

הַדַּס – Myrtle – *Myrtus Communis*

Myrtle: Fresh, Upright, Evergreen Symbol of Success

The humble hadas (myrtle), so common in the Mediterranean region, has great significance in the Torah. It is selected as one of the *arba minim* (four kinds of plants) that we shake in prayer on the Festival of Sukkot. It also appears in the Scroll of Esther, since the heroine of Purim – Queen Esther is called הַדַּסָּה/Hadassah after the name of the הַדַּס/hadas – myrtle. This fragrant, evergreen shrub can grow to become two meters tall. Its branches are thick and its roots are deep. In the Torah, myrtle is associated with success and prosperity:



תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף נז/א

הרואה הדס בחלום נכסיו מצליחין לו ואם אין לו נכסים ירושה נופלת לו ממקום אחר:

“He who sees a myrtle in a dream, his property will succeed. If he has no property, an inheritance will come to him from another place” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 57a*).

Not every myrtle is kosher for shaking on Sukkot. When the Torah commands us regarding this -ritual, myrtle is called עֵץ עֹבֵת/etz avot –“boughs of thick leaved trees” (*Vayikra 23:40*). This indicates that the myrtle must form a plait of three leaves that issue from one point and cover the base of the next three leaves, and so on, in this way the leaves cover the entire branch. After being burnt, the myrtle not only grows anew but also produces many triple leaves from each joint. It therefore makes sense that these triple leaves were considered especially appropriate on Sukkot, because they symbolized the myrtle’s ability to withstand damage – even fire. The resilient myrtle expresses the hope of strength and uprightness. Long after being cut, myrtle branches remain upright and fresh even without water. It is not surprising that the thick-leaved myrtle has even become a symbol of immortality.

The Righteousness of Esther and the Myrtle

The myrtle represents life, righteousness and prosperity in the Torah, the Prophets and Talmud. It is mentioned three times in the prophet *Zechariyah* as a parable and metaphor for the righteous Jewish people. “The myrtle bushes that were in the glen” (*Zechariyah 1:8*), refers to those righteous Jews who guard and preserve the hidden glory of the Shechinah even as she resides in the foreign kingdoms of exile (Yechezkel Anis). Likewise, the name Hadassah teaches us about Esther’s ability to glow in the dark and remain righteous in Achasverush’s decadent palace. Even though she was in a most susceptible position, through her virtue of *tzniut* (modesty) Esther was able to withstand the negative influence of the Persian culture. Just as the myrtle’s leaves cover its stem and protect the stem from the elements and parasites, likewise our exterior *tzniut* protects the innate purity of our soul. The sense of smell is the most spiritual among the senses. Therefore, the fragrant myrtle is associated with righteousness. ... וַיְהִי אִמֶּן אֶת הַדָּסָה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר... – He would raise Hadassah – that is Esther (*Megillat Esther 2:7*). The name Hadassah indicates her great righteousness. Immediately when she was born her great righteousness was known (The Vilna Gaon). Perhaps, just as three kosher myrtle-leaves emerge from one point, the righteousness of tzaddikim is threefold: in the realm of thought, speech and action.

Myrtle's Mystical Shabbat Connection

Myrtle's mystical connection to the Shabbat is illustrated by the well-known story about Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Elazar, who hid in a cave in Pekiin during the Roman occupation. At the end of twelve years, the Prophet Eliyahu brought them the good tidings of a change in the government, which made it safe for them to come out of hiding. Father and son now left the cave. Passing a field, where they saw Jewish farmers toiling on the land, they said, "Imagine people giving up the sacred study of the Torah for worldly matters!" No sooner did they utter these words, than the farmer and all the produce of the field went up in smoke. Then they heard a heavenly voice saying, "Have you come out to destroy My world? Go back to your cave!" They returned to the cave for another twelve months, until they heard the same heavenly voice calling them to leave. Seeing a Jewish farmer carrying two bunches of myrtle, Friday afternoon, they asked him what he was going to do with the myrtle. "It is to adorn my house in honor of the Shabbat," the farmer replied. "Would one bunch of myrtle not be sufficient to fill your house with fragrance?" they asked. The stranger replied, "I am taking two bunches, one for *zachor* – 'Remember the Shabbat day' and the other for *shamor* – 'Keep the Shabbat Day holy.'" Then Rabbi Shimon said to his son, "See how precious the mitzvot are to our brothers!" How exactly did the Jewish farmer plan to honor Shabbat with the bundles of myrtle? Arizal teaches us a special Friday night myrtle meditation ritual that involves encircling the Shabbat table while holding two bundles of myrtle and reciting certain Torah verses. Many Sephardi Kabbalists continue this tradition to honor the Shabbat with the myrtle. Even today, according to Arizal's custom, we inhale the scent of the myrtle before *Kiddush*. Whoever does not prepare three myrtle branches before Shabbat, when the three angels come to escort the soul they do not find a place to rest. Then they go away, and the soul remains alone and miserable (Rabbi Avraham Azulai, *Chesed l'Avraham*, wellspring 2, river 49).

The Myrtle and *Havdalah*: Infusing Darkness with Light

According to the Zohar, one should use a myrtle twig when making the blessing for *besamim* during *havdalah*. (Cf. Otz Hat, vol. 2, *Seder Havdalah*, *Zohar part 1*, 17b). The fact that the myrtle symbolizes the ability to bring light into the darkness explains why the myrtle is traditionally used in the *havdalah* ritual – bringing the light of Shabbat into the darkness of the week. On the night following Shabbat, during *Havdalah*, when we bless on the myrtle, the additional soul goes out with this scent, and immediately the three angels that dwell on the myrtle go with it and escort it to its place. At the time of departure, the additional soul blesses the owner of the house because of the satisfied spirit it received (*Chesed l'Avraham*).

שו"ע אורח חיים - סימן רצז הלכה ד דיני בשמים הבדלה

נהגו לברך על ההדס כל היכא דאפשר: הגה - וי"א דאין לברך על הדס היבש דאינו מריח, רק על שאר בשמים (טור בשם הר"ר אפרים והר"א מפראג), וכן נהגו במדינות אלו. ונ"ל דיש להניח גם הדס עם הבשמים, דאז עושין ככ"ע:

It is customary to bless on the myrtle whenever possible. There are those who say, do not bless on dry myrtle for it has no smell, only on other spices. This is the custom in these lands [of the Ashkenazi]. It seems to me that one should use myrtle together with other spices; this would be acceptable according to all the opinions (Rabbi Yosef Karo with the inline commentary by Rabbi Moshe Isserless), *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 297:4).

Our sages teach that a woman, who smells myrtle often, especially for *Havdalah*, will merit wise sons.

The Role of Myrtle in Celebrating Transitions

The myrtle is a symbol of *teshuvah* (repentance) because although its scent is good, its taste is bitter. This alludes to the pain experienced as part of the teshuvah process. Through the pain of feeling remorse for taking forbidden pleasure, the scent of teshuvah rises to Heaven (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Vayikra* 23:40). Myrtle, being a symbol of teshuvah and transformation, explains the custom to use hadas at weddings, when the couple are transformed into a new existence. "They used to decorate the bride and bridegroom with a crown of myrtle" (*Tosefta, Sota* 49b). Due to its warming evergreen properties and pleasant fragrance, myrtle became a sign of successful married life, symbolizing freshness and true love between the couple. "They say about Rabbi Yehudah, son of Elai, that he would take a myrtle branch and dance before the bride and say 'The bride is beautiful and kind'" (*Babylonian Talmud, Ketuvot* 17a). Based on these teachings, I like to introduce a new wedding custom: to sprinkle myrtle leaves on the bride and groom when they exit the *chuppah* (canopy) as an alternative to commercial confetti. The Sephardim are accustomed to inhale the scent of myrtle during *brit mila* and *pidyon haben*, which are also celebrations of transitional high points. Myrtle is also mentioned in the vision of the transformation of the redemption process, and as a sign for the good and the perfect. "Instead of the thorn shall the Cypress come up, and instead of the nettle shall the myrtle rise; and it shall be to Hashem for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off (*Yesha'yahu* 55:13).

Myrtle – The Gateway to the Garden of Eden

Arabic legend tells that when Adam and Chava were expelled from the Garden, Adam took with him a myrtle-branch to remind him of his former happy days with Chava. Indeed, the mystical myrtle is linked to the Garden of Eden. When Hashem originally commanded the earth to sprout forth fruit trees bearing fruit (and not just trees bearing fruit), only the myrtle and the etrog kept Hashem's command to produce trees that shared the taste of its fruit. "Our Rabbis taught – a tree whose taste of its wood and fruit is identical – this is the myrtle..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah* 32b). Since the fruit symbolizes the product, while the tree is the process, the tree which shares the taste of its fruit teaches us about the importance of the process itself, not only the desired end product. Within the exile, we can find redeeming sparks. It is precisely by gathering the sparks of light within the darkness – discovering Hashem within His concealment – that brings about the final redemption. Within the illusionary split reality, which we experience in our everyday consciousness, we have the opportunity to recover the original pure organic wholeness. Myrtle teaches us the secret of the inner unity behind the veil of duality. Its ability to grow lush, fresh, green leaves in dark and shaded places is a perfect metaphor for Jewish survival during the darkness of exile. For this reason, Esther is likened to the myrtle, as she also maintained total holiness and integrity within the darkness of the decadent Persian castle. Esther's secret legacy is to connect with the inner light concealed within the worldly reality in order to perceive the Oneness of G-d beyond the veil of division. In this way, she becomes a portent for returning to the consciousness of the Garden of Eden. The myrtle, by means of its exceedingly pleasant fragrance, also has the ability to carry with it the memory of the Garden of Eden. This explains why myrtle is traditionally picked in honor of Shabbat, which is also the gateway to the Garden of Eden.

Myrtle's Medicinal Properties

Because of its astringent properties, myrtle counteracts diarrhea, strengthens the teeth and gums, and stops profuse sweating and bleeding. It also prevents the womb and hair from

Herbal Remedies from the Judean Hills - Months of Shevat/Adar

falling. According to Assaf the healer, myrtle helps heal hemorrhoids and strengthen the hair. Myrtle fruits are very astringent and are good against diarrhea. Wash the body with its leaves in order to remove bad smell, and diminish sweating (Tuvia the Healer 1652-1729). Due to its disinfectant properties, myrtle is an excellent agent for purification that heals infections and wounds, soothes the skin, alleviates eczema, and drives away odor. Drink myrtle infusion to strengthen the stomach, cure ulcers and infections of the intestines, as well as to alleviate urinary tract infections. Rambam recommends making a plaster from myrtle extracted by wine and placing it on a spider bite to suck out the venom. In the Talmud, myrtle is described as a remedy against high blood pressure (*Babylonian Talmud, Gitin 68b*). A woman, whose births are difficult, should bruise the leaves of myrtle and mix them with a cup of warmed wine, to help her give birth easily.

Hands On:

Myrtle Oil is prepared from the leaves and flowers. This oil was commonly used by our grandmothers and grandmothers' grandmothers as a facial cleanser. Myrtle oil cleanses and moisturizes the skin, while giving off its gentle fragrance.

Medicated Myrtle Oil

1. Find a large, clear, clean glass jar or bottle with a tight lid.
2. Pack fresh, clean, bruised whole herbs loosely into the jar.
3. Cover the herbs with oil. Olive oil or any good-quality vegetable oil will work.
4. Put the lid on as tightly as you can. Set the jar on a sunny windowsill – this is best done in the summertime, but can be done in winter in a windowsill that gets a maximum amount of light.
5. Leave the jar on the windowsill for 14-30 days, shaking it gently once a day.
6. Find another large, clear, clean glass jar or bottle with a tight lid, a large funnel, and some cheesecloth.
7. Pack the cheesecloth tightly in the funnel.
8. Set the funnel in the empty jar, and wrap the cheesecloth around the mouth of the jar where it meets the funnel, to prevent spillage.
9. Slowly pour the oil into the clean jar through the funnel. The cheesecloth will strain the herbs, letting the oil filter into the jar.
10. To preserve the oil, add a drop of vitamin E or a little wheat-germ oil.