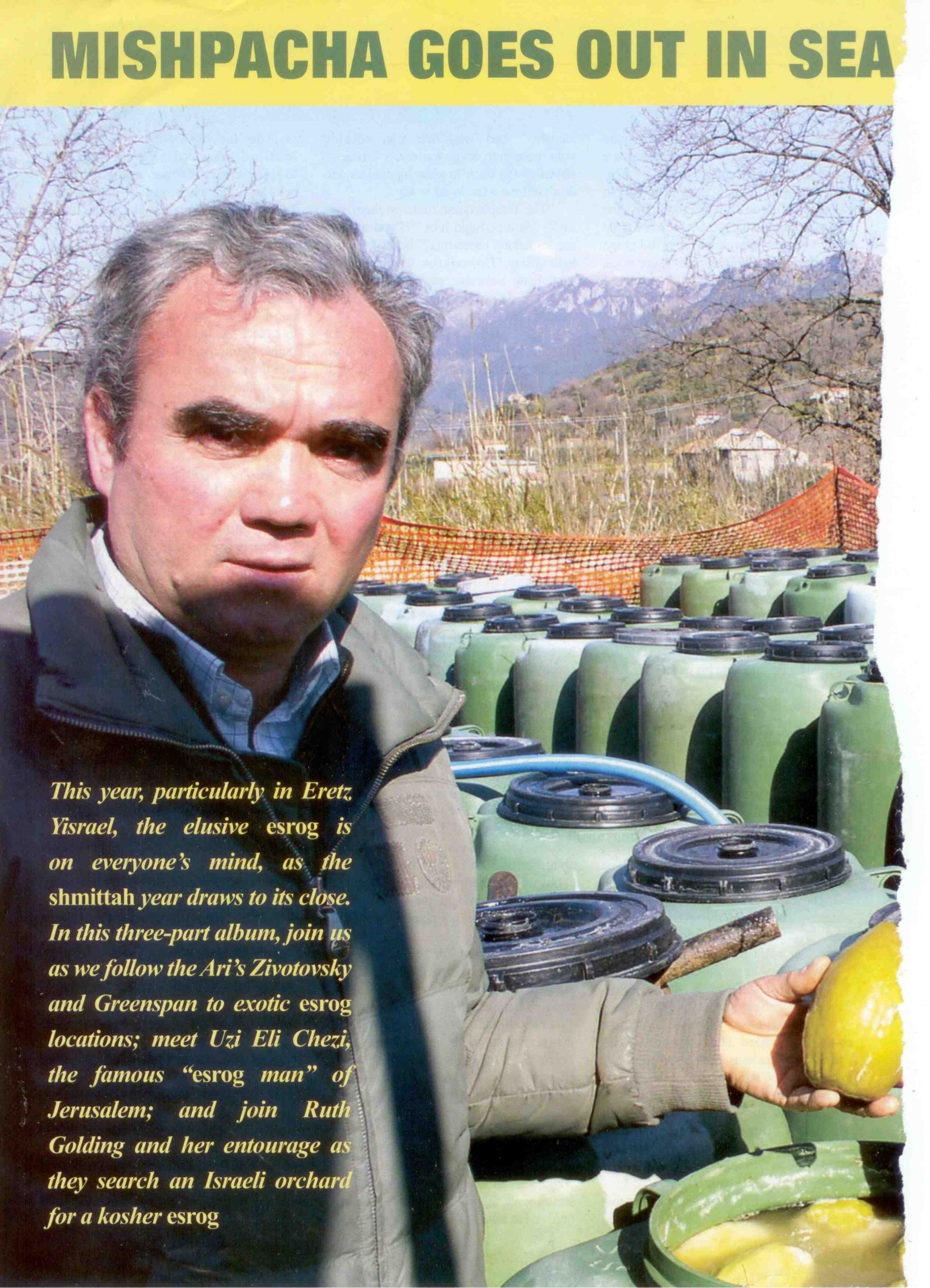


MISHPACHA GOES OUT IN SEA

A photograph of a middle-aged man with grey hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark jacket over a light blue shirt. He is holding a large, yellow, pear-shaped esrog fruit in his right hand. Behind him are numerous green plastic water jugs with black lids, arranged in rows. In the background, there is a red mesh fence, some bare trees, and a mountain range under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

This year, particularly in Eretz Yisrael, the elusive esrog is on everyone's mind, as the shmittah year draws to its close. In this three-part album, join us as we follow the Ari's Zivotovsky and Greenspan to exotic esrog locations; meet Uzi Eli Chezi, the famous "esrog man" of Jerusalem; and join Ruth Golding and her entourage as they search an Israeli orchard for a kosher esrog

RCH OF THE PERFECT ESROG



Antonio Durante, left, and his brother-in-law, Angelo Cava, Italian *esrog* farmers, displaying pickled *esrogim*

The “*pri eitz hadar*,” the citron, *Citrus medica*, is what we call an *esrog*. The Rambam explains that the Torah mandated taking specifically an *esrog* and the other three species because they all grow naturally in the area around the Mediterranean and are thus readily available in the Land of Israel.

As Jews wandered from one region to the next, they always took *esrogim* or *esrog* seeds with them. Jewish communities in North Africa, Israel, Turkey, France, Yemen, and Italy grew their own fruits. As long as Jews lived in regions whose climate permitted the growing of *esrogim* locally, they always planted them and had a ready supply. Once they ventured out of such regions, meaning essentially most of the regions where Ashkenazim lived, the acquisition of an *esrog* presented a yearly challenge because it was required to import them from afar. It was often necessary to employ the services of unreliable middlemen, including non-Jews.

Over the course of history, four general sources of *esrogim* evolved, each with a slightly different appearance: Moroccan, Yemenite, European (mostly Italian), and Israeli.

The typical Ashkenazic *esrog* is not a particularly tasty fruit and has very little pulp. So it should come as no surprise that there is little agricultural use for it other than the mitzvah. The farmers were often torn between strengthening their crop of weak-root *esrogim* via grafting, and the knowledge that most Jews, their primary customers, would not use grafted *esrogim* for the ritual. Thus, the issue of distinguishing between non-grafted and grafted trees began to torment the European Jewish world.

Genoa, Italy, was the conduit for the majority of *esrogim* supplied to northern and eastern Europe. Communication was poor and we find responsa detailing the kashrus and exquisite beauty of the Yanover *esrogim* with a *pitom*. Yanover became the catchword for quality *esrogim*. It was a bit of a misnomer, however, for Yanover was the mispronunciation of Genoa, which was nothing more than a trans-shipping point for most of the Italian and Greek Island’s fruits, rather than the actual source of these *esrogim*. Along with the many *mehudar* *esrogim* under reliable supervision, there were also many *murkavim*, grafted ones, that passed through Yanover, and by the time they made their way to the local *esrog* markets, they could easily be mixed together and offered for sale in Europe.

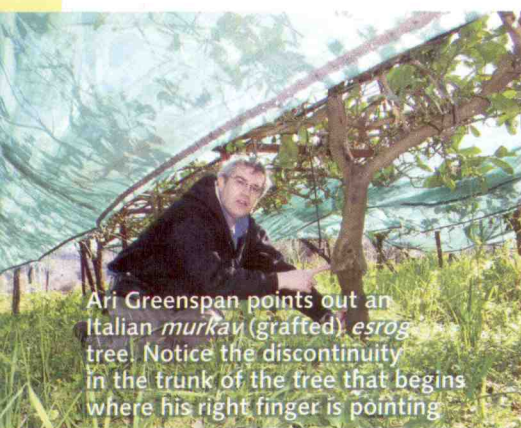
Even today, southern Italy produces beautiful kosher *esrogim*, and remains the preferred source for Chabad chassidim, as it has been for generations. We visited a

city whose name reflects the importance of the trade, Santa Maria Del Cedro. Cedro is Italian for *esrog*, and a main source of income for the city is the growing of *esrogim*. There we saw both *murkav* and non-*murkav* trees growing side by side. The local non-Jews told us, in broken Yiddish with a thick Italian accent (acquired from many years of working with chassidim), that they sell only the non-*murkav* *esrogim* to the Jews and the *murkav* ones are for the local *esrog* liqueur market.

Eretz Yisrael began exporting *esrogim* in the 1800s. As told by Rav Yaakov Sapir in his sefer, *Even Sapir*, they tried to leverage their need for charity at home as a way to sell their Israeli *esrogim*. Here, too, concerns of both graft and grafted *esrogim* were raised, and the charges were not completely without merit. But there were rabbis who felt that it was a *hiddur mitzvah* to use an *esrog* specifically grown in the Holy Land. The *Aruch HaShulchan* (*Orech Chaim* 648:29) wrote that: “... therefore any Jew with a little fear of G-d in his heart will use only Israeli *esrogim*. And will we not be ashamed and embarrassed when there is a mitzvah we can fulfill with a fruit from our Holy Land and we will take specifically from another land. Oy to the shame! Oy to the disgrace! And on this the verse said ‘and they rejected the beloved Land’ ” (*Tehillim* 106:24).

One of the more interesting and 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. There is a deep wadi that runs through the Atlas Mountains that has been a source of *esrogim* for hundreds of years. Its trees are grown in primitive and wild conditions and there appears to be no issue of grafting. One has to travel through a harsh, desert-like landscape for a long time to arrive at the base of the mountains and to find a tiny village that guards the entrance to the wadi. It is to this remote area, with its excellent irrigation, that Jews have been coming for centuries. Upon entering, I felt like I was touching history. The isolated deep ravine is full of thousands of fruits. It goes on for miles and the Berber tribes who tend the fruits have done so for generations, just as the Jews who come in late summer to buy them have also done for time immemorial. Even today, as the dealers arrive from around the Jewish world, the prices and quality are discussed like they have been for centuries, and the almost-impassable orchards are harvested and the produce is bought out in large woven baskets hefted on the backs of hard-working Berbers.

Finally, there is the huge and unusual-looking Yemenite *esrog*. It is hailed by Yemenites as the original and most ancient



Ari Greenspan points out an Italian *murkav* (grafted) *esrog* tree. Notice the discontinuity in the trunk of the tree that begins where his right finger is pointing



Esrog harvest in Eretz Yisrael, circa 1920



Ari Zivotofsky, left, and Ari Greenspan, right, with an Italian *esrog* farmer in his orchard

of all esrogim due to the centuries of isolation in which the Jews of Yemen lived. No grafting of trees exists there and many of the characteristics of the esrogim mentioned in the Gemara seem to fit it. There is no pulp; rather the white part below the skin is thick and that it is what is eaten, similar to an apple and unlike a lemon. While it is a bit mild for our Western tastes, it is considered sweet and edible by the Yemenites. We know that our ancestors ate their esrogim, yet nobody today would eat a European or North African esrog as a fruit; it would be like eating a lemon. The Yemenites cite this as proof that theirs is the “real” esrog. It has spaces around the seeds, the *chadrei zera* that the Talmud refers to, and its massive size fits the story of Rabbi Akiva’s esrog that he carried on his shoulder (*Succah* 36b). Indeed the Yemenites take pride in having a large esrog, and view it as a *hiddur*. Too large an esrog is never an issue with the standard European esrog. It may be that until the modern era, Israeli esrogim, grown predominantly by Arabs in the Lower Galilee and some near Jaffa, resembled Yemenite esrogim in this regard — Rav Sapir describes seeing year-old esrogim as large as watermelons hanging on the tree.

In a market in Ethiopia last Erev Succos, I was surprised to see a woman selling what looked like large Yemenite esrogim. I asked her what they were called, and in the Semitic Amharic language, she referred to them as “*tarunga*.” The T-R-G of the Hebrew eTROG jumped out at me and then I remembered Rav Saadia Gaon’s translation of “*pri eitz hadar*” — *el atrange* — and realized the similarity.

Today, thanks to air freight, instant communication, and our affluence, even in the coldest of climates it is commonplace for every person to have his own esrog. But such a luxury was not always the case. In fact, for Jews in northern Europe, an esrog 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. This was certainly true in times of war.

My father-in-law, Mr. Charles Siegman, a survivor of four years in Westerbork and Theresienstadt (together with a brother and sister, after their parents and two older brothers were murdered by the Nazis) and a current resident of Jerusalem and Silver Spring, recalls that the *chagim* after World War II in Amsterdam and elsewhere in Europe were celebrated with great emotion by those who survived the concentration camps and by those who survived in hiding. His “first” Succos in Amsterdam after the war, in 1945 (5706) became even more memorable for him because of a personal experience that he now relates each year to his grandchildren.

The shul where he davened on Swammerdamstraat, like most others at

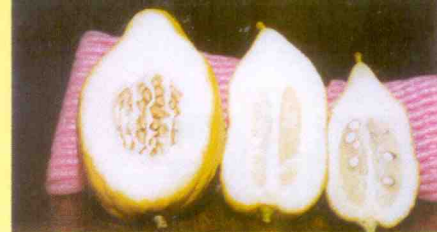
that time, felt fortunate to have one esrog and *lulav* for the entire shul. The people were thrilled and excited to be able to “*bentsch lulav*” again. The family with whom he stayed lived around the corner from the shul and was given the honor of being the custodian of the esrog and *lulav* after davening. On the afternoon of the second day of Succos, my father-in-law, then a curious just-turned-ten-year-old, took the lone esrog for a personal inspection and, in doing so, broke the *pitom*. He remembers being devastated and dreading facing the shul people and being identified as “the one who broke the *pitom*.”

The following morning, on Chol HaMoed, he went to shul with trepidation. The people were informed of the “*pitomless*” esrog, and he sat dejected, trying to be invisible. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a man wearing a gray suit and a bow tie entered the shul with his own esrog and *lulav*! He was a businessman from The Hague. Given the circumstances, he was greeted with elation. The businessman stayed in Amsterdam throughout Chol HaMoed, and the people of the shul were able to enjoy making a brachah on a kosher esrog for the entire “first” Succos after the war. To this day, when he thinks of the eventual appearance of Eliyahu HaNavi, *bimheira b’yameinu*, he says that he pictures him wearing a gray suit and a bow tie!

• • •

So which is the real, original, and most-authentic of the esrogim? There is such a variety of look, feel, and taste. Scientific collaboration between Israeli and Italian scientists, including a world expert on the science of esrogim, Rav Professor Eliezer Goldschmidt, genetically evaluated twelve types of esrogim with an astounding result: Despite the very different phenotypes, the external shape, size, and look of the fruit, the genotype, the genetic identity, of all the various esrogim is remarkably similar. That means that all esrogim around the world, despite looking different, are a single species. Of course, even without the DNA evidence, we are confident that our *mesorah* is as pristine today as it was the day we received it on Sinai, despite the tumultuous history of expulsions, exiles, and persecutions, and that we have accurately preserved this tradition in all four corners of our exile.

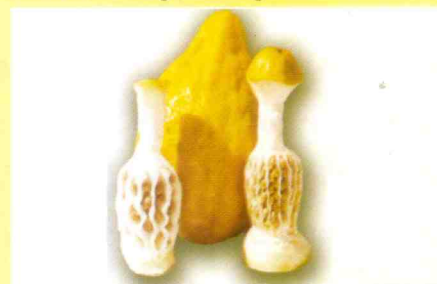
So as you hold your own *arbaah minim* this year and catch the scent of the esrog wafting up at you, rest assured that for all time Am Yisrael has safeguarded the identity of the esrog. You can view that esrog as a link to the earlier generations who often lacked esrogim for each individual, but staunchly carried the esrog on all their wanderings and preserved the tradition of identifying the “true” esrog. ■



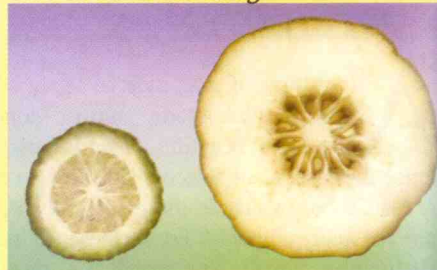
A study in esrogim. L to R: Yemenite esrog, all pulp and no liquid; Moroccan esrog, long, thin, without seeds; Italian/European/Israeli esrog that should look the most familiar to us



Cross-sections of two Yemenite esrogim. Notice the great bulge of pulp and seeds in the esrog on the right

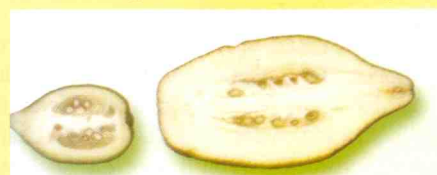


Core of Yemenite esrog

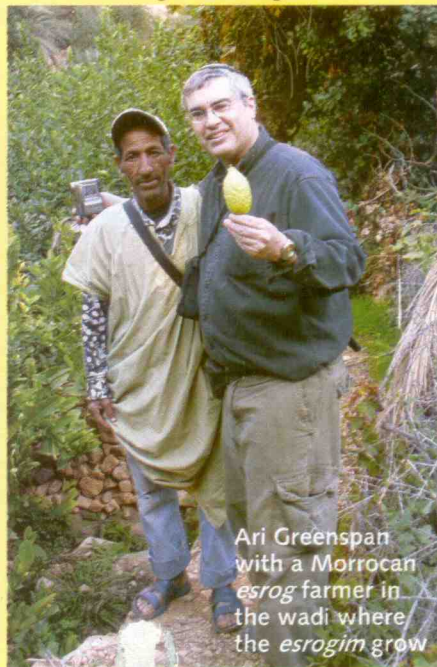


Italian esrog

Yemenite esrog



Longitudinal: Italian esrog on left, Yemenite esrog on the right



Ari Greenspan with a Moroccan esrog farmer in the wadi where the esrogim grow