

There's no such thing as a **BAD JEW**

We're all works
in progress

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



THERE'S A FAMOUS MIDRASH¹ ON THE VERSE² that contains the Torah commandment to take the arba minim (the four species) - aka the esrog (citron), the lulav (date palm branch), the hadassim (myrtle branches), and the aravos (willow branches) on the first day of Sukkos. The Midrash ascribes several allusions to the arba minim, but I'd like to focus on one of them in particular:

The esrog (citron) which has a taste and a fragrance - this is an allusion to people who have knowledge of Torah as well as good deeds;

The lulav (date palm branch) which has a taste (referring to the dates that grow from the same tree), but does not have any fragrance - this is an allusion to people who have knowledge of Torah, but who do not have good deeds;

The hadassim (the myrtle branches) which have fragrance, but do not have any taste - these are an allusion to people who have good deeds, but who do not have (knowledge of) Torah;

And finally, the aravos (the willow branches) which have neither fragrance

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nor taste - these are an allusion to people who have neither knowledge of Torah nor good deeds.

The Midrash continues and asks: What does Hashem do with these arba minim? And answers that: Hashem says, “Tie all of them in a single bundle and they will atone for each other!”

Yom Kippur is over! Why is the Midrash talking about atonement in connection with a mitzvah connected to Sukkos?

Sukkos plays a unique role. Although it's undoubtedly part of the shalosh regalim (the three pilgrimage festivals - included along with Pesach and Shavuot), the Torah also makes clear³ that it is intrinsically bound to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In fact, the last day of Sukkos, which we

call Hoshanah Rabbah and which falls out the day before Shemini Atzeres (which is a separate holiday), is known as being the day on which the judgment (which began on Rosh Hashanah) is finally sealed - and the davening for the day is filled with special prayers related to repentance, just like on Yom Kippur!

Historically, it was on the 15th of Tishrei, the day on which Sukkos begins, that the construction of the Mishkan began, but, perhaps even more than that, it was the day on which the ananei hakavod (the clouds of glory), which we actually commemorate with the mitzvah of sukkah, returned to the Jewish people after having been withdrawn following our sin with the golden calf, for which we were forgiven on the very first



“THE SAME CAN BE SAID FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE: G-D WANTS US TO COME TOGETHER. ALTHOUGH WE EACH HAVE AREAS WHERE WE EXCEL AND AREAS WHERE WE ARE LACKING, WHEN TAKEN AS A WHOLE, WE’RE ABLE TO BALANCE EACH OTHER OUT – TO ATONE FOR ONE AND OTHER.”

Yom Kippur. Thereafter, these clouds remained⁴ with the Jewish people throughout the rest of their 40 years in the midbar.

Although it’s a machlokes (difference of opinion), we rule that the arba minim do not have to be taken as a single group.⁵ In other words, provided that a person has all four of the species in front of him, he can make a bracha and then take them one-by-one after each other. However, if even one of them is missing, then the person can’t make the bracha – and he only takes them in such a case as a remembrance of the actual mitzvah. Although we don’t have to bind the arba minim together and take them as a single group, it’s actually considered to be preferable to do so, because, in so doing, one succeeds in fulfilling the mitzvah of arba minim in the most beautiful way possible.

The same can be said for the Jewish people: G-d wants us to come together. Although we each have areas where we excel and areas where we are lacking, when taken as a whole, we’re able to balance each other out – to atone for one and other. There’s a stunning Midrash⁶ that states that if even one of the 600 000 Jews who were present for the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai had been missing, then we would not have merited to receive the Torah! Each one of us has merits that are unique and, although we may be lacking in certain areas, taken as a complete group, we make up for one another and balance things out.

When I was walking out of shul once, I ran into someone who I had never met before. I wasn’t sure who he was or what he was doing at the shul, so I figured the safest route was to ask him whether he was a member. He said that he was indeed a member of the shul, but that he didn’t go to shul very often, and proceeded to describe himself as a “bad Jew”. When I hear people speaking in such terms, it really hits a nerve. Would this same person so nonchalantly describe himself as a “bad person”? Even Bernie Madoff believes that he’s a good person!⁷ And there are people sitting on death row in America who will tell you that they’re good people.⁸

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not by any means advocating poor shul attendance.

The irony is that the statement that this man made, declaring himself to be a “bad Jew”, is almost certainly worse than anything else that he’s ever done. Let me explain. By making that judgment on himself, that man was actually usurping G-d’s authority. At the very end of Yom Kippur, we all shout out in unison again and again: Hashem Hu HaElokim – Hashem, He is G-d! In other words, He is the Judge. We’re not meant to judge each other, or even ourselves. That’s G-d’s job.

Moreover, even if we tried, we’d all fail miserably. In explaining how G-d weighs our merits and our sins against each other, the Rambam (Maimonides) notes that the weight of this measurement is not simply according to the count of our merits and sins, but according to their greatness.⁹ In other words, some acts are more important than others. There are some merits that are equivalent to several sins and there are some sins that are equivalent to many merits. And we see hints to

such a thing – for example, the Rambam states¹⁰ that we are obligated to be careful with the mitzvah of tzedakah more than any other positive mitzvah, and one of the Sages of the Talmud states that the giving of tzedakah is equivalent to all of the other mitzvos in the Torah.¹¹

So why do people choose to label themselves as “bad Jews”? Because it’s an excuse – an excuse that enables them to avoid doing things that they don’t want to do, while simultaneously enabling them to do other things that they shouldn’t be doing. Let’s consider an example. If a person approaches a situation, such as eating something prohibited, and he thinks, I’m a “bad Jew”, then most people would say go ahead and take a bite, that’s what “bad Jews” do. But if, at that very same moment, a person thinks to himself, “I’m a good Jew,” then

there’s a much better chance that he won’t be able to take that bite...because that’s what a good Jew would do.

Mitzvos are not all or nothing. We had a guest once who confided in me an area where he struggled. Truth be told, I think he wanted me to throw him out of the house. I think he wanted me to tell him that I thought he was a bad person – that I thought he was a bad Jew – so that he could then rest easy and start living up to being a bad Jew. What I told him was that I was sorry to hear that he had been given such a difficult test in life and that, even if he failed that test repeatedly, it didn’t excuse him from the other 612 mitzvos¹² in the Torah!

That man who I met outside the shul that day – that man who judged himself to be a “bad Jew” –want to venture a guess as to why this guy was at shul that day? When I

“THERE’S A STUNNING MIDRASH THAT STATES THAT IF EVEN ONE OF THE 600 000 JEWS WHO WERE PRESENT FOR THE GIVING OF THE TORAH ON HAR SINAI HAD BEEN MISSING, THEN WE WOULD NOT HAVE MERITED TO RECEIVE THE TORAH!”

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tried to explain to that man that he mustn't write himself off so quickly, that there are many mitzvos that a person can do and which he was probably already doing, no sooner had I started when the man proceeded to reach into his pocket, from where he produced a handwritten receipt. He had been at the shul to make a donation!

Some of us know more than we do – some of us do more than we know – at the very extremes, there are a few who know and do and others who neither know nor do. But, the fact is that we need each other, as the Midrash says: tie all of them in a single bundle and they will atone for each other!

The following story¹³ is told about Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, one of the leaders of the Jewish people during the early 20th century:

At some point, a few Jewish students were permitted to attend medical school in Poland. There was one catch, however: they had to supply their own Jewish cadavers, since it was not considered fitting for a non-Jewish cadaver to assist with

the education of a Jewish student. So, the students approached Reb Chaim Ozer, who was the leading Halachic authority of the time, and they proposed that in order to keep the Jewish presence in the medical schools, "they be allowed to use the bodies of deceased Jews of ill repute" – people who had been lured into Poland's criminal street element.

After recovering from his initial astonishment at the suggestion, Rabbi Chaim Ozer responded, "For me to allow that, I would have to know what G-d thinks about those people. And that I can never know."

The lesson of Sukkos is that Hashem watches over the Jewish people – every last one of us – just as He did for our forefathers, just as He always will. May we each recognise that there is no such thing as a "bad Jew". We're all works in progress: some of us know more than we do – and some of us do more than we know. May we all continue growing both in our Torah knowledge and in our good deeds. **TL**

¹Vayikra Rabba 30:12

²Vayikra 23:40: *And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of a splendid tree, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before Hashem, your G d, seven days.*

³Compare Bamidbar 29:12 with Devarim 16:13. In the former, Sukkos is listed alongside Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and in the latter, it's counted amongst the Shalosh Regalim.

⁴Until the death of Aaron, see Rashi to Bamidbar 20:29, d"h ki gova

⁵See, e.g., Rambam Hilchos Shofar, Sukkah, v'Lulav 7:6

⁶Bereishis Rabbah 70:9

⁷www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/28/bernie-madoff-defends-him_n_829022.html

⁸Google the search terms "death row" and "I'm a good person"

⁹Hilchos Teshuva 3:2

¹⁰Hilchos Matanos Aniyim 10:1

¹¹Talmud Yerushalmi Peah 1:1

¹²In case it is not evident, no single person can fulfil all 613 mitzvos, as some are only incumbent in certain places, or at certain times, or only on men, or only on women, or only on Kohanim, or only on Dayanim, etc., etc.

¹³Told over by Rabbi Nachman Bulman, ztz"l, www.ohr.edu/5022

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