

“Sukkaton” Program

The Teva Learning Center is a non-denominational educational service for students who attend Jewish Day schools, Hebrew schools, camps and community centers.

The **Teva Learning Center** exists to renew the ecological wisdom inherent in Judaism. By immersing participants in the natural world and providing structured activities which sensitize them to nature's rhythms, we help them develop a more meaningful relationship with nature and their own Jewish practices. This process also facilitates personal growth, community building, and a genuine commitment to *tikkun olam*, healing the world.

In the fall of 1999 Teva had its first ever “Sukkaton” – a four day Sukkot learning experience geared towards teaching sixty 9th graders the connections between the holiday, the land, the natural rhythms of the season, and people’s responsibility towards each other and the environment.

What follows is one curriculum from this *Sukkaton*, involving *midrashim* on the *arba* – 4 species (*lulav*, *etrog*, etc.). In addition the following curricula were used at the *Sukkaton*, and are available upon request from the Teva Learning Center:

- The Building of a *Sukkah* – environmental considerations and recommendations
- Using the *Sukkah* as an Experiential Education Tool
- A Night Hike for *Sukkot*
- *Ushpizin*, Inviting Guests to your *Sukkah*
- The *Arba* (4 species) of *Sukkot* and their Symbolism
- Visiting a Local Farm on the Holiday of Harvest
- Locally vs. Nonlocally Produced Food – how do we know the difference and why do we care?
- Learning the Laws of Harvest – an interactive, experiential program
- Sukkot, *Zman Simchateinu* (The Time of our Joy) - Planning a Simchat Beit Hashuavah () to celebrate the harvest, the holiday, and the rains
- Relay Races
- Talent Show
- Water Libations Ceremony
- *Tefilot* (Prayers) during Sukkot – including environmental *kavannot* and readings

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The Arba Minim (4 Species) of Sukkot and their Symbolism

One of the most common images surrounding the holiday of Sukkot is that of waving the *lulav* and *etrog*. Yet the commandment from *Vayikra* (Leviticus) to take 4 species (*arba*) in joy before God is a somewhat cryptic one. Exactly which species are the four plants described in *Vayikra*? Why were these four chosen? What does it mean to take them and be “happy before Hashem your God?”

These questions have led to a number of beautiful *midrashim* on the role and symbolism of the *arba*. This curriculum uses some of these *midrashim* to explore the themes of Sukkot, self, and the land.

Objectives:

1. To discover the deep connections between *Sukkot* and the natural world, and the natural world as a means of connecting to God.
2. To explore one’s own self-image through the medium of the natural world and Jewish symbols
3. To learn several traditional interpretations on the purpose and symbolism of the *arba*
4. To stimulate creative thinking about Jewish subjects and ritual objects; To practice the art of *midrash*
5. To practice artistic and experiential learning

Material:

1. *Lulav* and *etrog*
2. Enclosed worksheet
3. Part 1: Music – optional
4. Part 2: Butcher paper and crayons, markers, pastels, chalk, paint, etc.
5. Part 3: Rope or yarn

Age Appropriateness: This curriculum was originally developed for 9th grade day school students, but can easily be modified for 6th graders through adults.

This curriculum has three parts. Each of these parts can be a lesson on its own, or you may choose to do two parts or all three. If all three parts are taught, they work best if done in the order presented. Also, the mediums in Part 1 and Part 2 can be reversed – i.e., art to explain the traditional *midrashim* and drama to create new *midrashim*.



PART 1 – Traditional *Midrashim* and Dramatic Presentations

Time: ~ 45 min.

1. Begin by reading the original verse from Leviticus. Hold up the *lulav* and *etrog* and help the students identify the four species named.
2. Divide students into four groups and assign each group a *midrash*. If there are too many students in a group (more than eight), two different groups can work with the same *midrash*.
3. Students have 10-15 minutes to prepare a skit that demonstrates their assigned *midrash*. Skits can be:
 - Silent or with sound
 - Songs, musical presentations (in a pinch, there are dozens of make-shift instruments in the classroom), dance, movement, or storytelling
4. All skits should include a reading of the assigned *midrash*, whether it is at the beginning, end, or middle of the skit.

Closing discussion questions:

Which *midrash* did you like the most and why?

Why would the Torah command us to take up the *arba* and “be happy before God?”

Why does this commandment to be happy involve objects which are directly from nature? In other words, the commandment could have asked us to create a ritual object (human-made), why use one directly from the earth?

How are these *midrashim* a reflection of being happy with/for/through God?



PART 2 – Creating our own *Midrashim* through Painting and Drawing Time: ½ to 1 hour

1. Begin this activity by asking the students to think about the following:
 - If you could create your own *midrash* about the *arba* , what would it say?
 - What is YOUR interpretation of why we use these particular species?
 - Remind students that they are not bound by the themes of the four *midrashim* on the following page (*arba* representing God, the people of Israel, the human body, and the land of Israel). The word *midrash* comes from the Hebrew word *doresh*, to seek. The rabbis described the reading of the Torah as reading “**black fire on white fire**” – and that creating *midrash* is reading the white fire.
2. Ask the students to make a drawing of their *midrash* using the paint, pastels, etc. provided them. This activity works best when everyone gathers around a large piece of butcher paper and works side by side.

A few questions/thoughts to stir up creativity:

- Look at *Midrash* #3: How else might the *arba* represent a person?
Do you see a reflection of yourself in the *arba* ?
How are you like the *lulav* and *etrog*?
 - Look at *Midrash* #2: How are the *arba* like members of your community or your family?
How might the phrase "Let them all be tied together as one and they will atone for each other" apply to your community or family?
3. Once everyone is finished, display the poster and ask each person to explain his or her *midrash*.



PART 3 – *Arba Minim* as Representatives of the Land – Picking our own *lulav* and *etrog*
Time: ~ 30 min.

1. This is an outdoor activity. A site should be chosen which has a variety of different plant species of various heights, sizes, colors, smells, etc. The best sites for this activity are “weedy” areas by the side of the road or parking lot, in a back lot, or on the edge of a forest. Essentially, any small strip of land that has not been mowed in some time works well.
2. Ask the students the following questions on Midrash #4:
 - Why does Rambam think that the *arba* are symbols of rejoicing at leaving the desert?
 - If the *arba* symbolize the land of Israel, which species would we choose to symbolize the land we currently live in?
3. Tell the students that they will now have an opportunity to create the *arba* of the region they live in. Because this activity involves picking plants, it is important to explain that the Jewish law of *Bal Taschit* prohibits the wasting of any thing, including the life of a plant. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught that every single blade of grass has a song which it sings to God (Rabbi Nachman’s Wisdom, p.306), and when we pick even a blade of grass, wantonly, for no purpose, we are killing its song. It is important that this activity not turn into a random picking of plants which are then thrown away. Only plants which appear abundantly should be picked, and then only if they are going to be used to beautify the celebration of the holiday.
4. Divide students into couples or small groups and give them 10 – 20 minutes to look for their *arba* .

****Please note:** This activity can be greatly enhanced (and lengthened) if the teacher can take the time to prepare background information on some of the more common species on the site. The following questions can be used to create a guide to the species of the area. This may also provide a wonderful opportunity to do a joint activity with the science teacher.

- Which plants are the main providers of food to the birds and other animals of the area?
 - Which plants are edible by humans or have medicinal applications?
 - Which plants are native to the area and which are introduced?
 - Which plants have special scents?
 - ****Are there any plants which should NOT be picked because they are scarce in this area?***
5. When students finish collecting their plants, the four species can be tied together with yarn or rope. These four species can be used as decoration in the *sukkah* or home. (Plants dry best when hung upside down). Gather the groups in a circle and ask them to share their four species and why they chose those particular species.

Closing discussion questions:

- The *arba* are an example of an instance in which we use something which is intrinsically a part of the land of Israel, even though we are not living there. Can you think of other rituals, prayers, or practices of *Sukkot* that are connected to the land of Israel and its seasons? What about other holidays?
- Why do you think we have these rituals/prayers/practices which tie us to the land of Israel,



even though we do not live there?

- What is your personal connection to the land of Israel?
- Do you think a connection to the land of Israel is important? Why or why not?
- Which is more meaningful to you, the *arba* of the Torah, or those you picked yourself?
- What does it mean to us as a Jewish people that we celebrate and pray for the rhythms and bounty of another land, when many of us have connections that are as strong or even stronger, to the land we live on? How do we reconcile this conflict as activists and environmentalists?

Further Reading on the Arba

Nature in Our Biblical Heritage, by Nogah Hareuveni, 1980, pp. 76 – 90. Can be ordered from Neot Kedumim, an Israeli nature reserve dedicated to restoring the flora and fauna of biblical Israel:

P.O. Box 1007, Lod 71100 Israel, phone: +972-8-233-3840.

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MIDRASHIM ON THE 4 SPECIES (Arba)

Leviticus 23:40: "And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of the *hadar* tree (citron/*etrog*), the branches of date-palms (*lulav*), the twigs of the '*avot* tree (myrtle), and willows of the brook (*'aravot*) and you shall be happy before Hashem your God for seven days."

#1 *Midrash VayiqraRabbah* 30:9 – “The fruit of the hadar tree.” Hadar symbolizes the Holy One Blessed Be, of whom it is written "you are clothed in glory and majesty-*hadar*” (Psalms 104:1). "Branches of Date-Palms " likewise symbolizes the Holy One Blessed Be of whom it is written, "the Righteous shall flourish like a palm tree" (ibid 42:13). "The branches of the '*avot* tree” symbolizes the Holy One Blessed Be as it is written, "(God) stood among the myrtles-trees" (Zech. 1:8). And "willows of the brook" too symbolizes the Holy One Blessed be, of whom it is written "(God) rides upon the skies-*aravot*.”

#2 *ibid.* 30:12 – “The fruit of the hadar tree” symbolizes (the people) of Israel; Just as the *Etrog* has taste as well as fragrance, so Israel have among them people who possess learning and good deeds. “Branches of the Date-Palm”, too applies to Israel; just as the palm tree has taste but not fragrance, so Israel have among them those who possess learning but not good deeds. "And branches of the '*avot* trees" likewise applies to Israel; just as myrtle has fragrance but no taste, so Israel have among them those with good deeds but not learning. "And the willows of the brook" also applies to Israel. Just as the willow has no taste and no fragrance, so Israel have among them people who possess neither learning nor good deeds . . . Says the Holy One Blessed Be "Let them all be tied together as one and they will atone for each other. If you have done so then at that instant I am exalted!"

#3 *ibid.* 30:14 – Rabbi Mani opened up his lesson with the verse "All my bones shall say: Hashem, who is like you?" This verse is an allusion to . . . the *lulav*. The *lulav* resembles the spine of a person; the *hadass* resembles the eye; the '*arava* resembles the mouth; and the *etrog* resembles the heart. This explains "all my bones shall say"!

#4 Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, Book 3, ch.43 – It seems to me that the four species . . . are symbols of rejoicing at leaving the desert and arriving at a place of fruit-bearing trees and streams of water.

The four species symbolically represent the four different geographic areas of Israel. When we wave these together we are asking for rains of blessings appropriate to each location. (Encyclopedia Judaica)

What is YOUR *midrash*?

Lulav: _____.

Etrog: _____.

2 '*Aravot*: _____.

3 *Hadasim*: _____.

Together: _____.



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