

Lulav - the Doorknob of Judaism

Category: Holidays, Sukkot

What is so unique about the lulav, and the Rebbe's lulav campaign

The Easiest Mitzvah

When the Rebbe came out with the Ten Mitzvoim, the Ten Mitzvah Campaigns, there were those that were easier, and others that were more difficult. For example, to come to someone and suggest that he or she begin keeping kosher is, as a general rule, not something you can do in a five-minute meeting. A person would have to change their habits—if until now he's been eating something he loves and it's not kosher, asking him to give it up is something very hard to do and would require a lot of self-control.

And talking to people about family purity is totally not something done "al regel achas," or standing on one foot, as the Jewish expression goes. You need to speak to both the husband and wife and explain to them what family purity entails, give them a tour of the mikvah, and so on.

But there are Mitzvah Campaigns that are easier to work with—for example, the Mezuzah Campaign. Here you have a mitzvah that's much easier to keep. You just hang a mezuzah on the door once and for all time, and you're done.

But even the mitzvah of mezuzah doesn't always go that smoothly. For starters, a mezuzah costs money—at least 30 or 40 dollars. Secondly, some people are ready to put a mezuzah on the front doors of their private residences—but when it comes to their offices, it's another story. They don't like it when everyone coming into the office knows that they're Jewish—they're afraid that it will hurt business, and as a general rule, they're a bit embarrassed to stand out at the workplace. At work, they want to keep a low profile.

The Tefillin Campaign, for its part, is an even easier campaign—you just meet someone, offer to put tefillin on him, and all he has to do is literally roll up his sleeve and give you less than five minutes. It's very easy. And so it's easy to convince people to do this mitzvah, relatively speaking.

But even with tefillin, there are enough people who are hesitant to do it—particularly in the wintertime, when you need to peel back several layers of clothing to get to the actual arm. Such people also tend to have very philosophical objections to putting on tefillin, like, “Where was G-d during the Holocaust?”—as if the only reason he doesn’t want to put on tefillin is because of the Holocaust, and that otherwise he’d be putting on tefillin every morning.

So let’s talk about that question for a moment here.

The Rebbe once responded to someone in a letter that the victims of the Holocaust are too holy to be used as an excuse for someone who’s hesitant to do a particular mitzvah. There are those who say that they don’t believe in G-d—but is only prepared to say that he doesn’t believe in G-d so long as they don’t bother him in the middle of the day with tefillin.

But to bring us back to the holiday at hand, the Rebbe’s mitzvah campaign with the highest rates of success is... the Lulav Campaign.

In the Lulav Campaign, Lubavitcher Chasidim hit the streets with lulav and esrog sets, meet people who look Jewish and ask them the big question: “Are you Jewish?” And if the person answers, “Yes,” then they offer them to take the lulav and esrog in their hands and make a brachah. As a general rule, people don’t refuse this particular mitzvah. Why? Because it’s the easiest mitzvah to keep. You’re not asked to commit to a major lifestyle change, like going to mikvah, or rolling up your sleeve, like putting on tefillin. You’re not asked to change your habits or, G-d forbid, to make a donation.

All that’s asked of you is to hold the lulav and esrog in your hand and say a blessing. And not only that, but even if you only hold the lulav and esrog in your hand and don’t say the blessing, you’ve still done the mitzvah.

This mitzvah is the only mitzvah in the Torah that we can do just by literally holding it in the hand for a second. There’s no other mitzvah like that. It’s based on the verse in the Torah which we read today: “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of the hadar tree” (Vayikra 23:40). In other words, it’s enough to take it in the hand and thus fulfill the obligation of the mitzvah.

Who Says?

But the Ibn Ezra asks a question on this verse: Who says that “And you shall take” means by the hand? The phrase “take” or “taking” appears in several other places in the Torah, where it’s not enough to merely physically hold the object in the hand.

For example, with the Korbon Pesach, the Passover Lamb, it’s written, “let each one take a lamb for each parental home” (Shmos 12:3)—and there it doesn’t mean to just physically hold it in the hand, but to slaughter and eat it. From where do we know that “And you shall take for yourselves” here is good enough with just holding in the hand?

The Ibn Ezra answers that the entire mitzvah of lulav and esrog is something we know of by tradition. In other words, how do we know what a lulav is supposed to look like? Not only that, but how do we know exactly which fruit is the “esrog”? And how is it any different than a lemon? After all, they look a lot alike—so how do we really know that the fruit known nowadays as the citron is the esrog, and not the common lemon? I’m sure that if someone didn’t know that this fruit is an esrog, he’d use it for a salad—but the fact is that it’s all by tradition, and so Chasidim have the custom of getting Italian esrogim from the Calabria region since those esrogim and those trees have a tradition going back over 1,000 years that the Jews took the first esrogim for Sukkos from that region.

And it’s the same thing with the Torah text “a branch of a braided tree”—how do we know that this refers to myrtle branches? But Maimonides says in his introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah that it’s all by tradition.

And so, the Ibn Ezra says that from the verse itself, we’d never know that “And you shall take for yourselves” means that’s enough to physically just hold it in the hand. “We trust the words of the transcribers that the verse is not false”—meaning that it comes down to us by tradition, from father to son and from master to student, going all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, himself, who personally taught us how to fulfill the mitzvah of lulav and esrog, and taught us that it’s enough to hold it in the hand.

The Contrast

What's interesting is that on the holiday of Sukkos, there are two mitzvos that symbolize the two extremes of keeping mitzvos.

On the one hand, you have the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah, which is the one mitzvah that a person can literally get entirely into, body and all. All the other mitzvos are observed with a specific limb or part of the body—we put the tefillin on the head, we pray with our mouth, and so on. The sukkah, however, is the one mitzvah that surrounds a Jew from head to foot.

On the other hand, with the mitzvah of lulav, holding the Four Species briefly in the hand is enough to have done the mitzvah—completely at the other extreme.

There is an expression from the Alter Rebbe, who promised his students that anyone who would “hold on to his doorknob” would not die without doing teshuvah, without repenting.

But this expression of “holding on to the doorknob” means that if the student has even the most minimal connection to him, then he already belongs—he has an insurance policy that he won't die without doing teshuvah.

And it's the same thing with the Lulav Campaign.

We can't wait for every Jew to get totally into the mitzvah at hand. We can't until he starts eating only kosher, or putting on tefillin or putting a mezuzah on the door. We need to make sure that he or she at least “holds on to the doorknob” of the Jewish Nation—and then they will “belong” to the Jewish Nation, and there's a good chance that they will remain a part of the Jewish people.

Let us reach out this holiday to connect with our fellow Jews, and connect them to mitzvos—particularly to the mitzvah of lulav and esrog.