

# The Chazon Ish's MAGIC ESROG TREE

Photos: Shuki Lehrer



Rav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz surveys his garden: "One breeze from Hashem can make the tree bear fruit"

*Five decades ago, the Chazon Ish guaranteed that future generations would be able to make a brachah on an esrog under his direct supervision. The Chazon Ish's personal esrog tree is still bearing fruit today, yielding thousands of high-demand esrogim that are available all over Eretz Yisrael. What is the secret of this mystical tree that for fifty years seems to have flourished with some otherworldly blessing?*

## 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!*" The teeming, bustling markets are filled with discerning customers busily counting the triple growths of *hadassim* leaves, examining the backbone of the *lulav*, and inspecting *esrogim* under looking glasses. They check the grooves and the specks, and those in the

know seek the Chazon Ish *esrogim*, which are snatched up (oh so carefully, of course) for their pedigree and beauty. And the new 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 customers for these *mehudar esrogim* are many and varied, but few know that the prototype, the original tree, still stands on 4 Vilkomir Street, near Yeshivas Ponevezh, in the yard belonging to Rav Michel Yehudah Lefkowitz.

**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 yeshiva in accompanying the deceased to his final rest. Another

*yungerman* 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 Yeshiva, 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 VIRTUES OF AN ESROG

The *esrog* is said to contain many virtues and *segulos*, though much of what is attributed to this fruit is actually unfounded folklore. While some people have heard that eating *esrog* helps in childbirth, the real power of the *segulah* lies in the *pitum* stem and not the fruit, says an expert *esrog* grower. “*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 Tzvi Friedman. Yemenites believe that eating *esrog* is beneficial for the heart.

If you still have an *esrog* and a bit of energy left after all the *segulos*, you can use it to make jam as a special treat for Tu B'Shvat, an auspicious time to pray for a beautiful *esrog* for the following year. Or you can try your hand at *esrog* liqueur. The recipe: Look for an *esrog* still attached to its branch. Soak it in alcohol and sugar. The alcohol will extract the aroma and flavor of the *esrog* and produce something exotic.

Alternatively, with a bit more effort beforehand, find an *esrog* tree, take a glass bottle, and, while the fruit is still small, insert it in the bottle. Eventually you'll have an *esrog*-in-a-bottle, an unusual and attractive succah decoration.

H. Shapira

method of testing the boys, he told them that he had adapted it directly from the Chazon Ish.

“I was a young *maggid shiur* when the Chazon Ish told me to test the students. He came with me to Tiferes Tzion and sat opposite the students. I began asking them difficult questions about the *sugya* they had been learning when suddenly the Chazon Ish took over and began firing questions at them. That's where I learned how to test the students.”

What was different in the approaches?

“I was still young and threw complex questions at them to see what they had absorbed. The Chazon Ish asked each student questions he was able to answer, so every *bochur* left with the feeling that he had done well.”

Nothing prepared Rav Michel Yehudah for that morning at the end of Tishrei when, upon the conclusion of the davening, the Chazon Ish asked him to step into his study. He went over to the icebox and took out the *esrog* over which he had said the blessings on Succos.

“Take the seeds from this fruit and plant a tree that will produce *esrogim mehudarim*.”

Rav Michel Yehudah took the *esrog* to the shack 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, reminding his disciple to water it properly. It began to bear fruit after about two years.

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 grow from seeds, they don't usually bear fruit; yet this one, nurtured by a *yungerman* with absolutely no agricultural know-how, flourished. In the period when Rav Michel Yehudah was still coaxing the seeds to germinate, he voiced a fear to the Chazon Ish that perhaps nothing would come of this venture.

“One breeze that Hashem sends can cause a tree to grow and bear fruit,” the Chazon Ish encouraged him with his pure faith, as if he foresaw the success of his endeavor.

It was just before Succos in the fourth year, and the family was

The Chazon Ish was Rav Michel Yehudah's *shadchan*, having suggested the daughter of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Gershonovitz, Rosh Yeshivah of Tiferes Tzion, which was under the Chazon Ish's administration. In 1939, the Chazon Ish appointed Rav Michel Yehudah to head *shiur gimmel* in the yeshivah. In later years, when Rav Michel Yehudah's grandsons asked him where he learned his

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



What better place for Bircas Ha'ilanos than the Chazon Ish's tree?

taut with excitement: the Chazon Ish himself came to the yard to select a superior *esrog*. He stretched out flat on the ground in order to creep under the small tree. Then he examined the fruit with his sharp eye until he found the perfect specimen upon which to recite the blessing on Succos. He was finally reassured that this was not a grafted tree; this would be the progenitor of the new species of Chazon Ish *esrogim*, and from this very tree, he and his brother-in-law, the Steipler, would take their *esrogim* in the years to come.

The Steipler was just as concerned about the welfare of this tree, and every Tu B'Av, two months before Succos, he would come to choose an *esrog* for himself and for his daughter, Rebbetzin Barzam. The Steipler, too, would crawl under the tree to get the fullest view of the fruits and select the most perfect *pri hadar*. And he would leave a very handsome sum for Rav Michel Yehudah. When the latter would protest, he would reply in surprise, “But you are giving everything, 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 Avraham Yitzchak Rebbes.

*Esrog* growers also took cuttings from the tree to create orchards with this coveted pedigree: Stockman, A. Daube, Friedman, Ludmir, 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 *esrogim* 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 Zichron 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 *talmidim* of the Chazon Ish, such as Rav Chaim Greineman 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 *bletlach*, 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.

Baker's Choice **Stands Behind** Every Delicious Piece of Cake...

**Baker's Choice**  
The Baker's Helping Hand



**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 *murkavim*?**

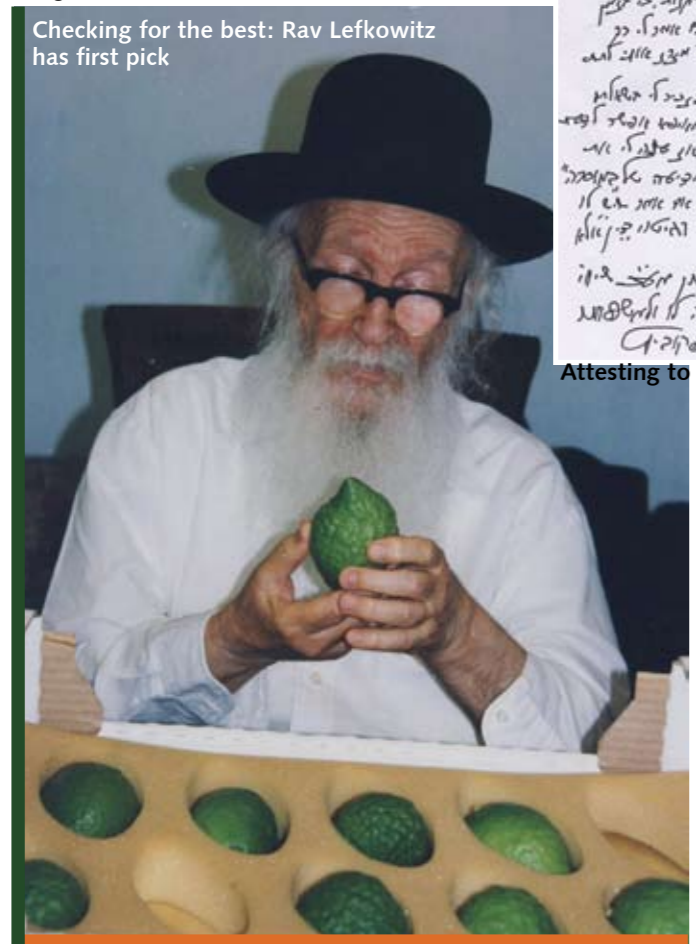
“We rely on the opinion of the Chazon Ish. We grow trees only from his original *esrog*. Our father took only ‘firsthand’ *esrogim* that the Chazon Ish identified and certified.”

**How big is the demand for this particular species?**

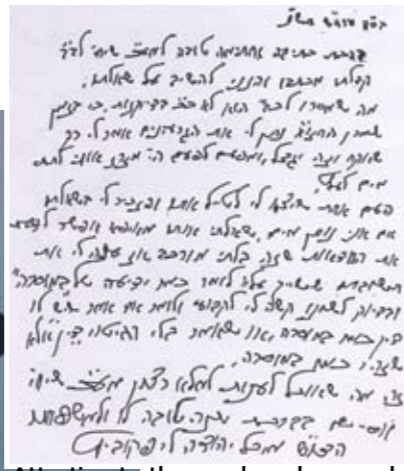
“In the Lithuanian *yeshivishe* circles, it is the leading kind, and even the chassidic circles have begun demanding it as well.”

All this begs the question: Where did the prototype originate? And how did the Chazon Ish know for sure that his *esrog* hadn’t been grafted?

Some claim 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 *esrogim* from a species he trusted to be kosher. This came from *esrogim* grown by the Yerushalmi tzaddik Reb Zerach Braverman, which originally came from Shechem. Many great rabbis recited their blessings over his *esrogim*, including the Maharil Diskin, and the Chazon Ish verified that they were nongrafted.



Checking for the best: Rav Lefkowitz has first pick



Attesting to the purebred mesorah



Rav Michel Yehudah, together with his son-in-law Rav Baruch Ber Korlansky, ztz"l, takes *ma'aser* from his harvest

**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?**

“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 d'Shmaya*, 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 to germinate and cultivate came from these trees.

As did so many others, Rav Michel Yehudah had faith in the Chazon Ish’s *ruach hakodesh* 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 my 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

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.

Reb 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.”

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.”

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 *hechsher*. ■



The magic tree: “Let it grow without intervention”

**A MUST SEE FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS!**

**R. ELIAS PRESENTS:**  
A moving drama, filmed in an authentic setting, a remote desert in Eretz Yisroel!

**ENCORE PERFORMANCE SHOWING WORLDWIDE!**

**CHOL HAMOED SUKKOS**

Admission: \$20

**SANDCASTLES**

**For Women & Girls Only**

<p><b>BORO PARK I.S.</b> 92 4715 18TH AVE</p> <p>Sunday Night: 9:00 Monday Oct. 5: 5:45 • 9:00 Tuesday Oct. 6: 5:45 • 9:00 Weds. Oct. 7: 5:45 • 9:00 Thursday Oct. 8: 7:00</p>	<p><b>MONSEY YESHIVA OF S.V. BOYS BLDG. - GYM</b></p> <p>Sunday Night: 9:15 Monday Oct. 5: 6:15 • 9:30 Tuesday Oct. 6: 5:45 • 9:00 Weds. Oct. 7: 5:45 • 9:00 Thursday Oct. 8: 4:00 • 7:00</p>	<p><b>LAKEWOOD BAIS SHAINDEL</b> 585 RIVER AVE</p> <p>Sunday Night: 9:15 Monday Oct. 5: 9:00 Tuesday Oct. 6: 9:00 Weds. Oct. 7: 7:00 • 9:45 Thursday Oct. 8: 7:15</p>	<p><b>WILLIAMSBURG CONCORD PLAZA</b></p> <p>Sunday Night: 9:15 Monday Oct. 5: 4:30 • 8:30 Tuesday Oct. 6: 5:00 • 9:00 Weds. Oct. 7: 4:00 • 7:15</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>TORONTO</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">See local newspapers for details</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>YERUSHALAYIM</b> אולם אפירון</p> <p style="text-align: center;">רחוב עלי הכהן - פינת בר אילן</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Monday Oct. 5: 4:30 • 8:30</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>For more information please call 718.686.1187</b></p>	