

The Saga of the Citron

By Toby Sonneman

This Sukkot, take the time to inhale the aroma of a citron – that giant, knobby, lemon-shaped fruit with thick, dense skin – and you’ll encounter an exhilarating fragrance. It may be almost inedible – bitter and dry, with little pulp or juice – but its unique scent of lemon and lime and its ever-bearing tree have endowed this native plant of northeast India with curative and ritual status. From ancient through medieval times, people utilized the fruit as a remedy for everything from snakebites and seasickness to muscular pain and skin disease.

The citron was first esteemed by the ancient Hindus, as a symbol of prosperity, perhaps because of its generous size (the Hindu god of wealth, Kuvera, is always shown holding a citron). The fruit reached China sometime in the fourth century CE, at which time the many-lobed ornamental variety called the Buddha’s Hand (when its finger-like lobes are closed, the fruit resembles a hand in prayer) became revered as a symbol of happiness. To this day, Buddhists value the citron as a religious offering in both temple and home altars.

The Citron & Sukkot

It is not known when the Jews first encountered the citron (*etrog* in Hebrew), though scholars believe that Jewish exiles in Babylonia brought it back to Palestine sometime before 600 BCE. During the Second Temple period (515 BCE to 70 CE), when Jews regarded the harvest festival of Sukkot as the most important holiday of the year (so much so that Sukkot was known simply as *HeHag* – The Festival), the *etrog* was a frequent motif on coins and synagogue mosaics of the time.

It remains a matter of debate when exactly the *etrog* was adopted to fulfill the Torah commandment to “take the fruit of a beautiful tree” during Sukkot. Though it has been proposed that the biblical “fruit of the goodly tree” was originally a different fruit, later replaced by the citron, most scholars have rejected this theory on the grounds that Jews of the era were very conservative in adhering to religious traditions.

Why the *etrog*? Again, this remains a matter of scholarly speculation. In advancing proofs that the *etrog* was indeed the “fruit of the goodly tree,” and perhaps even the fruit eaten in the Garden of Eden, the rabbinic authors of the Talmud asserted that since both the fruit and the tree had flavor, the *etrog* met both qualifications of the phrase, the tree being as “goodly” as the fruit. One rabbi demonstrated that the numerical value of the phrase “fruit of a goodly tree” was the same as the word *etrogim*, the plural of *etrog*. Still others compared the tapered oval shape of a heart, thus justifying its standing as the heart of the festival’s prayer.

Selecting the Perfect Etrog

To fulfill the *mitzvah* of selecting a beautiful fruit, follow these guidelines:

- *Substance*: the *etrog* must have an *ukatz*, the stem at the bottom of the fruit where it attaches to the tree. An *etrog* with an intact *pitam* (protuberance on top) is most desirable, though a *pitam*-less *etrog* is certainly acceptable for the *mitzvah*, if the fruit grew without a *pitam* or if it broke off naturally while still on the tree (knowledgeable buyers and experts can distinguish the difference).
- *Color*: the *etrog* should be bright yellow with a green undertone and have no black spots or blemishes.
- *Size*: in general, the *etrog* should be at least twice the size of an egg, with a pleasing, basically symmetrical, oblong shape, broad at the bottom and narrow at the top.

***Etrogim* through the Ages**

Having chosen the citron to fulfill the *mitzvah* of Sukkot, the Jews cultivated the fruit wherever they settled. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, exiled Jews planted citrus orchards in Europe (Spain, Greece, and Italy) as well as in North Africa and Asia Minor. Some food experts have linked the Jewish demand for the *etrog* to the development of Mediterranean citrus (derived from “citron”) culture, as the citron was the first fruit to be cultivated in Europe.

Jews who resided in communities north of warm citron-growing areas were dependent on imported *etrogim*,

which caused them much anxiety given the dangers and uncertainties of sea travel. Obtaining the fruit became even more difficult in the sixteenth century, when a series of rabbinical edicts forbade the use of citron from grafted trees. As grafting was widespread in Italy, Jewish communities had to find new sources. By the seventeenth century some of the most popular sources were Spanish Catalonia and the islands of Corsica and Corfu. At first, the citron of Corsica – where wild, ungrafted fruits grew abundantly – were the most prized, but as a result of political instability in the region, in the early 1800s the Ionian island of Corfu had taken Corsica’s place as the wellspring for pure, ungrafted citron. The father in Sholom Aleichem’s story “The Esrog,” checking the quality of the *etrog* he about to buy, asks, “But is it from the island of Corfu?” and is reassured: “Nowhere else but from Corfu!”

Corfu’s status as the standard by which all other *etrogim* were measured began to diminish in the mid-century, when it was discovered that cultivation standards had lapsed and that merchants had been dumping *etrogim* into the Adriatic in order to create an artificial shortage and raise prices. Decades later, anti-Semitic uprisings on the island, by then a part of Greece, led to rabbinic edicts prohibiting the ritual use of *etrogim* from Corfu and a worldwide Jewish boycott. A ritual murder accusation and subsequent pogroms against Jewish residents in 1891 would put an end to the reign of the Corfiot *etrog*. The attempt by citron growers in Corfu to market the fruit to American Jews met with protestations and failure. An 1892 broadside published in the United States labeled the New York dealers in Greek *etrogim* “traders in the blood of Israel.”

Jewish communities in Europe and America then turned to Palestine, where *etrog* farmers had been marketing *etrogim* to Europe since the late 1850s through The Fruit of the Goodly Tree Association. Some Jewish communities, such as the Sephardim, still preferred citrons from Italy, Greece, Morocco, or Yemen, but most Jews seeking citrons turned to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel.

The *etrog* would acquire a special cachet among the Jews of Eastern Europe – many of them impoverished – perhaps because of the imported fruit’s significant expense. They stored their *etrogim* in finely crafted, flax-lined boxes of silver and wood to protect them and prevent them from drying out during the seven days of the holiday, as only a fresh fruit could be used in the blessing. And so it was that Sholom Aleichem likened the *etrog* to “a diamond or a rare gemstone or a cherished heirloom which has been entrusted for safekeeping, as precious as life itself...tenderly swaddled in flax, as one would a delicate child...” Many Jewish immigrants considered the *etrog* box one of their most prized possessions, bringing these boxes to America along with their *Shabbos* candlesticks and Havdalah spice boxes.

Sukkot Blessings

“You shall take...the beautiful fruit, a palm frond, myrtle twigs and willow branches of the stream – and rejoice for seven days before the Lord your God.”

-- Leviticus 23:40

While reciting the blessing, hold the *etrog*, with its tip pointing down, in the left hand, close to the heart, because the fruit represents the heart, the most important organ of the body. The *lulav*, consisting of palm, myrtle, and willow branches (said to represent the spine, eye, and mouth respectively) is wrapped in a palm leaf holder and held in the right hand.

1) Begin with *Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hei-nu meh-lech ha-o-lam ah-sheh ki-d’sha-nu bi’mitz-vo-tav, v’tzi-va-nu al n’ti-lat lu-lav*. We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You shall hallow us and command us to fulfill the Mitzvah of the Lulav.

2) Follow with the *Shehecheyanu: Ba-ruch a-ta Adonai, Eh-lo-hei-nu meh-lech ha-o-lam, sheh-he-che-ya-nu, v’ki-y’ma-nu, v’hi-gi-a-nu, la-z’mam ha-zeh*. We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

3) Turn the *etrog* right side up and shake the *lulav* three times in each direction – front, right, back, left, up, and down – to symbolize God’s presence and dominion in every direction.

The blessing and waving of the species is performed in

the synagogue during the morning service on the first day of Sukkot, except on Shabbat. Later in the service, congregants walk in a procession around the synagogue with the four species in hand, chanting prayers. Traditionally, when every household could not afford an *etrog* and *lulav*, the wealthier members of the community would let others borrow theirs; also the congregation brought its own *lulav* and *etrog* from house to house, so those who were too young, old, or frail to worship at the synagogue could still observe the commandment.

For the remaining six days of Sukkot, the blessing is recited at synagogue, at home, or in the *sukkah*, and the four species shaken each morning, except, of course, on Shabbat.

Folk wisdom endowed *etrogim* with special powers related to fertility and childbirth. The Talmud advised a pregnant woman to eat the *etrog* after the holiday so she would have a “fragrant” child – the equivalent of a “good” child. In the *shtetl*, a childless woman who wanted to bear a son was advised to bite the tip of the fruit. A woman in labor was advised to place the tip under her pillow to ease the pain of a difficult childbirth.

My grandmother, who emigrated from Russia to Rock Island, Illinois in 1912, always used her post-Sukkot *etrog* to make marmalade, which she gave to

postpartum mothers. My mother was the recipient of at least one of these jars of “*esrog* jelly,” and she makes a marmalade from lemons (a descendant of the citron) to preserve the custom.

Etrogim in the Twenty-First Century

These days, American Jews continue to import the majority of their holiday *etrogim* from Israel, grown mostly by the Ludmir family on seventy-four acres of *etrog* groves in Bnei Brak. Their company, The Central Israel Etrog Co., supplies some seventy percent of Israel’s *etrogim* and exports about 100,000 *etrogim* to the U.S. each Sukkot season – that is, except every seventh year, when the Ludmir family observes *sh’mita*, the Jewish law requiring the land to lie fallow. During *sh’mita* years, the most devout Jews will buy *etrogim* from Italy, the Greek islands (including Corfu), Morocco, Yemen, and in recent years California.

Only one grower in the United States has successfully harvested significant numbers of *etrogim*. For the past twenty-three years, John Kirkpatrick, a Presbyterian who farms near the town of Exeter in the San Joaquin Valley, has cultivated some 250 citron trees under rabbinical supervision. He also tends thirty-five acres of lemons and tangelos, but says that the two acres of *etrogim* take most of his time. Religious regulations prohibit grafting *etrog* trees onto stronger, disease-resistant rootstocks, so the trees are short-lived and vulnerable to disease and frost. Add to this the highly labor-intensive process of growing and selecting the fruit. Using a magnifying glass and a mirror, Kirkpatrick and his employees cull any blemished or imperfect fruit through the growing season and protect each promising *etrog* in an individual cloth bag secured to a branch. Of the 100,000 immature *etrogim*, about 12,000 are cultivated to full size; after sorting and grading, only 2,000-3,000 are good enough to sell for ritual use in the extremely brief time period prior to Sukkot. David Wiseman of Dallas, who markets some of Kirkpatrick’s citrons through his company Zaide Reuven’s Esrog Farm, says of the endeavor: “You’ve basically got to be crazy to do this.”

This isn't the first time the Jewish obsession with the *etrog* has been called crazy. Writing for *Commentary* in 1958, Erich and Rael Isaac cited a fourth-century Christian bishop who called it both shameful and foolish for the Jews to make such a fuss over a lemon. The Isaacs rejected such arguments. "A symbol of world history and Jewish national persistence, a finite object in the natural world revealing God's divine and infinite mystery, the *etrog* is clearly an object of the highest significance," they wrote. "To the Jew it is a tree rooted in eternity, its creation antedating man; a tree from whose branches sprang the fruit which, in bringing the end to man's sojourn in Eden, gave us human life and history as we know it."

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