The Etrog Through the Ages

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By and large, we consider Judaism to be a religion that is focused on meaning and substance. We work hard not to judge others' appearances, we try to look into the words of the Torah, past the simple meaning to the deeper levels of interpretation and significance. All this is true, with one major exception: the Etrog (as well as the other parts of the four species).

If there is one time during the course of the Jewish year where we are *encouraged* to judge something based on its appearance, it is on Sukkot when we select our *pri etz hadar*, the fruit of a beautiful tree, as it says in Vayikra. According to the rabbis of the Talmud and later on, Maimonides, this fruit of a beautiful tree was none other than the Etrog, the Citron, or *Citrus Medica*.

This morning, I want to share some of the fascinating history of the Etrog, as it appears during three historical eras: the second Temple period; the middle ages in Europe, and finally, the 19th and 20th centuries. And we'll see that in many cases, the history of the Etrog provides a wonderful lens through which we can learn about Jewish history.

[Much of the material I share today comes from an article by Dr. Arthur Schaeffer in the journal Tradition entitled, "The Agricultural and Ecological Symbolism of the four species," as well as an article in the Jerusalem Post by ARI GREENSPAN and ARI Z. ZIVOTOFSKY, who have an amazing website called "Halakhic Adventures."]

The Etrog During the Second Temple Period

The Talmud records that the identity of the etrog was passed down as a tradition, going all the way back to Sinai. Botanical historians however trace the etrog from its origins in the Far East. By the time of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, it was well-rooted as the first citrus fruit in the western world.

During the first century BCE, the Jewish community faced tremendous tension and factionalization, in particular between the major groups of Sadducees and Pharisees. Alexander Yanai, the sixth and last of the Maccabean ruler high priests, had angered the Pharisee population by his Hellenized, military behavior. The outrage at this soldier priest climaxed one year during Sukkot, when he demonstrated his support of the Sadducees by refusing to perform the water libation ceremony properly: instead of pouring it on the altar, he poured it on his feet.

The Mishna (4:9) describes that his actions (and his support of the Sadducean cause) were so egregious that he was pelted with etrogim by the multitudes gathered on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Unwittingly, the crowd had played right into Alexander's hands. He had intended to incite the people to riot and his soldiers fell upon the crowd

at his command. The soldiers slew more than 6,000 people in the Temple courtyard and era of civil war began.

The etrog would remain a powerful symbol for Jewish independence as Jews struggled under Roman rule. It appeared on the coins of the Great Revolt in the year 66 CE before the destruction of the second Temple and was also a common theme on the coins during the Bar Kochba rebellion of 132-135 CE. Bar Kochba even refers to procuring the four species for his army in one of his letters! Indeed, as long as Jews stayed in the moderate climate on the shores of the Mediterranean, there was no difficulty obtaining *etrogim* for Sukkot.

The Etrog During the Middle Ages

However, as Jews moved north into France, Germany, Poland and Russia, however, the temperature-sensitive citron tree could not exist and tremendous problems ensued, most notably the case of only one etrog being available to fulfill an entire community's need.

The Maharam of Rothenberg was one of the great rabbis (and Tosafits) of the 13th century. He lived in France and Germany, authored more than 1500 responsa and was among the first *poskim* [halakhic authorities] to deal with this quandary:

"The *custom* is to buy an *etrog* in partnership from the money of the *kehillah,*" he wrote. "Each person who wants to make a *bracha* is given it as a gift when they take it to fulfill the *mitzvah.* When they have fulfilled the *mitzvah,* they gives it to his or her fellow Jew as a gift, and so on... for the *halachah* is that 'a gift [given] on the condition that it must be returned (to the original person) is still considered a gift.'"

Another authority, the ***Kol Bo*** mentions the *Ra'avad*, Rabbi Avraham ben David, who was a wealthy rabbi living in the 12th century in Provence. The *Ra'avad* "would buy an *esrog* at his own expense for the whole community of Montpelier [in southern France] and the whole *kehillah* fulfilled the *mitzvah* with it, for he gave it to each one of them."

In the ***Terumat Hadeshen*** (*Pesakim* 52), Rabbi Yisroel Isserlein (1390-1460) discusses how a group of *communities* came up with a strange and very original strategy to compensate for their scarcity of *etrogim*.

"You asked me about a surprising incident that happened near to you, when several towns only had one *etrog* for the *mitzvah* of the *chag,*" he writes. "It was an emergency situation as they could not spend any more money, but all the settlements wanted to fulfill their obligation. They cut one *etrog* into several pieces and sent each settlement one piece. Before the pieces reached the settlements, they had already shriveled to less than a *kebeitzah.* Even so, they blessed over them on the first day. You ask me whether it was halachically valid to do this." The *Terumas HaDeshen* explains that no, this was not valid for two reasons: 1) because the etrog was not whole, 2) but even

given that you could not find a whole etrog, you would still want the cut portion to be bigger than the size of an egg and the shriveled pieces did not suffice.

The lone *etrog also* sometimes ran into trouble as it made its rounds from person to person. **Rabbi Meir Katzanellenbogen** of Padua (1482-1565) writes how an *etrog* in his town was once kidnapped en route: “On one occasion when there was only one *etrog* in Padua, the Ashkenazi *kehillah* sent it to the Lo’azim *kehillah* [that kept the *minhag* of Italy],” he reported. “On the way, students attacked the messenger and stole it from him, and they had to redeem it from them at a high price.”

From these halachic questions we see two things very clearly: first, we see the scarcity of Etrogs during this time period. It’s hard to imagine but for many years, it was far from certain whether or not Jews would have access to an etrog and be able to fulfill this mitzvah on Sukkot. Additionally, I think it’s very moving to see the dedication of these rabbis and these communities to ensure that as many people as possible could fulfill a religious obligation.

The Etrog Wars During the 18th, 19th, and 20th Centuries

The Jews' willingness to buy these fruits at any price was not lost on the non-Jews. As the Jewish population of northern Europe proliferated, the need to import etrogim from far away, namely the Italian and Greek coasts and neighboring islands, grew and grew. The price soared and with it, there was an increased possibility for imitation, innovation and deception. In fact, there were those merchants - Jewish and non Jewish - who understood that fortunes that could be made off etrogim, especially if etrog trees were grafted onto a base of another citrus tree, most often a lemon tree, thus using the hearty base of the lemon to nourish the etrog.

A normal etrog tree is very delicate, requiring constant care. It starts to bear fruit after about five years, but because it is vulnerable to a number of diseases, particularly those of the root system, they rarely live more than 10 or 15 years. A grafted-citron tree however, known as a *murkav*, has a life expectancy of 30 to 35 years, is more durable, and requires less care. After just a few years, the place where the two trees were joined becomes difficult to detect, and it is then virtually impossible to determine if a tree is pure or grafted.

[The Rabbis of the Talmud don’t mention the question of a grafted etrog and it probably wasn’t a problem until a second citrus fruit - the lemon- was introduced into the Middle East in the Middle Ages. The first discussion of a concern over an etrog murkav is by scholars of the Holy Land and Italy in the 16th century, who probably personally witnessed what was by then a widespread procedure. Rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, known as the Maharam mi'Padua (1482-1565, Padua, Italy) and Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508-ca. 1593 Safed), a student of Rabbi Joseph Karo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, or Code of Jewish Law, were among the first to discuss and prohibit the grafted etrog.]

Without going into all the details, let me just say that this grafted etrog, the *murkav* became a very contentious issue from the 16th century on, especially as it pertained to the amazing and world renowned etrogs of the island of Corfu.

No one knows exactly when etrog orchards first started in Corfu, but the Corfu etrog appears to have first been sold in Sephardic lands in the mid-18th century. By the last decades of the 18th century, these beautiful etrogim were introduced to the Ashkenazim. Corfu etrogim were characterized by their stunning appearance, relatively steep price, and by the retained stigma (pitom), taken by many as a sign that they had been grafted. This led to questions regarding their fitness.

Not everyone, however, agreed that a *murkav* was unkosher. The Hungarian rabbi Meir ben Isaac (b. 1708), in his work Panim Me'irot, concludes that since a murkav has all the properties of a pri etz hadar it should be kosher. Rabbi Shlomo Tzvi Schick permitted buying etrogim of questionable lineage from the local etrog merchant who was a widow, because he believed that supporting her outweighed the fear of a grafted etrog.

In Poland and Lithuania, there was also widespread use of the Corfu etrog, although the rabbinic reaction was mixed. People either preferred the Corfu beauty and were willing to pay the premium price or held it to be part lemon and invalidated it totally.

In 1846, the etrog controversy came to a boiling point. For those who are familiar with the machine matza controversy, this debate had similar character and ferocity.

The story goes something like this: Alexander Ziskind Mintz, a learned resident of Brody earned his livelihood from selling etrogim. He published a booklet titled *Pri Etz Hadar* that prohibited the etrogim of Corfu and the surrounding areas such as the Albanian coast. It seems that a former partner of his had broken off and set up shop in these new areas. In order to stop him, Mintz solicited and received the support of many of the great rabbis of the time, all of whom were included in this slender volume. Their claim was that the exceptional beauty of the Corfu fruit was actually what damned it. A real etrog could never be so beautiful or perfect as a grafted one. The chief rabbi of Corfu, Rabbi Yehudah Bibias, countered that he had personally checked the local etrogim and they were not grafted. Numerous rabbis lined up behind the Corfu etrogim, as did many consumers who continued to prefer the attractive Corfu product.

The farmers of Corfu fought back, found supporters among the Hassidim, and a number of times even dumped thousands of citrons into the ocean to create a shortage to raise the price. The temptation for a beautiful etrog was so great that despite the rabbinic ban, Jews continued to purchase those etrogim. In 1876, the debate was reignited with the publication of a broadside signed by 117 Polish rabbis banning the Corfu etrog, and so once again the rabbi of Corfu defended "his" product.

Eventually, two additional factors conspired to doom the Corfu etrog. In 1891 the Greek population of Corfu, never known for their love of Jews, became involved in a blood libel and were boycotted throughout the Jewish world. In Newark, New Jersey, a call was

issued to ban Corfu etrogim because "... there is hardly a man in Europe who will touch them, bought these etrogim dripping with the blood of the children of Zion."

The second factor was the etrog crop of Palestine. In the mid 19th century local Sephardim entered the etrog trade, and soon thereafter the Ashkenazim accused them of peddling grafted etrogim. Then the Ashkenazim too started selling etrogim. After several decades of bitter fighting, these etrogim garnered the strong support of chief rabbi Avraham Kook. "The future, my brother, is with the kosher etrog, with the power of kashrut, and only with the kosher etrog will we win the battle of those who are against us, the Corfu mamzer [etrogim]."

The famed Lithuanian authority Rabbi Yechiel Epstein included in his Halakhic work, Aruch Hashulchan, a plug for Israeli etrogim, not only because he said they are unquestionably kosher, but because of the importance of buying from the Land of Israel.

I want to conclude with just a few takeaways from the many historical twists and turns of the etrog:

1. As I began, we can see that the Etrog has long enjoyed a privileged seat in the many throes of Jewish history. It was present during the turmoil of the Second Temple period, the scarcity of the Middle Ages, the new wealth and communal debates that grew during industrialization. It's also a powerful symbol of our own prosperity: in any time but our own, it would be unthinkable that each person or family could have their own etrog.
2. Additionally, as I mentioned, how amazing it is to think about multiple communities coming together to perform a single mitzvah. Can you imagine if every synagogue in Lakeview collaborated on a single mitzvah or priority - we do this sometimes but there's much more that we could do.
3. Finally, I want to return to this value of beauty. Yes, etrogs are supposed to be beautiful, but our history reminds us that this can get out of hand. Ultimately, there are other values that we must weigh as well, such as supporting a widow or the farmers of the land of Israel. As one of the 19th century rabbis said, (Rabbi Hezekiah Modena,19th century, Israel): "If Israel's etrogim are not the loveliest on earth, they will be the loveliest in Heaven."

So for Sukkot and onward, let's remember the etrog's long history, and that its beauty derives not just from finding a perfect fruit but from the actions of the people who hold it.

Shabbat Shalom.