

ARI Z. ZIVOTFSKY AND ARI GREENSPAN

# THE STORY BEHIND THE ESROG

AS SUKKOS  
APPROACHES,  
we search for the  
ideal *esrog* among  
the many on  
display, complacent  
with respect to  
the identity of the  
fruit, comfortable

with their country of origin,  
and taking for granted the  
abundant supply from which  
to choose. The Torah, however,  
instructed us with only the  
non-specific “*pri eitz hadar*.”  
What does it refer to? Is there  
a specific species? What does  
the ideal *esrog* look like? What  
have Jews used at different  
times and in different lands?  
Many of us recall the flax-  
wrapped *esrog* from before  
the current environmentally  
unfriendly plastic was  
introduced. Our research into  
the recent past has revealed  
some interesting halachic  
history that predates most  
people’s recollections.



## THE CARIBBEAN *ESROG*

The Torah (*Vayikra* 23,40) commands us: “On the first day [of Sukkos], you should take for yourself the fruit of the ‘*eitz hadar*,’ an unopened palm frond, the branch of the braided [myrtle] tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d for seven days.” We customarily translate *pri eitz hadar* as a citron, *Citrus medica*, what we call an *esrog*. This identification is based solely on a *mesora* going all the way back to *Moshe Rabbeinu*. The *Rambam* explains that the Torah mandated taking specifically an *esrog* and the other three species because they are readily available in the Land of Israel. Because *esrogim* grow naturally in the area around the Mediterranean, Sephardim often had access to them in the regions where they lived. For Ashkenazim, however, the acquisition of an *esrog* presented a yearly challenge because they were required to import them from afar, usually from places where there were long-standing traditions about their acceptability. For early American Jews, on the other hand, the most convenient source was neither Europe nor the Mediterranean, but the Caribbean, where the climate is also conducive to their growth. But

the novelty of *esrogim* from an unprecedented region raised concerns about their acceptability among the newly settled Jews.

In 1847, the Jewish monthly *The Occident* (Vol. V, No.2, Iyar 5607 / May 1847), edited by Isaac Leiser (1806-1868), one of the earliest defenders of Orthodoxy in the USA, published a letter on the subject. It was written by Rabbi Abraham Rice (Reiss) (1800-1862), a *musmach* of Rabbi Abraham Bing of Würzburg, and the first *musmach* to live and serve in the US. He wrote:

My Dear Sir,

It is not long since, that several of my friends urged me to come out publicly, in your periodical, with my opinion about the *esrogim*, which are yearly brought from the West Indies to this country. I am so much disinclined to give publicity to anything of a controversial nature in matters of our religion, that even now I should not trouble you, but that the time is approaching when our yearly communications are made to the West Indies for the supply of citrons, and I think it therefore my duty, for the sake of our religion, to state that these *esrogim* are kosher, and there cannot be found any word against them in all *poskim*, *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*. All rumors that were

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set afloat against the kashrus of these *esrogim* are founded in error and misinformation. Now, my dear sir, I wish only to promote the unity of Israel in matters of religious observances, and endeavor to effect that our brethren of Israel shall not be willfully deprived of the observance of *mitzvas lulav* without just cause.

I remain, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
A. Rice

Others saw the Caribbean *esrogim* as pristine and unadulterated. Rabbi



Author of Eitz HaSadeh

Eliyahu Posek, writing in *Eitz Hasadeh* (page 66), quotes *Teshuvos Divrei Yoseif* regarding "American *esrogim*," known as "West Indie *esrogim*." The *Divrei Yoseif* said that upon researching the subject, he reached the conclusion that their slightly different appearance was because they are the true *esrogim* as brought forth from the earth and found in prehistoric forests for thousands of years before man had a chance to modify them with all sorts of manipulations. No man was there to graft them or do other modifications, as was done to many of the fruit species in Europe. Indeed, the European *esrogim*, he says, were thus improved, and that is why they have an enhanced look and taste. *Teshuvos Divrei Yoseif* suggests that as a result of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the attendant curse of the land, all trees descended from their original perfect state at Creation to their wild state that then needed perfecting via human intervention. Rabbi Posek argues that in his view this is not true regarding *esrogim*, which remained in their perfect state, and thus, all *esrogim*, West Indie and European, are the same species in the same perfect state.

On the other hand, there were those who did not approve of the local American *esrogim*. Dr. Henry Illoway

writes<sup>1</sup> regarding his father, Rabbi Bernard Illoway (1814-1871):

"In the year 1861, the first year of his ministry in New Orleans, it was impossible, owing to all communications with northern cities being cut off, to obtain *Ethrogim*. *Lulabim*, *Hadassim*. 'Arbe Nahal were to be had in abundance, being native to the soil, but not *Ethrogim*. The *Ethrog* that grew indigenously was found to be *passul*. In the emergency, my father decided that they should be used, but without the usual *Berakah*, *al netilas Lulav*.

## AN ESROG FOR EACH PERSON .....

Today, it is commonplace for every person to have his own *esrog*, but this luxury was not always the case. In fact, for Jews in northern Europe, an *esrog*, which only grows in temperate climates, was usually not available for each person, and sometimes not at all. It was not uncommon to have only one for a town, to be shared by all the members of the community.

An extreme example of this can be seen in a question asked of Rabbi Yisroel Isserlein (1390-1460), a leading *poseik* in Germany (*Terumas Hadeshen*, vol. 2, 52). It transpired that several communities had access to only one *esrog*. Everybody wanted to perform the *mitzvah*, so before Sukkos, they cut the *esrog* into pieces and sent a piece to each *kehilla*. By the time the pieces reached some of the communities, they had shriveled to smaller than the size of an egg. Nonetheless, on the first day of Sukkos, they said a *beracha* over those small, dried, shrunken *esrog* pieces. The *Terumas Hadeshen* rules that what they did was incorrect, and explains that even if the *pesul* of *chaseir* (less than a whole *esrog*) is only a *lechat'chila* problem, this case is even worse, because the pieces were less than the minimum *shiur*. Two poignant facts are illustrated by this incident: 1) the dearth of *esrogim* and

<sup>1</sup> *Sefer Milchamos Elokim*, being the controversial letters and the casuistic decisions of the late Bernard Illoway, 1914., page 32

the difficulty of acquiring them; and 2) a yearning to fulfill the mitzvah.

- Surprisingly, it was not only in Northern Europe that entire cities had only one *esrog*. Venice, in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries was a time of strange “kidnappings” for the Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> The local medical school had constant need for corpses for dissection but the Jewish community, owing to their respect for the deceased, was unwilling to furnish its quota. They obtained an exemption by a considerable annual payment, but nonetheless, the students resented this “privilege” and bodies were sometimes intercepted and “kidnapped” on their way to burial. The Jews actually built a hiding place in the ghetto in which to conceal bodies until the funeral. A less serious case of kidnapping took place one Sukkos in the sixteenth century, during the ghetto’s golden age when close to 5,000 Jews lived there. Only one perfect *esrog* was available in the entire city, and it was shared by the various communities. One day, while it was being taken from the German to the Italian synagogue, it was “kidnapped” by a riotous band of students, who would not return it until they were paid an immense ransom.

- After Sukkos of 1747, Rabbi David Pardo (Venice, 1719 – Jerusalem, 1792, a *mechutan* of the *Chida*, in *Michtam Ledovid* 6) dealt with an interesting question from the small Sicilian town of Ragusa, where he once served as rabbi. There was a town that had only one *esrog*, but many *lulavim*. A nearby town, which yearly was supplied with the *arba minnim* from the first town, had no *esrog* that year, as the first town did not have any to supply. On *Chol Hamo’ed* a representative of the *esrog*-less town came to the first town and requested, pleaded, and then argued that because its

townspeople had fulfilled the biblical obligation on the first day, and had also used the *esrog* several more days after that, they should now give the *esrog* to them so that they could use it, and at least recite the *beracha* and *Shehechianu*. It was not sent, and they wanted to know Rabbi Pardo’s ruling on what should have been done.

In a long, intricate, response, he first suggests, and then rejects, the possibility that if they cut it in two they can all do the mitzvah. The suggestion is raised that the principle of Rabi Akiva regarding water in the desert – *chayecha kodmin*, your life takes precedence – should apply to mitzvos as well, and the first town would thus not be required to send the *esrog*. He then suggests that they should have sent it because the first town can still fulfill the rabbinic imperative of *zeicher leMikdash*, which is what the *arba minnim* are today during *Chol Hamo’ed*, with three *minim*,

while the second town could not say the *beracha* without all four.<sup>3</sup> After additional deliberation, he concludes that

<sup>3</sup> Many years earlier, the *Maharil* (Yaakov ben Moshe Moelin, Germany, early 15<sup>th</sup> century, *teshuva* 112) had already ruled that if one does not have an *esrog*, then after the first day, he should use the other three *minnim* during *Hallel* and *Hoshanos*.

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<sup>2</sup> This story can be found in *Cecil Roth*, Venice (Philadelphia, JPS; 1930), 286-287. I thank Rabbi Eddie Reichman for the source.



Examining a "finger esrog," from left, Rabbi Shlomo Machpud (head of Badatz Yoreh De'ah) and Ari Zivotofsky

they should have given over the *esrog*. Although other Italian rabbis disagreed and brought several proofs, including a responsum of the *Beis Yaakov*, who exempted an individual in a town of many *esrogim* from sending his personal *esrog* to a town with no *esrogim*, Rabbi Pardo stuck to his ruling.

- In early 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungary, Rabbi Dovid Shlomo Frankel (*Be'eir Dovid*, 18) dealt with the problem of small-town Jews. One year, *esrogim* were found only in the big cities, while the small towns had none. He wanted to know if one was required to spend sukkos in a big city so as to fulfill the mitzvah. He notes that the *Chayei Adam* already ruled in the negative for a variety of reasons, including that *simcha* is also a *De'oraisa*, and that thus, one should not leave his wife for *Yom Tov*. After careful analysis of the *Chayei Adam*'s sources as well as other factors, he reached the same conclusion.

#### LAST YEAR'S ESROG

The scarcity of *esrogim* probably motivated some people to save one year's *esrog* for the following year. This led the *Rama* (OC 648:1), but not the *Mechabeir*, to quote the *Maharil*'s ruling (*Siman* 5) that a year-old *esrog* is considered definitely dry, and is *pasul* for the mitzvah. But the practice apparently persisted, and the *Taz*, disagreeing with the *Bach* and possibly also with the *Gra* (648:3), says that this is not a blanket rule, and that a year-old *esrog* can be tested for halachic freshness. The *Mishna Berura* cites *Bikurei Ya'akov* as saying that he personally inspected

an *esrog* that was more than a year old, but had been stored in a metal box in a cool, moist area that preserved its beauty and moisture, and was thus kosher if it passed inspection.

#### THE PITOM

The *pitom*, which invalidates the kashrus of the *esrog* for at least the first two days in *chutz la'Aretz* if it is broken off on *Yom Tov*, is taken by many to be one of the defining signs of the *esrog*'s kashrus. We grew up thinking that an *esrog* without a *pitom* is like a day without sunshine. Perhaps some varieties do grow with a *pitom*, but we know from the following story that the ancient orchards of *Eretz Yisroel*, which have a *mesora* of kashrus for hundreds of years, are not like that. In Elul 5637<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Yaakov HaLevi Sapir, later known by the title of his book *Even Sapir*, wrote about the halachos of the *pitom* and tangentially, also discussed the sale of *esrogim* in the old *Yishuv*. He describes Yerushalayim of 1835, the year he moved there from Tzefas, as a small community with a Sephardi majority for which "500 *esrogim* were more than enough" to supply all the people, and that all profits from the sales were strictly controlled and used by the *Beis Din* for *tzedaka* for the holiday. As part of a discussion about how he participated in picking the much larger numbers of *esrogim* then needed by the Ashkenazik community, he describes the orchards of Umm el-Fahem, the principal source of *esrogim* at the time, and the detailed development of the fruit as follows:

"After the earthquake [in Tzefas] of 1837, the entire kollel of the perushim moved to Yerushalayim... as well as the kollel of the Chassidim and the Hungarians. The Ashkenazim became a large community and split from the Sephardim, also regarding the *esrogim*.... Here is the process of the growth of the fruit. On the branch where the fruit will form, a flower develops, and after a few days, the fruit itself will appear as the size of a bean, then a nut, and then an egg,

etc., and the flower will shrivel and dry up ... and fall off."

He describes how the vast majority of the *esrogim* lose their *pitom* as a natural process of its drying up and falling off.

"And anyone with understanding will know intuitively with a mere glance which had its *pitom* removed and which developed naturally without one; in other words, that it fell off as part of the natural growth process"

It is evident that there are two basic types of *esrogim*: those that keep their *pitom* and those that lose their *pitom*.<sup>5</sup>

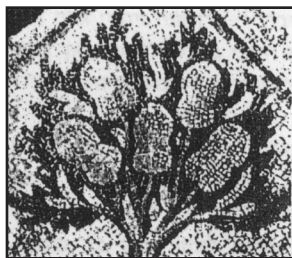
#### STRANGE FINGER ESROG

A unique *esrog* question relates to the curious finger *esrog*. This odd looking fruit, called a Buddha's Hand Citron or a Fingered Citron (*Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylus*), is indeed a citron, but lacks the gene that causes the sections of the fruit to fuse. As a result, rather than the usual spherical or ovoid shape, the fruit is corrugated, wholly or partly split into five, ten, or more finger-like segments, giving it a monstrous finger-like look. Each segment corresponds to one locule of a conventional citrus fruit. Although it smells strongly of citron, it has no juicy pulp hidden beneath its rind, but its strongly aromatic skin is a specialty ingredient in some Eastern recipes. It has been used in China for its fragrance for thousands of years, where it was hung about to perfume a room or used for religious ceremonies. It is also candied and is said to have some medicinal properties. But is it really a halachic *esrog*?

Genetically it is, but it is not dealt with much in the halachic literature, probably because the areas where it is found and the areas where large Jewish communities existed are for the most part mutually exclusive. The earliest mention in halachic literature seems to be the 13<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite authority, known as Rav Tanchum Hayerushalmi,

<sup>4</sup> In *Halevanon*, 14:2 (August 10, 1877), pages 12-15

<sup>5</sup> More recently, see Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Vozner, *Sheivet Halevi* 1:177 about *pitom*-less *esrogim*.



Above: Esrogim on ancient Judean coins.  
Left: "gartel esrog" as seen on Caesarea mosaic

who suggests that the finger *esrog* is the talmudic (*Sukkah* 36a) "*esrog hateyom—twin esrog*" and is kosher.

The next mention is from Iraqi authorities in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that in general, the Indian Jews would get their *esrogim* from Egypt, but one year they came moldy, and the question was raised whether these strange looking fruits were kosher to make a *beracha* on or not. Rabbi Abdallah Somech (author of *Shu"t Zivchei Tzeddek*) and his student, Rabbi Yosef Chaim, the *Ben Ish Chai*, both weighed in on the question, with the former permitting its use and the latter forbidding it, and stating that the Talmudic *esrog hateyom* is not relevant to this question. The question of finger *esrogim* came up during World War II, when one year, the Jews in Shanghai, including the Mir Yeshiva, had no *esrog* in the entire city, and someone suggested using finger *esrogim*. The *pe'sak* that they received was that they should not use it, not even without a *beracha*. Among modern *poskim*, the two *poskim* of the OU, Rabbi Yisroel Belsky and Rabbi Herschel Schachter, have both written *teshuvos* against the use of this strange *esrog* for the mitzvah,

## GARTEL

What about the *gartel*, the indentation encircling some *esrogim*? Note that although other types of fruits may show this phenomenon, the *gartel* is unique to the *esrog* among citrus fruits. Some Chassidim prefer an *esrog* with a *gartel* for various reasons, and Rabbi Sternbuch writes that he prefers such an *esrog* because he views it as the surest sign that it's not a *murkav*, even though it is not usually cited as one of the signs of a pure *esrog*. In fact, the *gartel* can be shown to be an ancient phenomenon, as there are coins from the period of the Bar Kochva revolt that consistently show an *esrog* with a *gartel*,<sup>6</sup> as do the mosaics from the 6<sup>th</sup> century Beit Alpha (Gallil) Shul and Caesarea.

<sup>6</sup> Note that on the coins from the Great Revolt 65 years earlier, the *esrogim* are always without *gartels*.

Could it be that such an *esrog* is actually not a "real" *esrog*? The continued usage of such a fruit means that the custom of *Am Yisroel* sees it as the same species, and kosher for the mitzvah. Dr. Ari Schaffer, an Israeli plant scientist, has explained the formation of this "*gartel*" as follows: When the flower is setting after it opens, the anthers, which carry the pollen, are arranged in a ring-like structure, which generally falls off when the fruit expands. In certain cases, for unknown reasons, this ring of anthers delays falling off for several days, essentially squeezing the middle of the *esrog*, resulting in the *gartel*. The *gartel* is actually a purely external phenomenon. Rabbi Professor Eliezer E. Goldschmidt has shown, and anyone with a *gartel esrog* can confirm, that the "belt" is only visible in the peel, whereas the pericarp is barely affected. The *gartel* is simply a slight thinning of the peel in the middle region.

## VARIETIES OF ESROGIM

Four major sources of *esrogim* have developed over the centuries, with clear differences inside and out. The typical Ashkenazi *esrog* is not a particularly tasty fruit, and has very little pulp. The halachic literature is replete with responsa detailing the kashrus and exquisite beauty of the "*Yanover*" *esrogim*. *Yanover* became the catchword for quality *esrogim*. It was, however, a bit of a misnomer, for *Yanover* was the mispronunciation of Genoa, which was nothing more than a transshipping point for most of the Italian and Greek Island's fruits. This is the *esrog* most Ashkenazim are most familiar with; it is neither overly large, nor too small, and in many ways resembles a lemon. The second source, *Eretz Yisroel*, began exporting its *esrogim* in the 1800s.

Here, too, concerns of grafted *esrogim* were raised, and the charges were not completely without merit. But assuming all things being equal and kosher *esrogim* could be had, there were rabbis who felt that it is a *hiddur mitzva* to use an *esrog* grown in the Holy Land.

One of the more interesting and certainly exotic locations for high quality *esrogim* is Morocco. The characteristic tall and slender *esrog*, always with a perfect *pitom*, but often a seedless fruit, comes from the Atlas Mountains. Finally, there is the huge and unusual looking Yemenite *esrog*. It is hailed (by Yemenites) as the original and most ancient of all *esrogim*, due to the centuries of isolation in which the Jews of Yemen lived. There is very little pulp; rather, the white part below the skin is thick and that is what is eaten.

## CONCLUSION

Today, the reality is far different than in years past. For the vast majority of us, whether in the US or Israel, the selection of *esrogim* is plentiful and varied. Rather than being limited in number and to the local variety, any of us can have his own *esrog*, and it can be Israeli, European, Moroccan, or Yemenite (although not usually a finger *esrog*). And indeed, many of the leading *poskim* have "taken sides" and chosen to use *esrogim* other than those from the region where their ancestors lived. So, which is the real, original, and most authentic of the *esrogim*? The question is really not relevant – all have traditions going back in history that Jews used them for the mitzvah. And recently, Rabbi Professor Eliezer Goldschmidt and collaborators showed that genetically, all *esrogim* are a single species. So, as you hold your *arba minnim* this year and catch the scent of the *esrog*, whatever type it is, wafting up at you, rest assured that what you hold is a genuine *esrog*. And despite the abundant supply, try to appreciate it the way our ancestors did when they would carefully cut up the prized, sole *esrog* so that every person in each town could use a small piece of it.