Menachem Pines

The Chazon Ish, ztz”l, prostrated himself on the ground in full view of the surprised avreichim who studied his every move. He wriggled into a small pit dug out of the Bnei Brak sand and crept under the esrog tree, which was planted and cultivated with his continuous instructions and supervision. But those who had the largest stake in this drama being played out were the family members of Rav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz, shlita.

The Chazon Ish had entrusted Rav Lefkowitz with special esrog seeds, which he had planted in his yard and which had now grown into a full-fledged, fruit-bearing tree.

The air was tense. The Chazon Ish examined one esrog after another, looking altogether pleased as his sharp eyes studied the fruit growing on the tree. Then, suddenly, he found what he was looking for. The perfect esrog, a beautiful specimen, the first crop of esrogim from a tree without a hint of suspicion of being murkav (grafted). This tree would become the archetype, the father of all the Chazon Ish species of esrogim. And in time, atop a hill in Gush Dan, in the center of the country, a whole orchard of this gene pool would produce beautiful esrogim for dozens of years, and cuttings from these superior trees would yield hundreds of thousands of esrogim to be taken into the trembling hands of talmidei chachamim during Succos.

And nowadays, vendors proudly proclaim their wares at the arbaah minim markets: “Chazon Ish esrogim, hiddur sheb’hiddur!”

Together Again Rav Michel Yehudah saw the Chazon Ish for the first time in Vilna at the funeral of the son of one of Vilna’s Roshei Yeshiva. Still a bochur but already famous for his diligence, Michel Yehudah closed his gemara and joined the yeshivah in accompanying the deceased to his final rest. Another young man who joined the procession caught everyone’s attention. “There is the genius who sits and learns nonstop throughout the day,” people murmured, pointing to the Chazon Ish. The next time Rav Michel Yehudah saw him was the following Purim, when he was appointed as messenger by his Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Shlomo Heiman, to deliver shalach manos to the Karelitz family. And there he had a better opportunity to verify the wonderful things he had heard about this budding gadol b’Yisrael.

Time passed. Rav Michel Yehudah’s brother, who was already living in Eretz Yisrael, was able to provide immigration certificates for him and the rest of the family. They settled in what was then the small town of Bnei Brak, and Michel Yehudah chose to continue his studies in Yeshivas Hevron. In Bnei Brak, he met the Chazon Ish for the third time, and the two struck up a warm friendship.
The Chazon Ish was Rav Michel Yehudah's shadchan, having suggested the daughter of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Gershonovitz, Rav Michel Yehudah's grandsons asked him where he learned his agricultural know-how, flourished. In the period when Rav Michel Yehudah gave them free access, seeing it as a holy mission to create orchards out of the tree. And Rav Michel Yehudah asked them free access, seeing it as a holy mission to create orchards out of the tree. And Rav Michel Yehudah took the esrog to the shock where he and his wife lived, and together they germinated the seeds. One small sapling was planted in the earth in his yard and began growing. Every once in a while, the Chazon Ish would inquire after "his" tree, and I am not giving anything." The yard was open to all, and all the followers of the Chazon Ish would come to get their esrogim. After making their selections, they would enter the house and have Rav Michel Yehudah take maaser. Many great rabbis sought these esrogim, including Rebbe Avrohom Yitzchok Kohn, the previous Toldos Aharon Rebbe and father of the current Toldos Aharon and Toldos Aharon Rebbe. Esrog growers also took cuttings from the tree to create orchards with this coveted pedigree. The Steipler, would take their saplings and others have created their own orchards out of the tree. And Rav Michel Yehudah gave them free access, seeing it as a holy mission to propagate this thoroughbred.

No Grafting Reb Tzi Friedman, owner of the Friedman esrog enterprise, is a fourth-generation esrog grower and one of the first to take cuttings from the original tree. We talked at 4 a.m., the best time to catch an esrog farmer during the harvest season.

"My great-grandfather, Reb Mendel Friedman, sought to grow trees without grafting even before the Chazon Ish launched his venture through Rav Michel Yehudah. Reb Mendel went to the orchard of Reb Yaakov Halperin, founder of the Zachron Meir neighborhood in Bnei Brak — which had also been planted under the instructions and guidance of the Chazon Ish — and took cuttings from which to begin. My father took from Reb Michel Yehudah’s tree and from others grown by the tzedukan of the Chazon Ish, such as Rav Chaim Greinerman and Rav Gedaliah Nadel, who grew their own trees from the original one."

Why is the fear of grafting greater with esrogim than with other fruit? "The esrog tree is very weak and delicate, requiring a great deal of care. "Summer is the time to work with the fruit itself, and in the winter, the tree alone needs much care. Each tree has a construction of wooden supports in order to keep the branches separate and prevent the fruits from rubbing against each other and becoming bruised, which happens so easily. The bledach, or blemishes, one can find on an esrog are the result of a leaf lightly touching it. Each fruit has to be tied in order to avoid scratches from the sharp thorns that grow from the tree. The care is altogether very complex. Because of the difficulty in producing fine esrogim, many growers have taken to grafting esrog branches onto sturdier citrus trees, like grapefruit. Halachically, it is permissible to graft in this way to obtain fruit, but the esrogim produced by grafting are not kosher according to most opinions. They are not a pure species, and one may not recite the blessing over them. Grafted esrogim have a stronger pitum, the small stem on top, whereas Chazon Ish esrogim are weaker, and their pitum breaks off right away. There are methods of keeping the pitum intact even on non-grafted esrogim," he assures us.

From the very beginning, there was something extraordinary about this tree. Esrog trees don’t usually grow from seeds but from cuttings, and even if they do, they don’t usually bear fruit yet this one, nurtured by a yungerman with absolutely no agricultural know-how, flourished. From the very moment, there was something extraordinary about this tree. Esrog trees don’t usually grow from seeds but from cuttings, and even if they do, they don’t usually bear fruit; yet this one, nurtured by a yungerman with absolutely no agricultural know-how, flourished. From the very moment, there was something extraordinary about this tree. Esrog trees don’t usually grow from seeds but from cuttings, and even if they do, they don’t usually bear fruit; yet this one, nurtured by a yungerman with absolutely no agricultural know-how, flourished.

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What is the virtuous of an esrog? ‘Yungermen come to me in the middle of the year asking for an esrog as a segulah for having a son. But this segulah is valid only over an esrog that was used for the blessing and was eaten on Hoshana Rabbah,” says Reb Tzi Friedman. Yemenites believe that eating an esrog on Tu B’Shevat, an auspicious time to pray for a beautiful fruit, and a bit of energy left after all the fruits and select the most perfect esrogim. R’ Yehuda Friedman. Yemenites believe that eating an esrog on Tu B’Shevat, an auspicious time to pray for a beautiful fruit, and a bit of energy left after all the fruits and select the most perfect esrogim.

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Can you discern a grafted esrog?

"Any expert can tell if a tree is grafted or not. The question is if the species is a grafted one to begin with. The outer signs designated in seforim are not enough. When you open up a box containing a Chazon Ish esrog, you can see signs of nongrafting, because today, with the harvest and growing periods being of a longer season, the fruit are smaller than in the past. When you pick an esrog in the winter, when it is still fresh and big, you can see all the signs of nongrafted fruit. But by summer, when it has reached its optimal growth and begins to shrink, it’s harder to tell. And even if a particular tree does not appear grafted, who was its ‘grandfather,’ and what is its true pedigree? Even a laboratory would not be able to tell you."

So how do you know your esrogim are definitely not marrarim?

“We rely on the opinion of the Chazon Ish. We grow trees only from his original esrog. Our father took only ‘firsthand’ esrogim that the Chazon Ish identified and certified.”

How big is the demand for this particular species?

“Some say that his original esrog came from the Galil. There is another legend that the Chazon Ish chose the esrog himself from an orchard in Shechem. But according to Mishpacha research, the true story is probably somewhere in between. It seems that in his first years in Eretz Yisrael, the Chazon Ish took his blessings over his esrogim, including the Maharil Diskin, and the Chazon Ish verified that they were nongrafted. The new esrog owners wonder: perhaps my esrog comes from the very tree the Chazon Ish himself cultivated? Or at least, perhaps his holy eyes surveyed the orchard where it grew?”

The magic tree: “Let it grow without intervention”

"HaKadosh Baruch Hu would not let someone like Reb Zerach Braverman stumble, and if he uses them, they’re kosher,” was the Chazon Ish’s explicit ruling. Several years later, the Chazon Ish decided to go hunting for his own source of nongrafted esrogim. He wandered from orchard to orchard across the country, visiting remote places and Arab villages, until he found several trees up north growing in a village near Tzfas. Because of his expertise in seeds and his siyat a din, which was also legendary, he was able to determine that this was a pure, unadulterated variety, and this species served as his prototype. The esrog upon which he recited the blessing that year and whose seeds he gave to Rav Michel Yehudah served as his prototype. The new esrogim grew by the grandchildren, who water it but refrain from any other treatments and care given to other esrog trees. The original tree continues to bear fruit, even after a yovel of years, alongside other trees that were planted from its seeds nearby. This is as unusual as the fact that the tree was grown from a seed instead of a shoot, as the average life of an esrog tree is between five and seven years, before the growers bend the branches and cut the tree so it will spring back to life. The Chazon Ish’s tree has continued to bear fruit from its original growth.

As did so many others, Rav Michel Yehudah did have faith in the Chazon Ish’s ta’avush halakdosh and asked no questions. Later, he did presume to ask and received an esoteric reply.

“When the Chazon Ish gave me the seeds, he merely told me to take them and that they would grow. From time to time, he would urge me to water the tree,” he wrote to someone who inquired about the esrogim. “One time, I was taking a walk with him and he asked me if I was watering the tree sufficiently. I then summoned the courage to ask him how he knew this was a purebred. He gave me a reply to the effect of its being a tradition handed down from generations past, though I cannot remember his exact wording. I cannot remember if he used the word din, that is, if it had the din of being pure or if it was a tradition.”

Years later, the tree is still standing proudly, tended devotedly by the grandchildren, who water it but refrain from any other intervention. Don’t touch it. Let it grow in its own way, without human intervention.”

Before the upcoming festival, Rav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz will go out to his yard and pick himself a clean, unblemished, and exquisite esrog, grown through miraculous circumstances, from a miraculous tree, in the merit of the Chazon Ish. Just as the Chazon Ish ensured that the Torah be perpetuated for the coming generations, so did he ensure that even after his death, there would be esrogim with his shehker.

The Esrog: A work of art. There is a strong rapport between the grower and whoever doesn’t see it with his own eyes, will not be able to understand it; you feel as if you have helped create a masterpiece, a beautiful work of art. There is a strong rapport between the esrog grower and his fruit, but there’s also a tremendous investment of physical work, and whoever doesn’t see it with his own eyes, will not be able to understand it.”

When the grandsons of Rav Michel Yehudah asked him about spraying the tree with pesticides, he told them not to dare touch it. “As an esrog grower and the son of an esrog grower, I more than anyone acknowledge that the existence of your tree is a pure miracle. It is supernatural. Don’t touch it. Let it grow in its own way, without human intervention.”

Rav Moshe Friedman left the special legacy of esrog production to his children. He once told them, “Esrog growing requires acrobatics to achieve a finished product. But there is tremendous satisfaction in it; you feel as if you have helped create a masterpiece, a beautiful work of art. There is a strong rapport between the esrog grower and his fruit, but there’s also a tremendous investment of physical work, and whoever doesn’t see it with his own eyes, will not be able to understand it.”

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