

Succot 5778, 2017:

*The Arba'at ha-Minim and Jewish Women*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, Devorah bat Chana, Chaya Mindel bat Leah Basha and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Festival of Succot contains two major *mitzvot*, dwelling in the Succah on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei, and the taking of the *Arba'at ha-Minim* (the Four Species). Both of these acts are in the halachic category of *mitzvot aseh sh'hazman grama* (time bound Positive Commandments); as such, while women may fulfill these commandments, they are not obligated to do so. This principle is based upon a major Mishnaic period source, “And in all cases of time-bound Positive Commandments, men are obligated and women are exempt.” (*Mishna Kiddushin* 1:7)

The following Midrashic interpretation of the *Arba'at ha-Minim* is particularly intriguing in light of the Mishna's statement:

An alternate explanation: “The fruit of a beautiful tree [*etrog*]” – this refers to Sarah, since the Holy One blessed be He honored her (*sh'hidrah*, literally, beautified her) with good health in her old age. As the text states: “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, coming on in years...” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:11) “Date palm fronds [*lulav*]” – this refers to Rivka, for just like a date palm tree has both fruit and thorns, so, too, did Rivka give birth to a *tzadik* (Ya'akov) and a *ra'asha* (Eisav). “A branch of a braided tree [*hadas*]” – This refers to Leah, for just like the *hadas* is filled with leaves, so, too, was Leah [blessed] with many children. “Willows of the brook [*arvei nachal*]” – This refers to Rachel, for just like the *arvei nachal* wither before the other *Arba'at ha-Minim*, so, too, did Rachel die before her sister [Leah]. (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, Parashat Emor 30:10, translation and brackets my own)

We are immediately confounded by the Midrash's choice of the *Emahot* (Matriarchs) as metaphorically representing the *Arba'at ha-Minim*. After all, what is their connection if, as we have seen, women are exempt from *mitzvot aseh sh'hazman grama*? In my estimation, the Midrash followed this path in order to teach us a crucial lesson: Judaism is comprised of two beautiful and equally vital *Massorot* (traditions), the *Massorah* of the Fathers and the *Massorah* of the Mothers. Given this context, it is fitting and proper for the Midrash to compare the *Emahot* to the *Arba'at ha-Minim*.

In modern times, there was no greater proponent of this approach than my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers:

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Massorah and one Massorah community; the community of the fathers. It is not true. We have two massorot, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* [chains of Tradition] – the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers... What kind of a Torah does the mother pass on? I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role of the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw upon my own experiences.

At this point we are privy to the Rav's deepest personal reminiscences of his beloved mother:

I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I “happened” to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use an halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked *me-inyana de-yoma* [about the halakhic aspects of a particular holy day]. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the *sidra* [Torah portion] every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

What was the essence of that which the Rav learned from his mother? What gift did she give him that changed his being and perception of the world? As he states in his unique and unparalleled manner:

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne*,” Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, 1978, Vol. 17, number 2, pages 76-77)

It is, and perhaps always has been, the unique privilege of Jewish women to enable our people to “... feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon [our] frail shoulders.” Therefore, when we rejoice with the *Arba’at ha-Minim* this Succot, let us remember the Midrash’s essential and powerful message, to embrace both the *Massorah* of the Mothers and the *Massorah* of the Fathers, so that we may fulfill this *mitzvah* as a “living experience” in all its “flavor, scent and warmth.” With Hashem’s help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to do so. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach!*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on this link: <http://bit.ly/2jrPl2V>.