



The Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life  
110 Maryland Avenue, NE, Suite 203  
Washington, D.C. 20002

## ENVIRONMENTAL PRAYER SERVICE

*The following is the service that we performed with Native Americans at Haskell Indian Nations University, in honor of the neighboring wetlands that was threatened by development.*

### Introduction:

We're going to be doing a Jewish prayer service here, in this Medicine Wheel that is so sacred to our Native American brothers and sisters. We're doing this service here for several reasons. First of all, we're showing respect for the sacredness of this spot and for the wetlands that border it. We're also showing our solidarity with the struggle of this Native American community to preserve the sanctity of this spot and keep the traffic way out.

The third reason we're here today doing this service is to show how close our tradition and the Native American tradition really are. With our modern suburban lifestyles, it is easy to lose touch with the natural world that gave birth to us and continues to nurture and support us every moment of every day. Our ancestors were much closer to the natural world than we are. The tools and the rituals that they created have their roots in the connection that they felt between themselves, the natural world, and God. The truth is that the way our ancestors looked at the world more closely resembles the way that Native Americans and other Native peoples look at the world than the way that we modern Jewish suburbanites have grown up looking at the world. As we today demonstrate the use of the spiritual tools that our ancestors created for us, I think you will see for yourselves how this is so.

### 1. The Shofar:

The Shofar, or Ram's horn, is one of the most important tools in the Jewish spiritual toolbox. Traditionally, the shofar is blown every morning during the month that precedes the Jewish New Year. The Jewish New Year is a time for inner examination, a time for thinking about where we are headed in our life, where we have followed a path that is in accord with our own unique purpose on the earth and where we have strayed from that path. In this introspective period, the shofar is our primary tool for helping us to wake up from our everyday distractions and become conscious of what's most important in our lives. The sound of the shofar goes into our ears and penetrates beyond the superficial level of conscious awareness, resonating in and bringing us in touch with the higher levels of ourselves that lie deep within our unconscious minds.

Traditionally, there are three sounds of the shofar that are used to wake us up spiritually. The first is a single loud blast, the second is a set of three shorter blasts, and the third is a series of nine short staccato blasts. This is then followed by another even longer blast. As we blow the shofars here today, close your eyes and try to take in the sound, letting it go deeply into your mind and help bring you to a higher level of awareness.

Tekiah - Shevarim - Teruah - Tekiah Gedolah

## 2) Tallit:

The tallit is the Jewish prayer shawl. It is used during all daytime prayer services and a smaller version is worn by traditional Jews all day long.

At this point, everyone with a Tallit please come into the center of the Medicine Wheel. Students please hold up the Tallitot, and everyone else please get under one. As arms get tired, please take turns supporting and being supported our sacred shelters. WAIT UNTIL EVERYONE IS UNDER A TALLIT.

Many of us, when we were little, had blankies, little blankets that were a source of security for us. The Tallit is like a blankie for adults. When a Jew puts on a Tallit, he or she is sheltering themselves symbolically under the protection of God. One way of looking at this protection is to think about all the ways in which we are protected and nourished by Mother Earth every moment of every day,

- to think about the ozone layer protecting us from the Sun's harsh rays;
- to think about the incredible cycle of water - from evaporation to condensation to precipitation - that makes it possible for us to live and grow food.
- to think about all the green plants of the world, producing oxygen for us that we can breathe fresh air.
- to think about all the communities of interdependent plants and animals, large and small, each of whom play s some part in the web of life that we depend on for our lives

All of these things are represented when we shelter ourselves beneath the Tallit.

The Tzitzit - the most important part of the Tallit are the four fringes located at each of the four corners. We are commanded to wear these fringes several times in the Torah and they are supposed to be a reminder for us of who we are and what our higher purpose in life is, how we're supposed to be holy and observe God's commandments. The natural question is - Why fringes?

One answer is that the fringes remind us that even though we are each of us unique and separate individuals, we do not, ultimately, have sharp boundaries dividing us from each other and from the rest of the world. The Tzitzit teach us that in truth we and the rest of life mix and mingle, like fringes, interpenetrating one another, so that it is not even possible to tell where one part of the web of life ends and our individual lives begin.

The four corners of the Tallit, like the four directions of the Medicine Wheel, also represent the four cardinal directions and the four essential energies of natural world. In the regular morning prayer service, we gather these four corners, these four tzitzit, and bring them together in one hand, just before we chant Shema Yisrael, the central prayer of Judaism. We do this for several reasons. One is that as we bring together the four corners, we are symbolically bringing together the energies of the four directions into our prayer, giving our prayer that much more power and focus. Another reason for bringing the four corners together is that the Shema Yisrael is the fundamental declaration of God's unity. When we bring together the four corners, we are symbolically demonstrating that fundamental unity in a positive action that we do with our own hands.

### 3) The Lulav:

LULAV HOLDERS EACH GET BENEATH A TALLIT.

The Lulav is the palm branch. Just as the ram was a holy animal to our ancestors, so the palm was a holy plant. Every part of the palm was used for some purpose. The lulav is traditionally used during the holiday of Sukkot, in the Fall. We gather together the palm branch and three other species of plant - a willow branch, a myrtle branch, and a citrus fruit called an etrog. Together with the palm branch, this made four species of plants that were brought together and used in prayer. As part of that prayer, the Lulav was shaken in the four directions and then connected to Heaven and Earth by shaking it two more times, up and down.

Just like the bringing together of the four corners of the Tallit was an invocation of the energies of the four directions, even more so is the shaking of the lulav such an invocation. This is because, when we shake it, we invoke the power of the wind that blows the branches while they are on the tree. When we shake the lulav in the four directions, we hear with our own ears the power of the four winds. The prophet Isaiah described the power of the four winds as follows: "The wind of the Creator, the wind of wisdom and insight, the wind of counsel and balance, the wind of knowing and being aware of the Creator" (Isaiah 11:2) Just like the bringing together of the four corners of the Tallit was also a physical demonstration of the unity of the four directions and of all the powers of the physical universe, so too when we bring the four species of plants together and shake them in the four directions and then up and down, we are demonstrating the unity of all life and of all the forces in the universe.

One final meaning of the lulav can be heard in the sound of the lulav. Everyone close their eyes and listen.

SHAKE THE LULAVS.

What do you hear?

LISTEN FOR RESPONSES.

Does anyone hear the rain?

PAUSE.

The lulav was used in the Fall just at the beginning of season for rain in Israel, Israel is a semi-arid country. Rain only falls there for several months of the year, and without that rain, there is famine. Part of the reason for shaking the lulav and using it in our prayers during the beginning of the rainy season is to make it rain. In our lulav shaking today, we honor the rain and the life that it brings to our land.

#### 4) The Shema Yisraek:

Before we actually shake the Lulavs, we will focus all our energies together using the oldest and most sacred Jewish chant, the Shema Yisrael. In English, the words of this chant mean - Listen, Israel, the Breath of Life, our God, the Breath of Life is One. This is the proclamation of the unity of God that lies at the core of Jewish teachings and practice. What is translated here as the Breath of Life is one meaning of the mysterious four-letter Hebrew name of God that is rarely, if ever, pronounced out loud. We don't even know for sure how to pronounce it, so great is its mystery and power. In Hebrew, the word Adonai, meaning my Lord, is usually used for this mysterious four-letter name when we chant the Shema Yisrael in Hebrew. Today, I'd like to try something different. I'd like to use the word Yah. This is another of the Jewish names of God, and, in its sound, it expresses the meaning Breath of Life. Something else a little different that I want to try is to chant the Shema very slowly, chanting each word as one long breath, one long exhalation.

We're going to chant the Shema three times in this way, so those of you who are unfamiliar with it can learn it and join in. After we finish, let's pause for just a minute to take in the energy that we will generate. Then the lulav holders will do three rounds of lulav shaking, shaking the lulavs for several seconds in each of the four directions, up and down, and doing this for three rounds.

It's important, as you're chanting and as you're listening to the lulavs shaking, to try to focus your thoughts. This focusing is called, in Hebrew, Kavannah, and it is critical to meaningful and effective prayer. As we're chanting the Shema Yisrael, please try to focus on theme of unity - the unity of the four directions, the unity of our two traditions and peoples gathered here today, the unity of all peoples and all life on earth, and the ultimate unity of everything we call God in the universe.

Then, as we're listening to the shaking of the lulavs, try to focus on hearing the rain in the sound of lulav's shaking. Give thanks for the rain that has finally fallen this last week. Pray that the rain continues to fall for us, bringing life to our fields and meadows, to our streams and lakes, and to the wetlands that we're here to honor today.

Source: COEJL