



THE TRUE BEAUTY OF THE ESROG

Remember what it's like to ride in a new car for the first time, when you can smell the leather and there are no scratches on the exterior? It's the most exciting ride. It represents a new beginning, a fresh start. After the culmination of the Yamim Noraim, the Torah commands us to begin a new journey as well, and it does so with the mitzvah of the four species:

וּלְקַחְתֶּם לָכֶם בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן פְּרִי עֵץ הָדָר כַּפֹּת
תְּמָרִים וְעֵנָף עֵץ עֵבֶת וְעֵרְבֵי נָחַל וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם
לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שִׁבְעַת יָמִים.

On the first day you shall take for yourselves the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d seven days.

Vayikra 23:40

Chazal (*Midrash Tanchuma, Emor* no. 30) elaborate on the Torah's choice to use the phrase “*yom harishon*” — the first day. They derive from this wording that the esrog is symbolic of a new beginning, the first day of a new spiritual journey — *rishon l'cheshbon avonos* — it is the first day of calculating our sins. What does this mean? Didn't the new year begin already? What are Chazal referring to with the phrase “*cheshbon avonos*”? Why is this new journey specifically associated with the *p'ri eitz hadar* — the esrog?

The fruit that is initially mentioned in this pasuk is the *p'ri eitz hadar*. Our rabbis (*Sukkah* 35a) have a lengthy discussion as to how to identify this fruit, and suggest various possibilities before concluding that it can only be

the esrog. Chazal's rationale is that the pasuk states *p'ri eitz hadar*, which refers to a fruit in which the taste of the branch is equivalent to the taste of the fruit — *ta'am eitzo upiryo shaveh*. The only fruit that matches such criteria is the esrog. Why does the Torah introduce this mitzvah with this quality? How does this quality in the esrog help begin the journey of our new year?

After Sukkos, we read about the creation of the world in Parashas Bereishis. Chazal tell us that there was a sin that was committed prior to the sin of man:

שֶׁעֲבָרָה עַל הַצּוּוּי שֶׁכָּךְ אָמַר לָהּ הַקֶּב"ה
תְּדַשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא וּגו' [עַץ פְּרִי עֵשָׂה פְּרִי
לְמִינֵנוּ וּגו'] מֵהַ פְּרִי נֹאכַל אִף הָעֵץ נֹאכַל,
וְהָיָא לֹא עֲשֵׂתָהּ כּוּן, אֲלֵא וְתוּצֵא הָאָרֶץ דְּשֵׂא

וגר' [ועץ עשה פרי] הפרי נאכל והעץ אינו נאכל.

The Earth violated the [Divine] command, for the Holy One, Blessed be He said "Let the earth sprout vegetation ... fruit trees that bear fruit of its kind ...," just as the fruit is eaten, so too the tree is eaten. But the Earth didn't do this, rather "the earth sprouted forth vegetation ... and trees that bear fruit," the fruit was edible, but the trees were not edible.

Bereishis Rabbah 5:9

HaShem commanded the land to produce trees and plants in which both the tree and the plant tasted just like its fruit. The Earth disobeyed the commandment of HaShem and created the natural world that we are familiar with, where the fruits and vegetables have taste but the plants and trees that bear them are tasteless. The Torah is teaching us what Hashem defines as beauty. *P'ri eitz hadar*, according to the Torah, is a fruit whose bark tastes like the fruit. This represents a new perspective that focuses equally on the growth process and the end product. It is not enough to have a good tasting fruit. The process, the journey, represented by the branch and stem, must also taste good as well.

We live in a world that follows the sin of the land: focusing on the result, on the end game, only emphasizing the product. When only the fruit has taste, only the end result is significant. In this approach, the means justify the ends. "Is it profitable or not?" is the question that the world around us tends to ask. Beauty is about the result, not the process. The Torah teaches us that this is a mistaken approach, one that has been with us since the beginning of creation. The Torah's definition of beauty

emphasizes the journey, and values taste in the bark as well. If we only focus on the beauty of the final product, it is an empty and artificial beauty.

After we experience the Yamim Noraim, the Torah reinforces this message. We hold the esrog and think, not only about the result, but about the process. This is our new *cheshbon avonos*. A new perspective on how to approach our journey in life. Instead of just looking at the end result — are we doing aveiros or mitzvos — we pay attention to the process that brings us to those results. When we dedicate ourselves to the process and

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place genuine effort on the journey, it makes the growth process beautiful, wholesome and representative of true avodas HaShem.

With this insight, perhaps we can explain why this journey is delayed until Sukkos. The Sefas Emes points out that there are five days from Yom Kippur to Sukkos. How can the first day of Sukkos represent the first day of calculating our sins? What happens during those days in between? He explains that during these intermediate days, we are fully engrossed in preparing for the mitzvos of Sukkos. We are busy buying the four minim and building sukkahs.

The preparation for mitzvos can sometimes elevate us higher than the mitzvah itself.

This can only be understood in a world in which the bark and fruit both have taste. We don't ignore the preparation and efforts leading up to the mitzvos, and we certainly don't view them as unnecessary. In our new *avoda* for the new year, we focus on preparation, realizing that it too has significance. The preparations can propel us in ways that even the mitzvah itself cannot do on its own. They pave a new path and a renewed outlook on our journey through life.

Each of us has the opportunity to raise our own personal esrog this yom tov. It is a new opportunity for us to implement the messages of *p'ri eitz hadar* in our own personal lives: focusing on the beauty of the journey, rather than the final outcome. In personal relationships, those bonds and connections that are forged through hard work, adjustments and struggle can produce the strongest and sweetest fruits. As we approach the domain of education, both in the professional field and Torah study, this message is vital. The grade is not the ultimate determinant, but the work we put in to get to that point is just as vital. And in our relationship with the Almighty, we must not fixate on mitzvos versus aveiros but rather whether we are on the right track. G-d focuses on the intentions, the pathway and drive to connect with Him. May we all be zocheh to begin a new journey with our esrog and merit a life of fulfillment.