing about the Arba Minim is that if any one of the species is missing, one has not fulfilled the Mitzva. Hashem says אִי אֶפְשֶׁר! We can't get rid of anyone. We need everyone! If we relate this concept back to members of Am Yisrael, then incredibly the Medrash is not just saying the people with Torah and good deeds will atone for those without. It's *also* saying that those members without Torah or good deeds, without seemingly anything

to offer, atone for those who hold both! The Aravos atone for the Esrog too. This is an incredible, unexpected concept. As a community, we need everyone, even those with seemingly nothing to offer. We all have a part to play.

This was my mother's attitude; she believed in everybody. She looked beneath the surface and saw what each person had to contribute, what made each person shine. And because of this quality of hers she brought together the most diverse group of friends and acquaintances I've ever known to connect to one person! That is why at her Shabbos table we had religious and non-religious, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, young and old, psychology professors, news reporters and even a priest who thought he might be Jewish.... because she brought everyone together under the banner of their core depth and what they brought to Hashem's society.

In so doing she gave meaning to this cryptic Medrash, that barren Aravos can also atone for the vibrant Esrog. Because Mum brought *out* the Torah and good deeds in everyone that perhaps weren't visible at first. Like sifting through sand to expose jewels. People left her with a better belief in themselves; they'd found something inside of worth, something valuable that she'd sifted out and shined and sparkled for them. Perhaps this is the deeper lesson the Medrash is teaching us. We need everyone, even the Aravos, those seemingly without Torah or good deeds, because actually we don't believe that concept. We don't accept that a person could have nothing to offer. Everyone, *everyone* has something inside of them to give and to be proud of.

I hope that we can take inspiration from my mother's legacy. I hope we can remember that even if we or others seem non-valuable from the outside, the Arba Minim teach us that's never true. Each member of Am Yisrael is uniquely valuable. We just need to sift out the gems lying beneath the surface.