

Etrog Essentials

And 8 surprising lessons on finding a spouse

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“Can we open the box? Is it beautiful? I want to take a look!” Of all the preparations for Sukkot, perhaps the most anticipated part is the selection and excitement surrounding the etrog—the “*pri etz hadar*” (the fruit of the beautiful tree), one of the *arba minim* (four species) commanded by Hashem in *Parshat Emor* (23:40) in celebration of the holiday.

Unlike the lulav, hadassim and aravos, where the visual differences in quality are less apparent to the uneducated, and unlike the standardized pre-fab sukkot which remain relatively constant each year (except for the kids’ creative new decorative masterpieces!), the etrog is carefully selected, shopped for and brought back home in eager expectation of the yom tov. And everyone has an opinion about its appearance and quality!

The interesting halachot, controversial history and fascinating tidbits surrounding the etrog are perhaps as colorful as the yellow fruit itself. As a hallmark of the *chag*, the search and purchase of the precious etrog takes much time and effort; and one takes great pride and cherishes the final selection. The halachic requirements and historical tales surrounding this mitzvah are fascinating, and can homiletically provide key life lessons for the “other” search that affects so many—finding a spouse.

A Little Background

Mentioned as a possible fruit plucked from the *etz hadaas* (tree of knowledge) in Gan Eden,¹ the identity of the etrog is a tradition handed down from Har Sinai, and the Rambam says its identity has never been questioned.² As a citrus fruit, with the Latin name *citrus medica*, known as “citron” in English, it is related to the orange, mandarin, grapefruit and lemon, and was the first citrus fruit variety to arrive in the Mediterranean region.³

Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael to take the etrog (and three other minim):

¹ *Bereishit Rabbah* (15:7),

² Rambam, Commentary to the Mishnah, Introduction to Seder Zeraim. As a side note, the gematria of “*pri etz hadar*” is 660, the same as “*etrogim*.”

³ Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky, “The Extraordinary History of the Etrog,” *Jerusalem Post* (Oct. 2005) available at www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-Features/The-extraordinary-history-of-the-etrog.

And you shall take for yourselves on the first day (of Sukkot) the fruit of the beautiful tree...

Vayikra 23:40

וְלִקְחֶתֶם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן, פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר ...
ויקרא כג:מ

The word “*hadar*” can mean several things. Of course, “*hadar*” is usually translated as “beautiful” though it can also be translated as “that dwells” from the Hebrew word “*dar*.” The etrog is one of the only fruits that “dwells” on its tree for all seasons. Another view traces the word to “*idur*” (from the word hydro) meaning water. The etrog tree cannot survive on rainwater alone and needs additional water to be properly irrigated.⁴

According to Rashi, Hashem initially intended the fruit *and* bark of the trees in the Garden of Eden to have the same taste. While the other trees declined, the etrog still retains that unique quality.⁵ The bark of the etrog tree and the etrog itself taste the same. In fact, the phrase “*pri etz hadar*” includes the word “*etz*” (tree), to demonstrate that the tree has the same flavor as the “*pri*,” (fruit).⁶

The etrog is indigenous to only a few areas in the world and can cross-pollinate very easily. To properly fulfill the mitzvah, it is essential to know that it wasn’t grafted from a different species or is the offspring of a hybrid utilized to make the tree stronger.

There are a few basic qualifications for an acceptable etrog:⁷

- As mentioned, the tree upon which it grows cannot be grafted (“*murkav*”) from a different species—i.e. it needs to be pure;⁸
- It must be defined as “*hadar*” (beautiful) according to objective Torah requirements. It should be free of certain types of blemishes, partially yellow and whole (e.g. no piece is missing) with an intact *pitom*—(see below for further discussion);
- The etrog should be not too large or too small; it’s minimum size is approximately the size of a hen’s egg;
- The shape should not be round; instead, it should be broader at the bottom and narrower towards the top;
- There has to be no halachic reason not to eat the etrog (e.g., land ownership should be unquestionable, i.e. not stolen; the fruit can’t be “*orlah*”—produced in the first three years).⁹

Besides these requirements, additional elements ensure that it be top quality, “*mehudar*,” making it even more exquisite than “*hadar*.” These include the *pitom* being aligned with the stem, that the etrog be free of other markings in the upper third of its body, and that there exist bumps and ridges to differentiate from the smoothness of a lemon.

⁴ *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).

⁵ Rashi, Bereishit 1:12.

⁶ *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).

⁷ These laws are summarized in ch. 648 of *Shulchan Aruch* and its commentaries.

⁸ While the Gemara and Rishonim do not address this question, the Acharonim dealt with it at length and gave different reasons to disqualify an *etrog ha-murkav* from use on Sukkot. For an extensive discussion on the matter see “*Etrog Ha-murkav*” – “The Grafted Etrog,” based on a shiur by Harav Yehuda Amital available at: www.vbm-torah.org/sukkot/suk64rya.htm

⁹ *Masechet Sukkah* (35a).

Chazal also learn from the extra word “*ulekachtem lachem*,” “and you shall take for yourselves,” that the etrog must belong to you.¹⁰ It cannot be stolen or even purchased on credit. It is also an individual mitzvah that can’t be done by someone else on your behalf—you must pick up the etrog yourself to fulfill the commandment.

Mah Pitom!

The requirement that the *pitom*, the stamen, be present on a kosher etrog has undoubtedly been the source of heartache and anxiety through the years. It has also ensured that the fruit be treated delicately, often wrapped in silken flax.

The top of the etrog (the “crown”) is the “*pitom*,” comprising the style (*dad*)—the central, stick-like portion at the bottom—and a rounded portion on the very top called the “stigma” (*shoshanta*). Other citrus fruits usually do not preserve the *pitom* in the same way as the etrog does. The bottom of the etrog, the “*oketz*,” has an indentation that is the point where the stem is attached to the fruit.

Some etrogim lose the *pitom* in an early stage of their growth, and are considered kosher by most poskim. Whether an etrog is kosher if the *pitom* is knocked off at a later stage is dependent upon whether it was a result of trauma, what the resulting indentation looks like and whether the *dad* (style) remains on the fruit.¹¹

Interestingly, it is a little easier to find etrogim with a perfectly preserved *pitom* since a discovery in the 1970’s by Professor Eliezer E. Goldschmidt of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a world-renowned horticulturalist and etrog expert. He found that spraying the trees with the synthetic auxin, Picloram, prevents the fall-off of the *pitom*.¹²

If the *pitom* falls off after the first day of Sukkot (or after the first two days outside of Israel), many poskim will allow its use for the other days, although it is controversial whether a *bracha* should be recited.¹³

Historical Happenings

Numerous coins and mosaics exist from the Roman and Byzantine eras, and even from the Bar Kochba revolt, which prominently display an etrog. A recent significant archaeological dig on an ancient palace’s garden in Kibbutz Ramat Rachel found remnants of etrog pollen on the plaster walls, which offered proof of early etrog cultivation as far back as post-Bayit Rishon era (about 538 BCE).¹⁴

Still, the citron/etrog tree is not easy to grow and doesn’t thrive outside temperate climates. With the added restriction that the delicate tree cannot be grafted to a stronger base, such as a

¹⁰ *Masechet Sukkah* (29b).

¹¹ Y.M Stern, *The Halachos of the Four Species*, p. 25, Feldheim Publications, 1993.

¹² Personal correspondence with Prof. Goldschmidt, July 9, 2013.

¹³ *Mishna Berurah* 649:36.

¹⁴ Rinat Zafir, “Jerusalem Dig Uncovers Earliest Evidence of Local Cultivation of Etrogs,” *Haaretz* (February 12, 2012), available at: www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/jerusalem-dig-uncovers-earliest-evidence-of-local-cultivation-of-etrogs-1.410505.

lemon tree, cultivating an etrog orchard is difficult and tedious work. The steep price made ownership of the etrog a luxury for many Ashkenazi Jews in years gone by, and stories abound on the difficulties individuals and communities faced in fulfilling the mitzvah.

Two “halachic adventurers,” Dr. Ari Zivotofsky and Dr. Ari Greenspan, have extensively studied the captivating history of the etrog and related anecdotes.¹⁵ Some of their most interesting tidbits include:

- In 1329, the victorious faction in Florence, Italy, issued written decrees restricting commerce in etrogim when they conquered Pisa, in an effort to corner the market in this lucrative business.
- A touching story in mid-15th-century Germany tells of several communities banding together to purchase a single etrog. They cut it into several pieces and distributed the portions to surrounding towns and villages. Unfortunately, the leading posek considered the pieces to be invalid because they weren't whole and even more important, because they arrived dried out, shriveled and smaller than the requisite *shiur*.
- Bohemian Jews had to pay a huge annual tax (40,000 florins) to Empress Maria Theresa in the 1700s for the right to import etrogim into that region.
- The infamous “Corfu Etrog War” of the mid-19th century resulted in one of the fiercest halachic debates across the Jewish world in that era. Rabbis across Europe and America aligned themselves in opposite camps pronouncing judgment on the purity of the exquisitely beautiful etrogim raised on the Greek Island of Corfu. Nasty allegations were raised by competitors since they couldn't fathom that one can produce such a hardy, large and beautiful looking specimen with an intact *pitom* without grafting. Livelihoods and fortunes were wiped out. Thousands of etrogim were dumped in the ocean to raise prices while the debate raged. The acrimonious battles persisted for decades, ending only in 1891 when a blood libel begun by the non-Jewish Greek farmers against Jews on the island provided further ethical and political reasons to boycott the Greek etrogim.
- With the cultivation of Israeli-grown etrogim in the late 19th century, complete with halachic endorsement by Rabbi Avraham Isaac Hachohen Kook (then Chief Rabbi of Jaffa), Eretz Yisrael etrogim became increasingly popular. The “Fruit of the Goodly Tree Association” promoted the purity of the Israeli etrog, and famed Lithuanian Rabbi Yechiel M. Epstein, author of the *Aruch Hashulchan*, recommended using the Israeli etrogim because of the importance of specifically buying from the Land of Israel. Rabbi Hezekiah Modena (19th century, Israel) wrote a memorable line to describe such fruits: "If Israel's etrogim are not the loveliest on earth, they will be the loveliest in Heaven."

Nowadays, etrogim from the Holy Land remain in high demand, though Yemenite, Moroccan and California etrogim are also available. Interestingly, there is a Presbyterian farmer in

¹⁵ Ari Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan, “The Story behind the Esrog,” *Jewish Observer* (October 2008), available at: halachicadventures.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/2008-JO-esrog.pdf and Greenspan and Zivotofsky op. cit.

Scottsdale, Arizona, working diligently to make a viable commercial enterprise from this Jewish mitzvah with his newly planted citron orchards.¹⁶

Why Etrogim Relate to Relationships

A few days before Sukkot about two years ago, my husband brought home his prized etrog. I know he spends time searching for just the right one and is always excited to return with his “find.” Good wife that I am, when I opened the box to take a peek at the fruit, I immediately critiqued his selection. “What? You call **that** beautiful?” I inquired delicately. “It is all lumpy, a little heavy on the bottom, has ridges down the side and a greenish tint.” With perfect patience and a wry smile, he replied that, “you simply don’t know the definition of beauty. It isn’t what you **think** is attractive... it’s the Torah’s definition of what makes an etrog ‘*mehudar*.’ These ridges, lumps and particular shape are actually the optimal features for a beautiful etrog.”

After I quickly changed the conversation (and determined to make jelly out of that yellow specimen in the not-too-distant future), the fascinating analogies to relationships suddenly hit home. At the YUCnects office at Yeshiva University, our educational programs include guiding young adults on values that will lead to long-term healthy relationships. We engage in vibrant discussions on important attributes to seek in a spouse, offer counseling in deciding “the right one,” and cultivate lessons for maintaining *shalom bayis* (marital harmony). There were clearly striking correlations to the esteemed etrog.

If anyone has been to the market in Mea Shearim Erev Sukkot, or similar markets worldwide, they would witness thousands of pious Jews scrambling in their quest to select beautiful kosher *arba minim*, with a prime focus on finding the “perfect etrog.” Some people wait until the last minute, some are overly picky and others decide to put all their resources and time into the endeavor.

Certainly, not all analogies drawn from the halachic and historical research will apply to long-lasting relationships; we do not recommend slicing and sharing a spouse with the rest of the community, nor do we “*posul*” (invalidate) an individual for a birthmark on their upper torso!

Still, the holiday of Sukkot is replete with comparisons to the loving relationship Hashem has with Bnei Yisrael. The sukkah itself is compared to the chuppah. This time of year is the re-igniting of the passion for the observance of the mitzvot after the repentance period of *Aseret Yimei Teshuva* and Yom Kippur.

With that in mind, pursuit of obtaining the “*mehudar*” fruit, coupled with general halachic guidelines in the care of the etrog, has lessons for us all. The following observations will make you stop, think, and view the etrog—and *hopefully, your spouse*—with greater appreciation:

1) Beauty is in the Eye of the Torah—Then the Choice is Yours!

As mentioned, “*mehudar*”—beautiful features—are defined by the Torah. What may not appear to be important is considered precious if it meets proper halachic ideals.

¹⁶ Chavie Lieber, “Down on America’s Next Big Etrog Farm,” *JTA* (Sept. 23, 2012), available at: www.jta.org/2012/09/23/life-religion/down-on-americas-next-big-etrog-farm.

However, the preferred shape and style vary greatly between cultures. Some notable kinds include the **Moroccan** classic “hourglass” shaped ridge, commonly called the “gartel,” favored by many Chassidim; the popular **Chazon Ish** selection that has many ridges; the larger **Yemenite** kind; and the greener Italian **Yanover** variety. Each of these is acceptable; each is sought after by different kinds of Jews and ultimately cherished.

So, too, in a search for a spouse there are various characteristics and personalities that are suited for different people. Some qualities should be essentials: honesty, integrity, devotion and compatibility of religious/Torah values. Our sages have offered guidance and taught us about critical qualities that will be important for long-lasting bonds—but they don’t include tablecloth colors or the style of hat. Nonetheless, our particular preference on the actual look, personality or form can certainly vary and we are justified in seeking mutual attraction, lumps and ridges included!

2) Hang in There—Maturity Matters

Another meaning for the word “*hadar*” is “dwelling,” since the *pri etz hadar* etrog remains on the tree even after it ripens. Season after season, the etrog endures and doesn’t fall off like other fruits. Part of the etrog’s appeal within the Jewish concept of beauty is the resolve of the fruit to “hang on” and withstand the elements trying to bring it down.¹⁷

Naturally, maturity in entering a marriage is an essential trait. So is perseverance. When two people commit to matrimony, their personal determination to make it last is a key barometer whether it will stand the test of time. Much like the etrog, admired for its ability to “hang in there,” a crucial criterion for a spouse should be their fortitude to partner together season after season.

3) Fragrance and Flavor

The etrog is also unique in that it has both fragrance and flavor. Unlike the other *minim* (species), which have none or only one of those characteristics, the etrog contains both qualities and is therefore compared to a person with both Torah knowledge (flavor) and good deeds (fragrance).

When seeking a soul-mate, one certainly should look for the person who will encapsulate *both* attributes, not just a bright intellectual type. Instead, seek someone who performs “*chesed*,” acts of kindness. Similarly, an observant Jew cannot rest on his acts alone; everything is based on understanding Torah principles so that a solid foundation will help build a strong Jewish home.

4) The Heart is Where it’s At

Each of the *arba minim* is also compared to a body part: the lulav is the upright spine, the hadasim are the eyes and the aravot the mouth/lips. While all come together to serve Hashem in this mitzvah, the etrog is the centerpiece—the caring and compassionate heart.¹⁸

With all that is written about beauty, values and qualities to seek, ultimately it is that inner sensation/emotion that guides one person to another. Let the heart rule; it is usually not wrong.

¹⁷ See R. Joshua Shmidman, “The Etrog: Jewish Beauty and the Beauty of Jewishness,” *Jewish Action* (Sept. 26, 1997), available at: www.ou.org/jewish_action/09/1997/the-etrog-jewish-beauty-and-the-beauty-of-jewishness.

¹⁸ Vayikra Rabbah 30:14

5) **Check out the Roots**

Halachic authorities are strict about requiring careful examination regarding the source of the etrog orchards to ensure no cross-pollination or grafting of the citron tree with other trees. Rabbinical certification that the tree is not “*murkav*” (grafted) authenticates that the base of the tree wasn’t grafted with a lemon tree to make cultivation easier.

Just as we inquire about the genetics of our etrog, genetic testing for compatibility relating to genetic diseases is important in the dating process. Utilizing the numerous open-testing venues available today such as Yeshiva University’s Program for Genetic Health (yu.edu/genetichealth) enables a couple to make informed decisions about the relationships they pursue.

6) **No Microscope Please**

When searching for an etrog, it is appropriate to make sure there are no holes or marks, especially on the upper third of the fruit. However, if a mark is visible only via a microscope but not to the naked-eye, the etrog is 100 percent acceptable.¹⁹ “*Lo nitena Torah le’mal’achey ha’sharet*” (“The Torah was not given to the ministering angels”), means that the Torah’s laws do not demand anything beyond ordinary human capability. Minute imperfections don’t count.

This has many obvious comparisons to relationships. Not only shouldn’t one examine so closely to uncover tiny flaws, but it may not always be best to check, re-check and check again every reference and opinion about a person. No one is perfect and no one benefits by microscopic inspections.

7) **Handle with Care**

To prevent piercing the rind or breaking off the *pitom*, an etrog must be handled delicately, wrapped in silken flax or soft foam. Contact with a sharp object can invalidate the etrog and render it useless for the holiday.

Relationships may not be *quite* as fragile, but that is no reason to proceed with abandon. Words and actions truly pierce the heart and can be very destructive. Even unintended passing remarks can’t be withdrawn, and the resulting hurt may be difficult to mend or can even be irreparable. If only we all would treat our loved ones as well as the etrog in the silver box...

8) **Never Too Early to Daven**

The *Bnei Yissachar*²⁰ cites Chazal who tell us to daven for a beautiful and kosher etrog on Tu B’shevat, when trees first produce sap, many months before Sukkot. He states that the Hebrew phrase in the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 1:1, is “*Rosh Hashana l’Ilan*” (“the tree”), written in the singular, not “*l’ilanot*” (“the trees”), to give tribute to the only fruit that is physically used in observance of a mitzvah, the etrog. It is never too early to daven for Hashem’s help in finding the right etrog, even in the winter month of Shevat.

With all the guidelines, research and advice offered on finding a “*zivug*” (mate), nothing compares to proper davening to the Almighty. Some parents even begin their prayers the moment their child is born since Divine intervention is what ultimately brings two partners

¹⁹ R. Stern, op. cit., pg. 22.

²⁰ *Shevat* no. 2.

together. As Hashem is the matchmaker for us all, heartfelt supplications for the special someone will be heard and answered *l'tovah* (for good). May the search for the perfect etrog to honor Hashem be a zechus to find the “perfect-for-you” soul-mate with beautiful qualities both on the outside as well as within.

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