

How to Use the Arba Minim

This is a general guide to the proper use of the Arba Minim. However, the Jewish laws governing their use can be complex, so the reader is urged to consult their Rabbi for more specific directions.

What Is the Source of the Commandment?

The commandment to take the Arba Minim is described in the Torah: "And you should take for yourselves on the first day (of Sukkos) the fruit of the beautiful tree (the Esrog), the branch of a palm tree (Lulav) a bough from the myrtle tree (Hadassim) and the willows of the stream (Aravos), and you shall rejoice before your G-d for seven days." (Leviticus/Vayikra 32:40)

What Are the Basic Requirements?

According to Jewish tradition, this passage defines our understanding of the Mitzvah of Arba Minim, and teaches us the requirements for each of the four species. First, it teaches us that all four of the Arba Minim are required in order to fulfill the mitzvah. Second, it teaches us that the primary mitzvah to take the Arba Minim is on the first day. Since the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash (Temple in Jerusalem) more than 1900 years ago, the use of the Arba Minim on the other six days of Sukkos is a Rabbinic ordinance. As a result, requirements that the Arba Minim must meet to be deemed kosher for use on the last six days of Sukkos are less stringent than the requirements to fulfill the mitzvah on the first day. Third, since the Torah says that we must take the Arba Minim to ourselves, it is interpreted to mean that we must own the Arba Minim we are using in order to fulfill the mitzvah, at least on the first day.

What Is the Significance of the Arba Minim?

Our Rabbinic sages teach that the mitzvah of Arba Minim has many symbolic meanings. One of them is to dramatize the need for the unity of the Jewish people. The Medrash in Leviticus (Vayikra Rabbah 30) compares the Esrog, which has both a pleasing taste and a pleasing scent, to the pious Jew who has both Torah learning and good deeds (mitzvos). The Lulav (date palm) bears fruit (dates) with taste, but no scent, similar to a learned Jew without good deeds. By contrast, Hadassim (myrtle) have a pleasing scent, but no taste, like a Jew with good deeds, but no learning, while the Aravos (willow) have neither taste nor scent, like those Jews without learning nor good deeds. Yet, on Sukkos, the mitzvah of the Arba Minim requires that we must take all four components and put them together in the service of the L-rd. Similarly, for the Jewish people to achieve its destiny, all Jews, regardless of their backgrounds, must come together in a unified effort.

Who is obligated to Use the Arba Minim?

As a "time dependant" commandment, Jewish tradition teaches that Arba Minim is voluntary for women, nor is it required of children. However, it has become customary for women to use the Arba Minim as well, and for parents to buy less expensive, educational "chinuch" Arba Minim sets for use by young children (under age 13) to practice the mitzvah.

Where, When and How Is the Blessing Made Over the Arba Minim?

The blessings over the Arba Minim are said during the morning (Shacharis) prayers just before the recitation of Hallel. The Arba Minim are then waved in the traditional fashion (see directions below) after the blessing is made.

However, many observe the custom of the Ari, the master of the Kabbala, who recited the blessings over the Arba Minim in the Sukkah.

When else are the Arba Minim used during the Morning Prayer service?

The Arba Minim are held throughout the Hallel prayer and waved at three points during that prayer. One also holds the Arba Minim during the Hoshanos prayer, while walking around the synagogue, following the Chazan (cantor). Depending on the custom of the synagogue, the Hoshanos prayer is recited either after Hallel or following the Mussaf Amidah prayer.

Are the Arba Minim Used Every Day of Sukkos?

No. The blessing over the Arba Minim is not made on the Sabbath. The Arba Minim is not used during the Saturday morning prayers in the synagogue, and should not be handled until the Sabbath ends.

How Are the Arba Minim Bundled and Held?

The Lulav, Esrog, Hadassim and Aravos must be grasped together in order to form the Arba Minim (four species). Three of the species, the Lulav (date palm), the Hadassim (3 myrtle branches) and the Aravos (2 willow branches), are bundled together in a wrapper made of woven palm fronds, with the Lulav at the center of the bundle. The bundle is assembled and held so that the Lulav's spine is facing the user, with the three Hadassim branches on the user's right, and placed so that their tops are slightly above the two Aravos branches on the user's left.

What Is the Procedure for Making the Blessing Over the Arba Minim?

One picks up the bundle of the Lulav, Hadassim and Aravos in the right hand. The Esrog is then picked up in the left hand, with the top of the Esrog (the end with the Pitom) facing down. (Note: For those who are left-handed, pick up the bundle with the left hand and the Esrog with the right.) One then brings the two hands together. The Esrog is held with its top end (with the Pitom) facing downward, as the blessing(s) is recited. Immediately after reciting the blessing(s), rotate the Esrog so that the top part is facing up, and while holding the Arba Minim together in both hands, wave it in six directions. The Esrog is turned over so that, in accordance with Jewish law, the Arba Minim commandment, like most others, is not supposed to be fulfilled until immediately after the blessing is recited. Jewish law teaches that to fulfill the commandment, the Arba Minim must be held in the same orientation in which they naturally grow. Since the Esrog grows with the Pitom facing up, if you pick it up with the Pitom facing down, you have not yet completed the requirements of the commandment. That is why, immediately after the blessing is recited, the Esrog is turned over so that the Pitom points up, meeting the requirement of holding it in the same orientation in which it grows, and completing the mitzvah.

What Are the Blessings Over the Arba Minim?

The main blessing over the Arba Minim is recited every day of Sukkos except the Sabbath:

ברוך אתה, יי אלהים - נו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו,
וצננו על נטילת לולב:

Transliteration: Boruch ata Hashem Elokeynu (*) melech ha-
olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvosav v'tzivanu al netilas lulav.

Translation: Blessed are you, L-rd, the King of the world,
Who has sanctified us with the mitzvos and commanded us to
take the lulav.

A second blessing is recited only on the first day of Sukkos,
after the main blessing on the Arba Minim, and before the Arba
Minim are waved:

ברוך אתה, יי אלהים - נו מלך העולם,
שהחיינו וקיימנו והגייענו לזמן הזה:

Transliterated: Boruch ata Hashem Elokeynu (*) melech ha-
olam, shehecheyanu v'kiyemanu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.

Translation: Blessed are you, L-rd, the King of the world,
Who has given us life, and protected us and brought us to this
special occasion.

* In accordance with Jewish tradition, the spellings used here
are variations of Hebrew words traditionally used to signify G-
d's names. Please refer to a prayer book and substitute the full
versions of G-d's names when actually reciting the blessings.

How Does One Wave the Arba Minim?

The custom of waving the Arba Minim, called Na'anuim,
involves holding the Lulav bundle and the Esrog together in
both hands, and shaking them gently, three times in each of six
directions. There are different traditions as to the order in
which one turns and shakes toward the six different directions.
Many congregations shake the Arba Minim in the following
order: Start by shaking the Arba Minim three times while
facing forward (toward the east), then turn clockwise 90
degrees, toward the south and shake three times, turn clockwise
again 90 degrees to the west and shake three times, and turn
clockwise again 90 degrees to the north and shake three times.
Then, while again facing east once again, shake the Arba
Minim three times upward, followed by three times downward.
The other major tradition calls for waving the Arba Minim
in the following order: First to the right, then to the left, then to
the front, then up, then down, and finally to the back.

One is advised to wave the Arba Minim only strongly enough
to make the leaves of the Lulav rustle a little. More vigorous
waving could damage the Lulav by splitting its leaves, possibly
disqualifying it from further use.

May I Use an Arba Minim Belonging to Somebody Else?

No. On the first day of Sukkos, Jewish law states that the Arba
Minim requirements cannot be fulfilled with a set which is
borrowed or stolen. It must be legally owned by the person
using it. The common practice in synagogues on the first day of
Sukkos is to provide one public Arba Minim set, and invite
anyone who doesn't have his own to take legal possession of it
in order to perform the ritual. The user is then expected to

relinquish possession of the community Arba Minim set back
to the synagogue so that the next person may use it and fulfill
the mitzvah. On the last six days of Sukkos, one may use a
borrowed Arba Minim set.

How Do I Care for the Arba Minim?

The Arba Minim are fragile, and should be handled with care.
If any component of the Arba Minim is damaged or dries out, it
should be shown to a rabbi to determine if it can still be used,
or must be replaced.

How Should I Handle the Esrog?

The Pitom at the top of the Esrog is particularly fragile, and
will likely disqualify the Esrog if it is broken off. For that
reason, it is advisable to transport the Esrog in the foam-fitted
box in which it was shipped. If you are using a decorative
Sukkah storage box, make sure that the Pitom is well protected
with padding while inside, and that you never force the top of
the box to close.

What Special Care is Required for Aravos and Hadassim?

The leaves of the Aravos, and to a lesser extent, the Hadassim,
are not strongly attached to the stems, and are prone to drying
out and falling off before the end of the holiday. If too many
leaves fall off, the Aravos and Hadassim are disqualified for
use.

It is therefore good practice to take delivery of Aravos, in
particular, as close to the start of Sukkos as feasible, to keep
them from drying out before the holiday starts. Also, if the
Lulav bundle does not come pre-assembled, one should be very
careful when pushing the Aravos and Hadassim branches into
the holder not to tear off the delicate leaves from the stem.

How Do I Keep My Aravos From Drying Out?

To keep Aravos and Hadassim from drying out during the
holiday, experts recommend that they be stored in moist air
when they are not in use. One way to do this is to take the
Lulav out of the bundle holder, wrap the bundle still containing
the Aravos and Hadassim in a moistened paper towel, and then
place it in a refrigerator until its next use. Another method is to
store the Lulav bundle, intact, at room temperature, standing
upright inside the long plastic bag it came in or a zippered
plastic carrying case, after putting a thin layer of water in the
bottom about a quarter-inch high. However, Aravos should not
be stored in direct contact with water, because the water is
likely to turn their leaves black.

What Can I Do If My Aravos Dry Out?

Because it is not unusual for Aravos to dry out and become
disqualified before the end of Sukkos, it is common practice for
Arba Minim vendors, to sell fresh replacement Aravos for
delivery during Chol Hamoed. However, make sure that the
person selling the Aravos is their legal owner. One cannot
perform the mitzvah with stolen Aravos.