
Beat It! The Ritual of *Havatat Aravot*

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One of Judaism's oddest rituals is that of beating the *aravot* (willow fronds) during the services for Hoshanah Rabbah, the final *Hol ha-Mo'ed* day of Sukkot. While there is no explicit commandment in the Torah, the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud understand the ritual of the *aravah* to be *d'oraita*.¹ A ritual which was originally distinctive to the Temple, in which the *aravot* were laid by the sides of the altar and paraded around that altar on each day of Sukkot, its transfer and transformation to the synagogue (in which the *aravah* is no longer paraded, but beaten) leaves us with a series of unanswered questions: there is an ancient dispute about how it is to be performed (and where). Most perplexing of all, there is no persuasive explanation for why it is contemporary practice to beat the *aravot* against the floor. As anthropologist and folklorist Theodor Gaster notes: "so different a meaning is now read into it [the ritual of the willow] that its original purport can no longer be recognized."² A similar admission of ignorance, from a more traditionally-religious source, affirms that "this custom of beating the *aravah* on the ground contains profound esoteric significance, and only the Great of Israel merit the knowledge of those secrets. The uninitiated should intend merely to abide by the custom of the Prophets and the Sages of all the generations."³

Why do we beat the willow?

¹ See Sukkah 43b. Rabbi Yohanan considers the Temple ritual of the *aravah* to be a *mitzvah*. See also Sukkah 44a and Rambam. *Hilkhot Lulav* 7:23.

² Theodor H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year*, p. 95.

³ Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, p. 208.

The Ritual of the Willow in Antiquity

The only biblical verse that deals with the willow frond is the one that establishes the mitzvah of the *arba'ah minim*, the four types of plants: וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפַּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עֲבוֹת וְעֵץ-נַחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרֵי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפַּת תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ-עֲבוֹת וְעֵץ-נַחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים “on the first day you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before YHWH your God seven days.”⁴ Rabbinic tradition understood that verse to mandate carrying all four plants together,⁵ and specified that “לִפְנֵי ה'”, before YHWH—meaning in the Temple—the *Arba'ah Minim* was to be carried for seven days, but that everywhere else, only בְּיוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן on the first day. After the destruction of the Temple, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai instituted carrying the *Arba'ah Minim* for all seven days זָכַר לְמִקְדָּשׁ in memory of the Temple.⁶

While there is nothing explicit in the Torah suggesting any additional role for the *aravot*, tannaitic tradition takes such a ritual for granted, asserting that “לְעֵץ הָעֲבוֹת וְלְעֵץ הָרִבֵּעַ שִׁבְעָה יָמִים” “the mitzvot of the lulav and of the willow branch are performed for six or seven days.”⁷ Only later does the Mishnah attempt to describe this ritual, first asking “כִּיצַד עֲרֵבָה שִׁבְעָה יָמִים?” “How is the willow branch performed for seven days?”⁸ Only after explaining that the normal practice (in the Temple) is to perform the rite of *aravah* for six days, unless the seventh day is Shabbat, does the Mishnah then describe what actually happens.

מצות ערבה כיצד? מקום היה למטה מירושלים ונקרא מוצא. יורדין לשם ומקלטין משם מרביות של ערבה. ובאין וזוקפין אותן בצדי המזבח. וראשיהן כפופין על-גבי המזבח. תקעו והרעו ותקעו בכל-יום מקיפין את-המזבח פעם אחת ואומרים. “אנא ה' הושיעה נא. אנא ה' הצליחה נא. ואותו היום מקיפין את-המזבח שבעה פעמים.

How was the mitzvah of the *aravah* performed? There was a place below Jerusalem, called Motza. They went down to there and gathered large branches of willow, and they came and stood them against the altar. They blew a tekiah, teruah, tekiah blast. Each day they would circle the altar once, saying, “Please YHWH, save us, Please YHWH, vindicate us.” . . . And on that day [the seventh day] they circled the altar seven times.⁹

Thus far, we know only that the ritual of the *aravot* involved fetching them from a distant place, laying them against the altar, blowing a series of blasts

⁴ Leviticus 23:40.

⁵ Sukkah 3:4b and Menahot 27a.

⁶ M. Sukkah 3:12.

⁷ M. Sukkah 4:1.

⁸ M. Sukkah 4:3.

⁹ M. Sukkah 4:5.

on horn or shofar, reciting Psalm 118:28 (part of the Hallel), and then parading around the altar once each day and seven times on the seventh day. The mishnah does not specify whether or not this perambulation was accompanied by carrying the *aravot*.

The next mishnah then explains that there was no difference between the *aravah* ritual on a weekday and that of Shabbat except that the *aravot* were gathered in advance and stored in golden vessels to prevent them from wilting. Immediately following, Rabbi Yohanan ben Berokah says *היו דקל של חריות מביאין וחובטין אותן בקרקע בצדי המזבח. ואותו היום נקרא יום חבוט חריות* “They brought date palm branches and beat them on the ground at the sides of the altar. That day was called the day of the beating of the palm branches.”¹⁰

Surprisingly, the only explicit Mishnaic attestation to beating something refers to palm branches, not to the *aravah*! In fact, claims Rabbi Yohanan ben Berokah, this ritual became the defining characteristic of the seventh day, giving the day its own special name. There is no reference in the Mishnah to beating willows, only to laying them by the altar and, possibly, to parading with them.

The *Aravah* and Later Sources

The Mishnah’s silence about beating willows, and its ambiguity about parading with them offered an urgent invitation to later rabbis to clarify and harmonize their readings of the Mishnah and contemporaneous practice. Needing to explain the practice of taking the willow branches outside of the Temple, in the period when the Temple no longer existed, the Talmud explains that this practice was instituted by the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi¹¹ as either *יסוד הנביאים*, an institution of the prophets, or *מנהג הנביאים*, a custom of the prophets. The sole consequence of this distinction is whether or not taking the *aravot* require a *berakhah* (if it is merely a *minhag*, even of the prophets, then it does not.) Because the mitzvah pertained only to when the Temple stood, and was now performed as a custom in memory of the Temple, the willows were used separately from the lulav and etrog only on the final day of the Festival.¹²

Having provided satisfactory lineage for continuing the ritual use of willows outside of the context of Temple worship, the Talmud also had to address the challenge of Rabbi Yohanan, and his claim that the ritual on the Sabbath really pertained to palm fronds. Rav Huna explains his colleague’s basis as emerging from the Torah’s use of *כפת תמר* as implying more than one palm frond: one for use with the *Arba’ah Minim*, and another for use

¹⁰ M. Sukkah 4:6.

¹¹ According to rabbinic tradition, these three were understood to be members of the Great Assembly (*כנסת הגדולה*), and were the source of several *takkanot*.

¹² According to Rabbi Zevid, “In the case of the willow branch, which is only a Rabbinical precept, we do not perform the ceremony for seven days in commemoration of the Temple” Sukkah 44a.

independently. The *Tanna Kamma*, however, does not accept that argument, pointing out that the use of the defective כַּפֶּת without the “ו” indicates that only one palm branch is to be used (and that one in the *Arba’ah Minim*).¹³

Rabbi Levi explains Rabbi Yohanan ben Berokah’s reasoning based not on a verse of Torah, but on *s’vara*: the Jewish people are compared to a date palm because just as the palm tree has only one heart (core), so too the heart of the Jewish people is directed solely to God.

Strikingly, the Talmud never directly mandates the mitzvah of beating the willow, instead it refers to it explicitly only in the context of asserting rabbinic hegemony over the interpretation of Torah, pointing out that the custom of beating the willows on Hoshanah Rabbah is a direct response to a group that rejected the authority of the Oral Torah: לְפִי שֶׁאֵין בִּיְסוּתִים מוֹדִים בְּחִיבוֹת עֲרֵבָה, because the Boethusians do not acknowledge the mitzvah of beating the willow.¹⁴

Later authorities, confronting the disparity between the explicit mention of beating palm fronds and the contemporaneous practice of beating willows, resort to somewhat strained readings in order to be able to harmonize the two. Thus the *Tiferet Yisrael* says that the disagreement between Rabbi Yohanan and the *Tanna Kamma* in the mishnah Sukkah 5 is only about what is done when the seventh day coincides with Shabbat. In that case, Rabbi Yohanan understands the prophets as requiring the use of palm fronds because they won’t wilt when gathered a day in advance. But Rabbi Yohanan and the *Tanna Kamma* both agree about the use of willows when Hoshanah Rabbah doesn’t coincide with Shabbat. The Tosafot and Ritva¹⁵ both understand Rabbi Yohanan as calling for the use of palm fronds in addition to willow branches. Even with the strenuous efforts at harmonization, later authorities insist that the halakhah doesn’t follow Rabbi Yohanan.¹⁶

This was far from the last halakhic dispute surrounding the what it is we are to do with the *aravot*. Rashi understands *havatab* to mean shaking (נְעוּנָה) while Rambam and the *Shulhan Arukh* understand it to mean that the *aravah* is “struck against the grounds or against an object.” The Rema attempts to integrate both views by insisting that one should “do both—one shakes the willows and afterwards strikes them.” While a consensus of practice has developed during the medieval period, no similar consensus has surrounded the attempt to explain this strange and uncharacteristic mitzvah.

Current Practice

As we now practice the ritual of the *aravah*,¹⁷ additional *aravot* are provided to the worshipers just after the seven *hakafot* with the lulav and etrog, the

¹³ Sukkah 45b.

¹⁴ Sukkah 43b.

¹⁵ Sukkah 45b, אַחַת.

¹⁶ Rambam 7:20–22.

¹⁷ See Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), p. 168. See also, *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim*, p. 664.

last time the *Arba'ah Minim* are used that year. As the Hazan recites קול מבשר ומבשר ואומר “A voice brings tidings and says,” the congregation strikes their *aravot* on the floor or against a solid object. It has become customary to strike five times, assuring that some of the leaves fall from the stem. There is no *berakhah* to be recited for beating the willows, and no uniformity about the required number of willows¹⁸ or beatings¹⁹ necessary. The silence that surrounds this practice, the diverse ways it can be implemented all underscore how strange this ritual is. With no real context, how is this momentary violence to be explained? Why do we beat the willow?

Why Beat the Willow?

The Mishnah, as we have seen, affirms a special ritual involving the willows in the Temple, one that involved decorating the altar, parading around it seven times on Hoshanah Rabbah, possibly carrying the willows while marching. The Talmud suggests that there was also a practice of beating the willows on that day, although it also affirms that this practice was not universally accepted.

What the Mishnah doesn't provide is a reason for the practice of beating the willows. Why is this strange ritual required? Particularly because its origin is so questionable, justifying its practice is all the more intriguing. One suspects that the diverse accounts of how the practice originated and of what the practice actually entails suggests that the sages were confronting a practice whose purpose they didn't really know.

That suspicion is only compounded by the multiplicity of justifications that are offered across the ages. Were any one reason conclusively true, the others would have become unnecessary. That no one reason commanded (or commands) broad assent suggests that the plausible explanation of this practice has not yet emerged.

A brief examination of the explanations, both medieval and modern, reveals the ingenuity and the confusion of rabbinic authorities in the face of explaining *havatat aravot*.

The *Sefer ha-Toda'ah* candidly concedes that there is no rational explanation for the *minhag*²⁰ and *Minhagei Yeshurun* sees it as a symbol of the ability of the Jewish people to survive persecution: no matter how hard we beat the *aravot*, the branch somehow persists.²¹ *Hayyei Avraham* suggests that the

¹⁸ Rav Sheshet says that one twig is sufficient (Sukkah 44b), and that assertion is supported by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Lulav* 7:22) and Rav Yosef Karo (*Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim* 664:4). According to Rav Nahman (Sukkah 44b) three twigs is better (see also *Mishnah Berurah* 664:16, citing *Or Zarua*). The most common practice follows the Ari, and involves taking five twigs.

¹⁹ Rashi (Sukkah 44b, חב"ט) calls for waving the willow, corresponding to waving it during the Temple ritual. Rambam (*Hilkhot Lulav* 7:22) calls for beating the willow on the ground or on some furniture two or three times. Karo (*Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayim* 664:4) calls for beating it on the earth, and the Rama requires both waiving and beating the *aravah*.

²⁰ *Sefer ha-Toda'ah*, Volume 1, p. 124.

²¹ *Minhagei Yeshurun*, p. 116.

beating of the willow symbolizes the beating we deserve when we violate the mitzvot.²²

Rabbi Abraham Millgram suggests that beating the willows “may have once been connected with rain-bringing rituals.”²³ While there is explicit rabbinic writings connecting Hoshanah Rabbah with rain, there is nothing extant to indicate why the willow *beating* would symbolize rain. If this was once an apotropaic rite in which our ancestors induced rain by making it “rain” leaves, there is no ancient testimony to confirm that supposition.

Echoing the Rambam, Rabbi Millgram also affirms that “its meaning in the synagogue ritual is the remembrance of the Temple service, the awareness of the Temple’s destruction, and the hope of its restoration.”²⁴ While there is Talmudic testimony that we continue the *hakafot* on this day in memory of the Temple, there is no suggestion that the willow beating memorializes the old Temple or reflects hope for a new one. Beating branches would be an odd way to express hope in a future rebuilding.

Arthur Waskow offers that “as the leaves fall off the willow, they can be seen today as a symbol of fading, falling lives, or as a symbol of casting off our old and dying sins.”²⁵ Candidly admitting that his homiletical interpretation lacks support, Waskow’s lovely *drash* is a psychological reading into, worthy of reflection but not as an historical explanation of how this rite functioned originally.

Rabbi Elie Munk sees an agricultural and ecological message in the practice: “the procession is made first with the lulav and only thereafter with the special *Hoshanot* to symbolize our prayerful hope that the blessings of nature be extended to every species of vegetation.”²⁶ As lovely as this explanation is, the absence of prayers for nature (when there are, indeed, explicit prayers for rain) limits the plausibility of reading the *hakafot* as originally expressing the hope of natural bounty to all species of plants. In any case, it says nothing about why we *beat* the *aravot* after the procession ends.

Basing himself on the Midrash²⁷ which sees the *aravot* as representing “those insipid creatures of Israel who have neither savor nor perfume,” Rabbi Munk offers an explanation of the willow beating as asserting that God doesn’t desire the death of these sinners, “rather, it is God’s will that they be chastened and tried by bitter blows of fate so that they may learn to walk in the right path once again.”²⁸ The beating of the willows, then, represents

²² *Hayyei Avraham* 49b.

²³ Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971), p. 220.

²⁴ Millgram, *Jewish Worship*, p. 220.

²⁵ Arthur Waskow, *Season of our Joy*, p. 63. His reading comes very close to the *Sefer ha-Matamin*, p. 64, which sees the ritual as a resolution “that henceforth the words of our lips will be untainted and pure, and sin will no longer be part of our lives.”

²⁶ Elie Munk, p. 285.

²⁷ *Va-Yikra Rabbah*, p. 30.

²⁸ Munk, p. 288.

what should happen to those who sin, in order to inspire them to correct their ways. Unfortunately, the prayer before and after it are messianic and eschatological in content, undermining a sermonic desire to use these branches to whip erring congregants back into line.

Less plausibly, Munk asserts that “this is a means of acting out our wish that in the future Israel may be visited no more by calamity and sorrow.”²⁹ This reading is more consistent with the contemporary liturgical context for the beating of the willows, but it is hard to see how beating the willow branches can symbolize hope that Israel will yet transcend disaster.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld sees the beating of the willows as a ritual which “probably symbolized a casting away of sins.”³⁰ The English Rabbi Isaac Fabricant asserts that “the custom of the beating of the willow is that it symbolizes the ephemeral aspect of life, for as the leaves of the willow drop through beating, so our years in which we are buffeted by the storm and stress of life fall from the span of time allotted to us.”³¹

What all of these lovely “explanations” share is recourse to psychologizing the ritual (reading it as reflecting an internal human condition) or to theologizing it (as expressing some sentiment toward punishing sinners, forgiving sinners, or establishing the eschaton). None of them explain the texts as we have them, and many of them don’t really explain the specifics of what we actually *do* with the willow branches. While they might apply to marching with the willows as a memorial to the Temple, none address the violence of the action, or its timing. Why *beat* them, and why after the last *hakafof* on Hoshanah Rabbah?

Toward a Simpler Explanation

Rather than reading an inadequately-explained rabbinic ritual against a psychological or spiritual backdrop, invoking categories which were never explicitly delineated in rabbinic thought, a more plausible first try would be to work within the realm of existent rabbinic concern. Such an approach mitigates against the arrogance of the living, who often impose their core beliefs and assumptions on the ancients. Such an approach also has the advantage of avoiding the seductive appeal of reducing religion to something else (psychology, anthropology, or sociology, for example). Looking at a ritual through the lenses of the ancient rabbis (as best we can), their strong concern is often with the integrity and contours of halakhah. It is to that realm, then, that we had best look. I propose that the beating of the willow is motivated by a halakhic desire, in this case to signify the end of the festival and to render its main implement *pasul*.

²⁹ Munk, p. 288.

³⁰ Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 135.

³¹ Isaac N. Fabricant, *A Guide to Succoth* (London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1969), p. 21.

For that reading, there is some suggestive support. First, in the realm of logic (in this instance, the kind of evidence that is both weakest and most suspect), it is noteworthy that the *havatah* takes place immediately after the willows are no longer necessary for any ritual purpose. We don't even wait until the end of the service, but destroy them immediately. That we do so without any prayer or *kavanah* only strengthens the notion that this minhag serves a practical purpose, not some deeper symbolic expression.

There is some hint of this practicality in rabbinic texts as well:

The primary support comes from the Mishnah itself. After describing the ritual of the *aravot*, the next Mishnah informs us that מיד התינוקות שומטין את-לולביהן ואוכלין אתרוגייהן, “immediately the children loosened their lulavim and ate their etrogim.”³² While there is some dispute about the precise meaning of the verb שומטין,³³ there is no doubt that this practice renders the lulav and the etrog no longer fit for ritual use. Given its propinquity to the passage on the *aravot*, and given that the *havatah* is also destructive, it stands to reason that the function is the same: to disqualify the *aravot* from any further ritual function.

The *Shulhan Arukh*³⁴ supports this supposition when it notes that we are not to beat off all the leaves on the branch, only a few. Hence the *havatah* only includes beating the *aravah* once or twice. The purpose of the ritual is not complete destruction, only preventing its further use. In this regard, the *Shulhan Arukh*'s understanding of *havatat aravot* parallels the removal of one *tzitzit* from a *tallit* that then becomes *pasul*. Eliyahu Kitov mentions³⁵ a similar contemporary practice of taking five *aravot* and beating them five times, after which they are stored in a place where they won't be trampled “since it is improper to cast it away as worthless even after it has been used.”

Conclusion

At stake in this discussion is more than simply uncovering the original reason of a relatively obscure ritual. In contemporary religious homily and study, there is a tendency to filter religious history through the agenda and priorities of the individual examiner. While this is unavoidable to some extent, it often results in the wholesale abdication of the search for the agenda of the original intent. Consequently, the learning that might emerge from an encounter with a different worldview or an earlier set of values is lost. While scholars of myth and ritual are quick to point out that the “true” meaning of a practice may change over time, with each new interpretation possessing its own validity for the community that reads the ritual in that way, it is nonetheless also

³² M. Sukkah 4:7.

³³ Meiri holds that the verb means to untie, so he reads this mishnah as implying that the children untied the bindings of the lulav. The Rosh (4:4) reads it as meaning they slip the lulav out of its bindings in order to play with it alone. Rashi (Sukkah 46b מיד) understands it as meaning the children put the lulav aside in the corner.

³⁴ *Orah Hayim* 664:4.

³⁵ Without citation. See Kitov, 1: 208.

true that a too hasty accommodation of all interpretations tends to result in a hasty skipping over interpretations that might trouble us. In this accommodation, traditions get homogenized, harmonized, and flattened.

I would propose that a more productive way of reading ancient, continuous traditions would allow its many voices to speak out, with the hope of learning even from those perspectives we can no longer embrace. In the case of *havatat aravot*, many of the homiletical *drashot* are lovely, profound, and add a layer of warmth and depth to an otherwise bizarre practice. But in doing so, they threaten to substitute psychology, a literalist theology (do it simply because God says so), or an imperialist anthropology in place of what might have simply been a way to render the *aravah* no longer ritually usable.

Allowing the divergent voices to stand side by side, and searching for an encounter with an original motivation regardless of how it might dovetail with our own agenda, respects the integrity and otherness of Jewish traditions. Rather than imposing our own belief and concerns on the past, it allows the values and priorities of the past a hearing in our own day. Looking for a referent behind the text (such as a historical event, an intent, or some posited deeper meaning) is a characteristic of a modernist hermeneutic.³⁶ It assumes a privileged position for the reader, who is able to intuit the true (and hidden) purpose lurking underneath the text. That way of reading reveals a great deal about the reader, but is more limited in illuminating a text or a practice. Post-modernist readers have insisted that we look for rich, multiple readings that the text or the act itself generates and sustains among a reading/doing community. Such a post-modernist perspective respects the object of study while also allowing the modern reader to grow through a real encounter. Rather than reading our love of psychology or the guidelines of the way we conduct our spiritual search into *havatah aravot*, we might actually learn and grow more by a willingness to “assume” the perspectives of the texts we are reading, at least while we are engaged in the reading.

In rushing to the *drash*, modernist creative voices displace the talmudic concern for operating within the simple parameters of reason and halakhah. While that modest goal may not be able to compete with supernal visions or eschatological vindications, there is great value in letting those fundamentals have a hearing. Reasonableness and halakhic involvement are standards that American Jewry would do well to reclaim. Beating our willows, more than anything else, is a summons back to halakhic tidiness—to cleaning up after ourselves ritually by disposing of our *kelim* after they have served their purpose. And that is next to godliness.

³⁶ My perspective on modernism and post-modernism is very much informed by a wonderful book, edited by Peter Ochs, entitled *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scriptural Interpretations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).