

*R'Yehuda HaNasi says: Do not read the verse as written, "hadar," meaning beautiful, but rather read it, "hadir," meaning the sheep pen. And it means, just as in this pen there are large and small sheep, unblemished and blemished sheep, so too, this tree has large and small fruits, flawless and blemished fruits. (Sukkah 35a:4)*

One of my favorite parts of studying Talmud is that quite often, I'll come across a passage that makes me do a double take. I had to read the comparison of an etrog tree to a sheep pen several times, and I ended up with more questions than answers.

Why, of all things, is the etrog tree compared to a sheep pen? Rabbi Yehuda's reasoning is that they both have large and small contents, blemished and unblemished. By these parameters, there are infinite comparisons one could make to an etrog tree. Almost any group of items could count. A basket of blueberries, a clothes closet, a silverware drawer.

But taking it a bit further, I think the Gemara is making an interesting point. There are a few more similarities that apply to an etrog tree and a sheep pen. Both are living things and both are tended to by humans. Both of them require specific and careful maintenance in order to grow healthily. Both create products of some sort, one of them being wool and meat and the other being etrogim for sukkot. Both are containers which hold a collection of items that grow physically and spiritually inside them.

*The Gemara wonders: Is that to say that among other fruits there are not large and small fruits, flawless and blemished fruits? How does this description identify the etrog specifically? Rather, this is what R'Yehuda HaNasi is saying: Just as in a pen, there are both large and small sheep together, so too, on an etrog tree, when the small ones come into being, the large ones still exist on the tree, which is not the case with other fruit trees.*

So we see that the most important similarity is that within the pen, and on the tree, there is a variety of products that are able to thrive alongside each other. And so too, in any community, we have many people with many differences who create something beautiful through cooperation and coexistence. A community is a home for life and is tended by humans with the product being cooperation and love. It takes hard work and dedication to maintain. What it creates is spiritual connection and growth.

-Aryeh Leib Reynolds