



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

TODAY'S TORAH



Sukkot

September 20 (Sundown) - 27 (Evening), 2021
Tishrei 15-21, 5782

The Best Jewish Holiday

By: Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL

After two days of Rosh Ha-Shanah and a day of fasting on Yom Kippur, you would think that Jews would be exhausted. Enough Judaism, already!

Yet at precisely that time, the calendar of Judaism presents a dazzling array of festivals--Sukkot, Hoshanah Rabbah, Sh'mini Atzeret, and Simhat Torah. For more than a week, we continue to celebrate one holiday after another, each with its own set of rituals, songs, and customs.

Of all the festivals, none has as many *mitzvot* (commandments) and customs associated with it than does Sukkot, the Festival of Booths. We build special huts (the *sukkah*), carry the four types of plants (the *lulav*--palm frond, *etrog*--citron, *aravah*--willow, and *hadas*--myrtle) and eat festive meals in the sukkot. Some Jews even sleep in their sukkot.

Exhausted by the holy days already behind us, and living in a culture that distrusts ritual in the first place, what can this frenetic activity mean to us?

Traditional commentators have explained the lulav and etrog in several ways:

According to the *Midrash Va-Yikra Rabbah*, the *etrog*, *hadas*, and *aravah* symbolize the three Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The single *Lulav* symbolizes God. By holding the three against the *Lulav*, we act out our hope that the sacred deeds of our ancestors, the lessons learned throughout our lengthy history, will serve us well before God. Thus, *lulav* and *etrog* demonstrate our link to Jewish history throughout time.

According to *Pesikta De-Rav Kahana*, each of the plants symbolizes a different type of Jew: one who is learned in Torah and rich in good deeds, one who is learned but has performed no good deeds, one who is uneducated but active in demonstrating lovingkindness, and one who is uneducated and has not performed loving deeds. By binding all four plants together, we pray that God will also consider the entire Jewish people as a single unit, each responsible for the other, each Jew compensating for the shortcomings of the others. Thus, *lulav* and *etrog* demonstrate our unity as a people and celebrate our diversity as individuals and as religious movements within the umbrella of Judaism.

Finally, the medieval compilation *Kad ha-Kemah* asserts that each of the four species corresponds to a different human organ: the heart, the spine, the eyes, and the lips. Just as all these organs can lead a person to error and to pain, so too they can become the means for self improvement and for elevating others. Thus, *lulav* and *etrog* demonstrate our determination to use our bodies to help other people and ourselves, to serve God, and to make the world more holy.

Each of these explanations works from the bottom up, trying to account for the details of an already established observance. Perhaps another approach would be to work from the other direction, to explain the larger picture and not worry about the details. So, for example, in *Midrash Va-Yikra Rabbah*, Rabbi Avin compares the lulav and the etrog to a scepter awarded to a victorious combatant. After returning to our synagogues in massive numbers on Rosh Ha-Shanah, after spending Ten Days of Repentance considering who we are and who we want to be, after fasting and praying on Yom Kippur, the entire Jewish people emerges energized, enriched, and motivated.

Such a transformation is indeed a victory. Carry your lulav and etrog with joy!



Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL holds the Abner and Roslyn Goldstone Dean's Chair of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and is Vice President of American Jewish University in Los Angeles. Rabbi Artson has long been a passionate advocate for social justice, human dignity, diversity and inclusion. He wrote a book on Jewish teachings on war, peace and nuclear annihilation in the late 80s, became a leading voice advocating for GLBT marriage and ordination in the 90s, and has published and spoken widely on environmental ethics, special needs inclusion, racial and economic justice, cultural and religious dialogue and cooperation, and working for a just and secure peace for Israel and the Middle East. A member of the Philosophy Department, he is particularly interested in theology, ethics, and the integration of science and religion. He mentors Camp Ramah in California in Ojai and Ramah of Northern California in the Bay Area. He is also dean of the Zacharias Frankel College in Potsdam, Germany, ordaining Conservative rabbis for Europe. A frequent contributor for the Huffington Post, the Times of Israel, and a Contributing Writer for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, he has a public figure [Facebook page](#) with over 70,000 likes. Rabbi Artson is the author of 12 books and over 250 articles, most recently *Renewing the Process of Creation: A Jewish Integration of Science and Spirit*. Married to Elana Artson, they are the proud parents of twins, Jacob and Shira.



SCHOLARSTREAM

A PARTNERSHIP OF THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT

Following a successful launch of the *ScholarStream* program in 5781, we are excited to announce the full year of *ScholarStream* learning in 5782! Beginning in October and spanning all the way up to Shavuot, the Ziegler School is partnering with Conservative Movement seminaries and institutions to offer eight series that will bring you face-to-face with the brightest and most engaging scholars our movement has to offer.

ScholarStream 5782 features three distinct arcs of learning that stand alone or flow into each other. *Cultivating Our Relationships* (series 1 & 2), *Defining Our Sacred Spaces* (series 3, 4, and 5), and *Renewing Our Resilience* (series 6, 7, and 8), will offer an exploration of who we are, where we are in relation to others, and how we move forward in this complicated world.

Individuals may register below. If you are part of a synagogue or organization interested in sponsoring ScholarStream, please [click here](#).

We are pleased to announce full descriptions for the first series on *Torah Relationships*, which can also be found by [clicking here](#).

[Register for Ziegler ScholarStream Programming](#)

Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. In addition to providing holiday inspiration, we are pleased to offer you continuing access to a vast library of Ziegler Torah commentaries on each weekly Parashah throughout the entire Torah cycle. To delve deep, please click [here](#).

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies
American Jewish University
15600 Mulholland Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90077
310-476-9777
www.aju.edu/ziegler

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

15600 Mulholland Dr.
Los Angeles, CA | 90077 US

This email was sent to .

To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

