

Shaking It

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am all for customs. They add variety, exoticism, and often humor into our ever more pressurized and material world. And Judaism has its fair share of strange things to do. If you take them all as friendly pointers, as ways of thinking and acting differently to the way one habitually does, they can add some spice to life and might even be elevating. They are as a general rule harmless and, if they will not necessarily do you any good (unless you're a mystic who believes in magic), at least they do not do obvious harm.

You just might not want to indulge in say, whirling chickens around your head before Yom Kippur. Though come to think of it, [it can't be harmless for the poor chickens](#). As for me, I'd rather give money any day instead of running the risk of picking up some fowl virus.

Sukkot is a festival with a heavy overload of exotic things to do. (And I don't mean getting drunk on vodka on Simchat Torah, something we have Lubavitch to thank for. Getting drunk on single malt whiskey is a much older and healthier custom.) I mean everything to do with the four plants we take and shake and wave, the [Arba Minim](#). They are the Lulav, Etrog, Hadasim, and Aravot. (For those of you looking from outside in, they are the palm branch, citron, myrtle, and willow. Just think of [Palm Sunday](#), except that's in the spring and we do ours in the autumn.)

So much can go into buying the Four Kinds of Plants and the expense can be mind-blowing if you go for the top of the range. Perhaps you have seen this depicted in the film [Ushpizin](#). The tips of the lulav have to be examined to make sure they are not split. (And women think split hair is a problem.) You might, as I do, prefer a lulav with a kneppel. That's the husk still intact at the top that reduces the chances of split fronds but has the disadvantage of not sounding so good when you shake it (more of that shortly).

The [etrog](#) is even more complicated. You want one that is genuine citron, not a mixture of other citrus, not one grafted. Preferably one watched over by the thousandth generation of Sicilian Mafiosi shepherds whose goat manure is vintage, or better still from the Calabrian ['Ndrangheta](#), and not to mention the more controversial [ones from Corfu](#).

And don't even begin to get involved in the issue of the pitom, that cute little mushroom-like protrusion at the top of the fruit (not to be confused with the bottom, which has the remnant of the stalk that attached it to the tree). The pitom is pure vanity. It takes just one clumsy move or a kid's over-enthusiasm and it's gone and your etrog is useless, a defective reject. Far better to get one that never ever had a pitom so there's nothing to break off. And then there are the marks, the spots and the bubbles. You will need magnifying glasses, microscopes, and jeweler's loops to sort out the goats from the sheep, the lemons from the citrons. And a really laboratory-tested pure one, certified by experts, sanctified by saints, and commercially

exploited by rabbis, can run into thousands! I know people who live elegantly the whole year round on the etrogs they sell for Sukkot.

I suppose splurging money on a religious artifact is at least no worse than throwing away 100 times more on horsepower you can never use in traffic or jewels that 99% of people cannot tell from glass or cubic zirconia.

What concerns me, however, is the way you wave your lulav and when. You see, as of course anyone who knows anything about Judaism will tell you, [there are a hundred different ways of doing it](#). You take them in your two hands, hold them out in front of you and shake. But how do you shake? Is it a swirling cutlass swipe, an up and down beating motion as if to cut any nasty lingering evil spirits in two? Is it a sedate Germanic putting out and pulling back in, three times or two? Is it an en-garde foil-wiggling at the end, as though you are trying to clean out the right ear of the fellow in front, or perhaps you are trying to spike his kippa and toss it into the air?

And which direction do you rotate? Most go east, south, west, north, up, and down. Others go right, left, front, up, down, and back. The Kabbalists added their variations, and the rebbes a few refinements more. Beware if you are out of sync with your neighbor. It does not matter if what you were doing was good enough for King David or the Vilna Gaon, you will get black looks, superior noses in the air, and if you are really out of luck, some kid will be delegated to tug your kaftan and tell you that you are an ignorant fool or a heretic for ignoring local custom.

You see, that's what I do not like about customs. They give every pompous inadequate religious snob a chance to feel superior, to make you feel inferior, and to do the very opposite of what true religion is supposed to do which is to engender happy, uplifted, and spiritual feelings. The complexities of the varieties of customs are minefields laid out to trap the unwary, and make the visitor feel out of place and ignorant. They are the means of ensuring that small select groups of holier-than-thou's can recognize who is in and who is out. It is like the dress code that enables you to get into the right nightclub or casino. Which might be fine for nightclubs and casinos and fashion shows, but it is not what religion should be concerned with. And you, sir, are waving your lulav under my nose and in the wrong direction. No way into heaven for you! (You see, Yom Kippur is over and I'm back to normal!)