Antipodal Etrogim

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One of the more interesting questions revolving around Sukkot is a question first raised by R. Jacob Ettlinger (1798-1871) in his 1836 halakhic work *Bikkurei Ya’akov.* R. Ettlinger was the rabbi of Altona and author of the well-known Talmud commentary *Arukh ha-Ner* and *Responsa Binyan Tziyyon,* among other publications. He was staunchly Orthodox, vigorously anti-Reform, and an adherent of mysticism. At the same time, Ettlinger was a modern rabbi in many respects: he attended university; gave sermons in the vernacular; and recognized early on the advantages of periodicals and journals, editing his own, *Shomer Tziyyon ha-Ne’eman,* for ten years. It is all the more perplexing, then, that we find the following, seemingly anti-modern, discussion in his writings.

In Sukkah 45b, R. Shimon b. Yochai is quoted as saying, “All mitzvot must be performed in the manner in which they were grown.” Though there is some debate as to which *mitzvot* this ruling applies, there is no doubt that the *arba minim* are included. That is why, for example, in fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *etrog,* the *etrog* is taken with the *pitom* side up, as it grew on the tree. But, asks R. Ettlinger, what about a *lulav* or *etrog* that grew in far-away America or Australia? From the vantage point of his native Germany, it grew sideways or upside-down, as it were. Can such a item, which sprouted in the antipode of one’s current location, be used for the *mitzvah?*

I was uncertain if we, who live in Europe, can fulfill the obligation with *arba minim* grown in America and Australia, located to our side and bottom [of the Earth], and vice versa. We know what the scientists write: their feet are opposite our own; they are prevented from falling into space because God placed the force of gravity on the Earth. Thus, if we were to use the species grown there, they would [perhaps] be [considered] the reverse of the manner in which they grew, because from our perspective, the top of the *lulav* or *hadas* grew farther down than their bottom. Or perhaps since [the four species] are taken in the manner in which they grew in relation to the ground, this is called *derekh gedeilatan* [their natural manner of growth]. This [latter position] seems correct. (*Bikkurei Yaakov* 651:13)

R. Ettlinger concluded that it was reasonable to judge *derekh gedeilatan* not by the person, but by the growth of the *arba minim* in relation to the ground—which, of course, is the same all over the world—and *etrogim* grown anywhere would be therefore be valid.

But, as is often the case in halakhic discourse, the matter did not end there. Later authorities, as well as the burgeoning Hebrew press, picked up on R. Ettlinger’s question. Fittingly, it was in “sideways” America where the discussion was picked up again.

America’s first successful Jewish periodical was Isaac Leeser’s *The Occident,* founded in 1843 in Philadelphia. In May 1847 the paper published an announcement by Rabbi Abraham Rice, which declared unequivocally that *etrogim* imported from the West Indies were way for the author of *Binyan Shlomo* to have seen it. Still, this misrepresentation of Rashi’s view persists; surprisingly, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv interpreted Rashi this way in his recently printed lectures on Sukkah 45b.
kosher. This sparked a spirited discussion in the June issue, which featured a critique of Rabbi Rice by Menachem Goldsmith. Goldsmith countered that many of the Caribbean etrogim had been grafted with lemons, and therefore should not be assumed kosher unless sold by a trusted vendor or examined by a competent halakhic authority.

In a brief editorial note, Isaac Leeser defended Rabbi Rice's original statement. Of course, he had never meant to permit grafted etrogim; the rabbi was simply refuting those who claim that all American etrogim, grafted or not, were unkosher. As Leeser put it, "An inspection does not help; the land of their growth is their blemish." If that were true, Leeser argued, the mitzvah of arba minim would be unfeasible for all Jews of the Western world. Certainly, he concludes, we may rely on the halakhic opinion of Rabbi Rice that West Indian etrogim—as long as they are purchased from reliable vendors and are not grafted—are kosher.

A clarification by Rabbi Rice, as well as Goldsmith's response to Leeser, appeared in The Occident's next issue. Rabbi Rice, for his part, declared that all the signs of discriminating an etrog from a lemon were unreliable. Rather, any etrogim, including those of the West Indies, were presumed to be kosher unless proven otherwise. Since most etrogim are not grafted, the Halakha, based on the majoritarian principle, would dictate that these etrogim are kosher for use.

In his reply to Leeser, Goldsmith wrote that he knew what Rabbi Rice had meant; he merely wished that it was understood in the rank and file of American Jewry, "most of whom are not benei Torah, and they will certainly misunderstand his words." He expressed surprise at Leeser's assertion that some say all Western etrogim are unfit. "I have never heard of anyone in this country say so, but I have seen a responsum of Rabbi Jacob Ettinger[er] in which he wanted to forbid etrogim grown in America." Goldsmith summarizes Ettlinger's question, dismissing it out of hand. If American etrogim were invalid for Europeans, Goldsmith countered, European etrogim would, for the same reason, be invalid for Americans—and this was a possibility he could not take seriously.3

Below Rabbi Rice's and Goldsmith's Hebrew articles is another note by Leeser, in English, which effectively ended the discussion. He asked that any further comments on the matter be carried on in private correspondence. Yet some questions remain. Whom did Leeser have in mind when he referred to those who declared all American etrogim, grafted or not, blemished and unfit? Is this a misunderstanding of Rabbi Ettlinger's position? Or was it an unrelated stringency which viewed the citrons of the New World with suspicion, having had no tradition of kashrut throughout earlier generations? It is hard to say, and, as we shall see, the parameters of Rabbi Ettlinger's discussion were sometimes stretched beyond his original intentions.

Rabbi Ettlinger's query was an interesting point of discussion not only for halakhists; it also provided ammunition for critics of rabbinic authority. The maskil Yehudah Leib Gordon of Vilna (1830-1892) frequently used his brilliant poetic talents to ridicule the rabbinic leadership of his generation. The protagonist of his poem Shenei Yosef ben Shimon (c. 1880), a young, university-educated rabbi, dreams of modernizing Judaism, excising it of its later, unaesthetic accretions. He would permit kitniyot on Pesach, move the bimah to the front of shul, abolish the practice of spitting during Aleinu, and delay burying the dead. The same fictional hero also took an enlightened approach toward the arba minim: "Lulavim of America and its etrogim, he permitted them all / Despite being taken as they grew / Their leaves in the ground and their roots in heaven."

In 1883, an article by Mordechai Jalomstein (1835-1897) appeared in Ha-Meilitz, a popular weekly haskalah newspaper. Jalomstein, a regular contributor, had immigrated to America in 1871, where he edited and wrote for a number of successful Yiddish and Hebrew papers. In this piece he sneeringly described how "our brothers," the Orthodox in America, reject the etrogim grown in California, despite their obvious superiority and affordability. Instead, they opted for etrogim from everywhere else—Genoa, Corfu, and Jerusalem.4 Jalomstein criticizes the dishonesty of the vendors (perhaps also hinting at the naïveté of the masses), who would miraculously be able to procure even etrogim "grown from atop the grave of the Tanna Kamma." The Orthodox, he writes, were following the ruling of a certain disputatious rabbi, "the East Broadway Maggid," who had forbidden all American citrus. Jalomstein mockingly describes the flawed reasoning behind this ban: since America rests on the underside of the world, its fruits cannot be taken for the mitzvah. If an American etrog is taken with the pitom up, it does not fulfill the requirement of derekh giddule; if it is taken pitom down, it is against the law codified in the Shulchan Aruh.

This is essentially Bikkurei Ya'akov's quandary, but applied, nonsensically, to the residents of America themselves. As Jalomstein presents it, the stringency is absurd. It seems incredible that a halakhic authority would come to such a conclusion. Whether or not Jalomstein is faithfully representing this rabbi's opinion, and though he never mentions his name, the "East Broadway Maggid" did, in fact, exist: his name was R. Yosef Moshe Aaronson (1805-1875), and he was indeed a respected yet quarrelsome Orthodox scholar. His book of responsa from his years in America, Mata'ei Moshe, does not appear to mention etrogim at all.

A number of weeks later, a paragraph by Shalom Pludermacher appeared in Ha-Meilitz entitled "Do Not Mock." It is a brief anecdote, simply referring the reader to our Bikkurei Ya'akov, which was never mentioned by Jalomstein. By showing a halakhic precedent for Rabbi Aaronson's stringency, Pludermacher seems to have been issuing a sort of defense of rabbinic integrity.

Pludermacher reprinted this article some years later in more detail. He described himself and a group of friends sitting around Rabbi

3 Goldsmith's response is puzzling for a number of reasons. First of all, Bikkurei Ya'akov is a commentary on the laws of sukkah and arba minim in Shulhan Arukh, not a book of responsa. Second, R. Ettlinger did not want to forbid; on the contrary, he concluded that the arba minim were permitted. Most perplexing of all is Goldsmith's refutation. He seems only to be restating what Ettlinger himself already asked: can etrogim grown in one hemisphere be used in the other? Are American etrogim kosher for Europe and are European etrogim kosher for America? It seems likely that Goldsmith was writing from memory and had forgotten the details of Ettlinger's question.

4 J. D. Eisenstein, in his 1952 encyclopedia Otzar Yisrael, mentions the articles from The Occident and Ho-Meilitz but conflates the West Indian etrogim permitted by R. Rice in 1847 with the California etrogim discussed by Jalomstein in 1883. This, as well as a number of other sources, were brought to my attention via this thread: http://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?topic_id=2497782&forum_id=19616
Mattityahu Strashun’s table one winter night.5 The conversation turned to that day’s newspaper article—it was written by Jalomstein. They began to joke about it, but when Rabbi Strashun heard, he quieted them. “My brothers, don’t mock—I recall seeing a similar question in a book by one of the great [rabbis].” Immediately he got up and headed to his library, emerging with a copy of Bikkurei Ya’akov.

Yet, in truth, Rabbi Ettlinger’s discussion and Rabbi Aaronson’s ruling are not parallel. Rabbi Ettlinger would not have forbidden Americans from taking American etrogim, or Australians Australian etrogim. It is strange to think of Rabbi Mattisyahu Strashun missing this obvious difference, or of Pludermacher failing to point this out.

In 1891 Rabbi Hayyim Hizkiyah Medini began publishing his magnum opus, the encyclopedic, nine-volume Sedei Hemed. He twice mentions our Bikkurei Ya’akov, adding an interesting postscript: “One of the wise ones of our generation” had sent him the following question: if the world is round, how is there any top or bottom at all? Given what we know about the Earth, how does Rabbi Ettlinger’s question make any sense? Rabbi Medini deftly avoids answering the question; he explains that he has never seen the Bikkurei Ya’akov, only quotations of it in secondary sources. Perhaps, he suggests, someone who has read it will be able to clarify.

Perhaps.

In the meantime, we ought to bear in mind Strashun’s admonition. In surveying the history of thought and ideas, we should not judge our predecessors—certainly not the truly great personalities of the past—based on our current knowledge and experience. R. Ettlinger, modern and thorough thinker that he was, harnessed his own scientific knowledge while formulating halakhic decisions. In retrospect, the discussion may appear naive or backward, but R. Ettlinger was operating with what was current scientific thinking and deciding accordingly. What, after all, is the duty of a responsible posek, if not to apply the methodology of Halakha to the situations and exigencies of the day? Rather than painting R. Ettlinger as quaint or outdated, his comments in Bikkurei Ya’akov 651:13 cement his legacy as a broad modern thinker, a halachist who applied all the knowledge at his disposal to arrive at an informed decision.

**Does peri etz hadar Mean Etrog?**

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On the first day [of Sukkot] you shall take a peri etz hadar, palm fronds, branches of leafy trees, and river willows, and you shall be happy before the Lord your God for seven days. (Leviticus 23:40)

The verse above directs one to take a peri etz hadar on Sukkot. There is a consensus in Rabbinic literature that peri etz hadar refers to the etrog, but how do we get from the actual words peri etz hadar to the etrog? Although the question might seem straightforward, there are actually multiple approaches to this question, as seen in disagreements about how to translate this phrase. There are two keys to understanding these differences that will guide us as we analyze Rabbinic texts from different time periods, different geographies, and different languages. I will offer my own interpretation at the end.

The first key is a grammatical ambiguity inherent to the phrase peri etz hadar. In Biblical Hebrew, there is no preposition corresponding to the English word “of.” The of-relationship is expressed by juxtaposing two nouns in what is called a construct chain in English, or semikhut in Hebrew. For example, when “fruit” (per) is juxtaposed with “womb” (beten) we get “fruit of the womb” (per beten). In some instances, three nouns are juxtaposed, such as our own “fruit” (per) + “tree” (etz) + “beauty” (hadar). The ambiguity is whether the third noun (hadar) is modifying the first noun (peri) or the second noun (etz). If hadar modifies peri, the fruit is meant to be beautiful (“beautiful fruit from a tree”). If hadar modifies etz, the tree is meant to be beautiful (“fruit from a beautiful tree”). A similar phenomenon, albeit backwards, occurs in the English phrase “big etrog tree.” If the tree is meant to be big (a “big tree of etrogim”), one would expect a large tree with many etrogim on it. If the etrog is meant to be big (a “tree of big etrogim”), one would expect a tree with Yeminite etrogim, which can be larger than footballs and weigh more than ten pounds. Both scenarios match a “big etrog tree.”

The second key to understanding peri etz hadar in Rabbinic texts regards a historical-halakhic matter. Some aspects of Jewish life are so ancient and well-established it is difficult to imagine them not being biblical. The etrog is one of these cases. Everyone agrees the words peri etz hadar refer to the etrog, but do they literally mean etrog? In other words, is the etrog mentioned explicitly in the Torah or is the identity of the fruit known from a tradition passed down from Moses on Sinai? Those who are content with it being a tradition translate hadar according to its plain-sense meaning as “beauty” or “majesty,” but those who are not content with it being a tradition translate it as “etrog.” Translating hadar as “etrog” makes the fruit just as biblical as the Sabbath, Passover, Menorah, etc.

We are now ready to analyze each and every interpretation in light of (1) the grammatical ambiguity of “hadar tree” versus “hadar fruit” and (2) the historical/halakhic matter of Sinai tradition versus Torah law. We will use the grammatical ambiguity as a framework for organizing these interpretations.

1. Hadar Tree

This approach understands the tree to be hadar but not the fruit. The Bavli attributes the following interpretation to Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the redactor of the Mishnah:

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5 For more on Strashun, see [http://archive.li/8zfYu](http://archive.li/8zfYu).

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Rabbi Yehudah is pointing to a unique characteristic of the etrog tree, namely, the tree’s year-round production of fruit. Most trees produce their fruit all at once, meaning all the fruits are roughly the same size as they mature. The etrog tree, which is continually producing new fruit, has large and small fruits at the same time. This is like an animal pen, which has large animals together with their offspring. The emphasis of hadar/ha-dir is not on the fruit but on the tree, which is the “animal pen.” Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi’s understanding is “fruit of the etrog tree,” which he interprets midrashically to mean “fruit of the animal pen tree.”

This approach can also be found in Targumim such as Neofiti, Pseudo-Jonathan, and the Targum fragments from the Cairo Genizah. In these texts, peri etz hadar is translated into Aramaic as “fruits of a praiseworthy tree, etrogim” (peirei ilan mishabhah trugin). The word “praiseworthy” (mishabhah), which is singular, must be modifying “ilan,” which is also singular. It cannot be modifying “fruits” (peret), which is in the plural. For these Targumim, the tree is praiseworthy (ilan mishabah), not the fruit.

This approach was taken by a number of subsequent interpreters. Saadia Gaon (882 – 942) translated peri etz hadar into Judeo-Arabic as “fruit of the etrog tree” (thamar shajar alatraj). For Saadia Gaon, the etrog tree (etz hadar) is mentioned by name in the Torah itself. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) interpreted etz hadar as “a tree whose external appearance and unique features distinguish it above others, a tree of exceptional beauty.” The tree is hadar, not the fruit. Rabbi David Zvi Hoffmann (1843 – 1921), who had a PhD in Near Eastern languages, wrote: “Therefore, beyond any doubt, [the Rabbis] had an accepted tradition that the ‘beautiful tree’ (etz hadar) is the tree which is called etrog in Aramaic.” Again, the focus is on the tree. Rabbi Joseph Hertz (1872 – 1946), the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom from 1913-1946, took a tree-focused approach when he translated peri etz hadar as “fruit of goodly trees.” In 1981, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1934 – 1983) translated peri etz hadar as “fruit of the citron tree,” and in 1996, the translators of the Artscroll Tanach did the same, translating peri etz hadar as the “fruit of a citron tree.” For these last two translations, the etrog tree (etz hadar) is not merely a tradition but is literally mentioned in the Torah.

II. Hadar Fruit

The second approach understands the fruit to be hadar but not the tree. According to Targum Onkelos (ca. 2nd to 5th centuries), the translation of peri etz hadar is “the fruits of the tree, etrogim” (pereti ilana etrogin). Here Onkelos translates hadar as etrog, meaning the etrog is sourced biblically and not in an oral tradition. He also separates the tree (etz) from hadar by translating etz in the determined state (ilana). This means hadar is not modifying tree (etz) but is in apposition to peri. This grammatical nuances means the fruits are hadar but not the tree. The translation of peri etz hadar is “the fruits of the tree, etrogim” (pereti ilana, etrogin).

This hadar-fruit approach was attributed to Ben Azzai (2nd century):

Hadar means “the dweller” [ho-dar] on its tree all year round. (Sifra, Emor to Leviticus 23:40; cf. B. Sukkah 35a, Y. Sukkah 3:5)

Ben Azzai is pointing to the same botanical trait as Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi above, that the etrog fruit stays on its tree all year round. Whereas Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi focused on the tree, Ben Azzai focuses entirely on the fruit, which is “the dweller.” Ben Azzai’s understanding of peri etz hadar is “hadar fruit that comes from a tree,” which he interprets midrashically to mean “the dweller fruit that comes from a tree.”

Vayikra Rabbah takes a similar approach when it discusses the wisdom of King Solomon:

By separating the “trees” (ilanot) from the “beautiful fruit” (perot hadar), this midrash is clarifying that the fruit is beautiful (perot hadar), not the tree. It also asserts that the plain-sense meaning of peri etz hadar has nothing to do with the etrog (“All trees make beautiful fruit!”). The etrog is associated with Leviticus 23:40 because of tradition alone.

More than a half millennium later, this approach would be taken by Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089 – 1167). According to Ibn Ezra,

We believe that the words of our sages do not contradict the words of the Bible… The sages passed down a tradition that peri etz hadar is the etrog, for in truth there is no tree-fruit (peret) more beautiful (hadar) than it.

Ibn Ezra introduces two ideas here. First, he clarifies that the etrog is a tradition as opposed to the plain-sense meaning of the biblical text. Second, by separating the word tree (etz) from the word beautiful (hadar), Ibn Ezra is disambiguating the original Hebrew. The tree-fruit (peret) is beautiful, not the tree itself. Ibn Ezra’s translation would be “beautiful tree-fruit,” or “beautiful fruit from a tree.”

III. Hadar fruit and hadar tree

There is a group of commentators that did not choose between hadar fruit or hadar tree. For these commentators both were hadar. According to the Yerushalmi, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai (2nd century) took this approach.

“And you shall take for yourselves peri etz hadar.” This refers to a tree whose fruit is hadar and whose tree is hadar. The taste of its fruit is like the taste of its tree. The taste of its tree is like the taste of its fruit. Its fruit is similar to its tree. Its tree is similar to its fruit. And what is this? This is the etrog. (Yerushalmi Sukkah 3:5)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai equates the fruit (peri) with its tree (etz) five times in this brief passage. Both the fruit and the tree are hadar. The syntax underlying this interpretation is “hadar fruit from a hadar tree” (peri hadar from an etz hadar).

Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, 1194 – 1270) took a similar approach by translating hadar as etrog.

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It appears to me that the tree called etrog in Aramaic is called *hadar* in Hebrew... the tree and the fruit are called by the same name, as is the custom with the majority of fruits such as the fig, the nut, the pomegranate, the olive, etc., and so both the tree and the fruit are called etrog in Aramaic and *hadar* in Hebrew.

As a proper noun meaning etrog, *hadar* has the ability to modify both the tree, which is called *hadar*, and the fruit, which is called *hadar*. Rambam’s interpretation is “*hadar* fruit from a *hadar* tree,” or better, “etrog fruit from an etrog tree.”

Like Targum Onkelos and Saadia Gaon, Ramban views the etrog identification as Scriptural as opposed to being a tradition from Sinai. As mentioned above, this approach was also taken by the much later Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan and the translators of the *Artscroll Tanach*.

IV. Conclusion

Two decisions are implicitly made in every Rabbinic interpretation of *peri etz hadar*. The first is whether the fruit is *hadar*, the tree is *hadar*, or if both are *hadar*. The second is whether the identification of *hadar* as the etrog stems from an oral tradition from Sinai or whether it is explicit in the biblical text. If it is an oral tradition, then *hadar* means “beauty,” but if it is explicit in the text, then *hadar* means “etrog.”

How would I interpret *peri etz hadar*? Like Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. That is, the etrog is a Rabbinic tradition and *peri etz hadar* means “beautiful fruit (*peri hadar*) from a tree (*etz*)” or “tree-fruit (*peri etz*) that is beautiful (*hadar*).”

These two translations, which are identical in meaning, emphasize that the fruit is beautiful, not the tree.

Although Ibn Ezra never mentioned it, there is evidence for translating this way. The phrase *peri etz* exists individually in Biblical Hebrew and means “tree-fruit.”

Tree-fruit is mentioned in the sixth day of creation (Genesis 1:29), in the Egyptian plague of locusts (Exodus 10:15), in the laws of tithes (Leviticus 27:3), and in one of Ezekiel’s prophecies (Ezekiel 36:30). The very similar phrase *peri kol etz*, which means “all tree-fruit,” is attested to twice, in Nehemiah 10:36 and 10:38. Thus, *peri etz* “tree-fruit” is a unique and individual phrase.

Why is this important? There is another phrase that can shed light on our ambiguity. The term *nega tzara’at*, “leprosy affliction,” is a unique phrase that appears by itself thirteen times in the Bible. When a third noun is added, such as *beged* /garment in Leviticus 13:59, we arrive at the same ambiguity as *peri etz hadar*. Does *beged* modify *nega* or does it modify *tzara’at*? Luckily, another verse, Leviticus 13:47, disambiguates for us: “a garment (*beged*) that has a leprosy affliction (*nega tzara’at*)”. The phrase *nega tzara’at* stays intact.

There are other examples of this phenomenon (e.g., *shemen-mishhat kodesh* and *berit-melah olam*), but what is important for us is that *peri etz* “tree-fruit” is to remain intact. The interpretation is “beautiful fruit (*peri hadar*) from a tree (*etz*),” which can also be written as “tree-fruit (*peri etz*) that is beautiful (*hadar*).”

The tree-fruit is beautiful, not the tree itself.

This grammatical interpretation is bolstered by the context of Leviticus 23, which ties the annual festivals to the agricultural cycle. The *omer* ritual marks the beginning of the barley harvest at Passover time; the two loaves are offered on Shavuot to commemorate the end of the wheat harvest; and Leviticus 23 even contains harvesting laws such as *peah*, “the corner,” and *leket*, “gleanings” (v. 22). Sukkot is also tied to agriculture, taking place “when you have gathered in the bounty of your land” (v. 39). The holiday is elsewhere called the “festival of ingathering” (Exodus 23:16; 34:22). What “bounty” was “gathered in” during the seventh Hebrew month, which correlates to our September and October? Tree-fruit. At the time of Sukkot, the grapes, figs, dates, and pomegranates were either ripe for harvest or already harvested, and the olive harvest was just beginning. These ripe tree-fruits were most likely the *peri etz hadar* of Leviticus 23:40. While this interpretation is what I consider the plain-sense meaning of the text (*pshat*), an ancient tradition says otherwise. As Ibn Ezra put it, “The sages passed down a tradition that *peri etz hadar* is the etrog, for in truth there is no tree-fruit (*peri etz*) more beautiful (*hadar*) than it.”

Can I Use Zip-Ties To Hold Down My Sekhakh?

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Last year, I received a frantic call the day before Sukkot. The query came from neighbors who were busily erecting their *sukkah*. They needed to know: “Can we use zip ties to hold down our *sekakh*? We read in the *OU guide* at shul that it’s not allowed!” The halakhic recommendations prepared by Rabbi Eli Gersten and reviewed by Rabbi Yaakov Luban in 2013 include the following questions and answers that would seem to prohibit the use of plastic zip-ties:

Q: How should the *schach* be supported?  
A: One should not rest *schach* directly on metal or plastic, but rather on wooden beams placed on top of the metal poles (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 629:7). If one’s mats are woven with plastic wire, they must make sure that the *schach* is placed perpendicular to the wooden beams; otherwise the stakes are being supported exclusively by the plastic wire.

Q: Can one tie their *schach* mats to the *sukkah* with string?  
A: *Schach* mats are notorious for blowing off of the *sukkah*. Therefore, the mats should be tied down. However, one should not tie the *schach* with wire or synthetic strings, but rather they should use cotton or hemp string or place heavy 2x4s on top of the *schach* to weigh it down.

To my mind, there’s more to this matter. A thorough analysis of the parallel *sugyot* in both talmuds (m. Sukkah 2:2, y. Sukkah 52d (2:2), b. Sukkah 21b), as well as the attendant commentaries, offers an alternate take on the halakhic sources in defense of the more lenient practice, that it is allowed (even *ab initio*) to use zip-ties, and even metal wire to support the *sekakh* of the *sukkah*.

In yeshiva shorthand, this issue is known as “*maamid be-davar hamekabbel tumah*,” that is, the question of the permissibility of supporting the *sekakh* of the *sukkah* with a material (like metal) that is susceptible to *tumah* (impurity). Or more broadly, a material (like plastic) that is unsuitable to be used as *sekakh*. Besides the recommendations published by the OU, this *halakhhah* (among the numerous laws of the walls and roof of the *sukkah*) has become well-known, and is taken seriously (perhaps disproportionately seriously) by many *Halakhhah*-abiding Jews.
Sekhakh for the sukkah is limited by several criteria (Rambam Hil. Sukkah 5:1, Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 629:1): the material must have grown from the ground (地中ץ המיירץ), must be detached from the ground (陥רץformed), and it must not be susceptible to impurity ( yukar) e.g. it cannot be food or any utensil (like a bowl or bed).

The Sugya

The Mishnah (m. Sukkah 2:2) presents a debate relevant to this issue under the anonymous first opinion in the Mishnah, that of the Sages, and Rabbi Yehudah:

The Talmud Bavli (b. Sukkah 21b) expands and clarifies this debate between the Sages and Rabbi Yehudah, specifically explaining how it articulates legal principles applicable beyond the case of a sukkah built into bed-poles:

The Halakhah follows the Sages: The first approach is taken by Rambam and Rabbi Zerahiah ha-Levi (“Baal ha-Maor”). Rambam expresses his opinion succinctly and clearly in his Commentary to Mishnah (2:2):

The claim that the sukkah must be “fixed” is talmudic shorthand for a collection of tannaitic debates (collated and discussed on b. Sukkah 7b) about the permanence, sturdiness, and size of the sukkah. Rabbi Yehudah is one of the proponents of this approach (m. Sukkah 1:1 where he allows a sukkah taller than 20 amot), so Rabbi Zeira is justified in seeing that same criterion at play here. Importantly, the opinions who require that the sukkah be fixed are mostly rejected in favor of the opinions allowing or even requiring the sukkah to be “casual/impermanent.”

 Alfasi’s codification (Sukkah 10a, §1010) mirrors the Talmud’s cryptic formulation:

Three Possible Approaches

There are basically three different approaches on how to rule in this sugya, taking into account both the Talmud and Alfasi’s code—aligned logically along the three different opinions we have seen.

1) We rule like the Sages against Rabbi Yehudah
2) We rule like Rabbi Yehudah, and the reasoning for his ruling is that the sukkah must be fixed, like Rabbi Zeira
3) We rule like Rabbi Yehudah, and the reasoning for his ruling is that the sekakh must not be supported by a material susceptible to impurity, like Rabbi Abba

Rabbi Yehudah’s opinion is that the sukkah must be fixed and his opinion has already been explained (see Rambam to m. Sukkah 1:1) therefore he requires that it be able to stand on its own ... and the Halakah does not follow Rabbi Yehudah.

This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that Rambam does not address the case discussed in our Mishnah at all in his Mishneh Torah.

Usually, it is reasonable to assume that Rambam and Alfasi agree in their halakhic rulings without strong evidence to the contrary. After
all, Rambam praises Alfasí’s code in his introduction to his Commentary to Mishnah as “contain[ing] all the rulings and laws that are needed in our time.” Rambam’s father, Maimon, was a student of Ibn Megas himself a student of Alfasí. However, because Alfasí’s ruling is so cryptic we are still left wondering. For Rambam, our Mishnah itself is enough proof that we rule against Rabbi Yehudah, according to the general rule of mishnaic debates “one against many, the Halakhah follows the many.”

Why then did Alfasí quote the opinion of Abaye—itself a compromise solution that addresses both the interpretations of Rabbi Zeira and the Rabbi Abba bar Mamai—if the Halakhah does not follow the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah at all?

This question is strong enough that Rabbi Zerahia ha-Levi, a fierce opponent of many of Alfasí’s halakhic rulings, understands Alfasí to have ruled according to Rabbi Yehudah (otherwise why cite Abaye’s conclusion). He sides with Rambam against his understanding of Alfasí, although Rambam likely understood Alfasí to be aligned with his own ruling (see Sefat Emet Sukkah 21b s.v. sham).

The core of this approach lies in two principles 1) that we rule like the majority against Rabbi Yehudah and 2) the reasoning behind Rabbi Yehudah’s ruling may very well be a principle rejected elsewhere in Sukkah. Thus, to reject Rabbi Yehudah’s stringency here is to reject his approach globally, and we never even enter a discussion of supporting the sekhakh with a material susceptibility to impurity.

The Halakhah follows Rabbi Zeira within Rabbi Yehudah: The second approach to how to understand the sugya and Alfasí’s ruling is developed by Tosafot (s.v. she-ein) and Rosh (2:1) based on the parallel sugya in the Talmud Yerushalmi. The debate around Rabbi Yehudah’s position as presented in the Yerushalmi takes a much more conclusive turn:

Rabbi Immi said [the reason behind Rabbi Yehudah’s ruling is] that there are not ten tefahim of space from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh. Rabbi [Abba] said [the reason behind Rabbi Yehudah’s ruling is] that one should not support [the sukkah] on top of something [that can become] tamei. And it was taught [in t. Sukkah 2:3]: ‘A case of people in Jerusalem who used to hang their beds out their windows and cover them with sekhakh.’ If you would say that the reason [for Rabbi Yehudah’s ruling] is that one should not support [the sukkah] on top of something [that can become] tamei, behold they used to support [their sukko] on top of [beds] which can become tamei, thus that which is not fixed, as it needs ten tefahim of space from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh.

This parallel version of sugya presents another version of the debate about the rationale for Rabbi Yehudah’s position that sheds light on our reading of the Bavli. The first explanation of the problem R. Yehudah has with the sukkah, formulated in the Bavli (attributed to Rabbi Zeira) as “it is not fixed,” is explicated in the Yerushalmi (attributed to Rabbi Immi) as about the amount of airspace between the surface of the bed and the sekhakh.

Normally, the ten tefahim of vertical airspace are measured from the floor of the sukkah, disregarding any of the furniture brought into the sukkah; here because the sukkah is built into the bed-POLES Rabbi Yehudah’s requirement of fixed-ness (i.e., sturdiness and size) requires that the ten tefahim begin from the top surface of the bed rather than from the floor. Abaye’s solution in the Bavli—building the sukkah around the bed rather than into it—makes perfect sense as to why it would address this concern because once the bed is no longer a part of the sukkah but only a piece of furniture in it, the idea to measure the ten tefahim from the surface of the bed no longer makes sense.

In addition, after recording the debate between Rabbi Immi and Rabbi Abba, the Yerushalmi quotes a proof against Rabbi Abba from the Tosefta; the case of the scrupulous Jerusalemites demonstrates that supporting the sekhakh on top of a bed is not problematic at all. Thus, for the Yerushalmi, within the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah, the correct interpretation must be that of Rabbi Immi and Rabbi Zeira—the problem is that the sukkah is not sufficiently fixed, as it needs ten tefahim from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh.

Rabbi Immi’s interpretation of the case quoted in the Tosefta (that it would be problematic to build a bed-sukkah with air space less than ten tefahim measured from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh) even appears in our text of the Tosefta in situ (though not in the version quoted by the Yerushalmi).

Tosafot and Rosh conclude that the flow of the sugya in both the Yerushalmi and the Bavli (when read as a direct parallel to the Yerushalmi) indicates that the Halakhah follows the opinion of Rabbi Zeira within Rabbi Yehudah. However, if the whole basis of Rabbi Yehudah’s approach is his internally consistent requirement that the sukkah be fixed—an opinion rejected in the Talmud elsewhere—how can the Halakhah accord with him here? Rosh suggests that there are two different standards of fixed-ness.

Although Rabbi Yehudah’s global insistence on a high level of fixedness was rejected by others, in this case, a more minimal standard (that there be ten tefahim from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh) was adopted even by his opponents. Just because the requirement that there be ten tefahim from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh is an example of Rabbi Yehudah’s position on fixed-ness does not mean that it should be rejected here.

The approach of Tosafot and Rosh, corroborated by responsa of Rashi 1:213 (also cited as n.216 of those originally attributed to Ramban) and of Terumat ha-Deshen n.91, is that which was presented by Rabbi Yosef Karo in his Beit Yosef (629 and 630, and see Darkhei Moshe ha-Arokh 629:7) and Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 630:13) as the conclusive Halakhah:

 pymy hme ve-lo sekhak. Tosefta in situ (though not in the version quoted by the Yerushalmi).

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Although Rabbi Yehudah’s global insistence on a high level of fixedness was rejected by others, in this case, a more minimal standard (that there be ten tefahim from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh) was adopted even by his opponents. Just because the requirement that there be ten tefahim from the surface of the bed to the sekhakh is an example of Rabbi Yehudah’s position on fixed-ness does not mean that it should be rejected here.

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Rabbi Abba (that Rabbi Yehudah’s disqualification is based on a concern of susceptibility to impurity) it follows that Rosh, and seemingly Shulhan Arukh are unconcerned with this criterion. However, from Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 629:7 it seems like Rabbi Yosef Karo is hedging his ruling to accommodate the stringency of the third approach:

If Rabbi Yehudah’s position is adopted as authoritative here, it must be fixed on the ladder as having nothing to do with it being a material which is arguably susceptible to impurity. This indicates his willingness to adopt the approach of Raavad, Ramban, and Ran against the approach of Rosh that he seemingly endorses later in 630:13.

The doubt expressed by Rabbi Yosef Karo, and more fully explicated by Rabbi Moshe Isserles in his gloss, is that the ladder is disqualified because it is susceptible to impurity—a concern that only makes sense within the third approach to our sugya, following the interpretation of Rabbi Abba.

The Halakhah follows Rabbi Abba within Rabbi Yehudah: The third approach to the sugya is developed by Raavad and supported by Ramban and Ran in their commentaries to Alfasi’s code, as they characteristically rebut Rabbi Zerahiah Halevi’s critique. Rabbi Zerahiah ruled in accordance with the Sages, understanding Alfasi to have ruled like Rabbi Yehudah. In response, Raavad and Ramban defend the position of Rabbi Yehudah as interpreted by Rabbi Abba—that it is unsuitable to support the sekhakh on a material that itself can become impure (and perhaps even more broadly, the material supporting the sekhakh must itself be suitable to be used as sekhakh, see Rosh 2:1).

This argument rests on two claims. The first is that the flow of the sugya (involved entirely in a discussion of Rabbi Yehudah’s position) is evidence that the Halakhah follows Rabbi Yehudah, even against the rules followed by Rambam (that is even against the majority opinion of the Sages).

The second claim is that the Halakhah should consider the opinion of Rabbi Abba, not Rabbi Zeira, as authoritative. This is against the conclusion of the sugya as presented in the Yerushalmi, and disregards the proof brought from the Tosefta. Nonetheless, the argument is based on the fact that Rabbi Yehudah’s requirement that the sukkah be “fixed” is rejected elsewhere (cf. b. Sukkah 2a, 3b, 7b).

If Rabbi Yehudah’s position is adopted as authoritative here, it must be for a different reason, namely Rabbi Abba’s rather than Rabbi Zeira’s explanation. (This ignores the clever distinction suggested by Tosafot and Rosh that there is an agreed upon lower standard of fixedness that even Rabbi Yehudah’s opponents concede to him, but again that is based on the Yerushalmi which is not being considered here.)

It is this position—that of Raavad, Ramban, and Ran—that would disqualify a sukkah built where the material supporting the sekhakh is itself susceptible to impurity, like a metal pole or wire. (Synthetic materials are excluded from laws of impurity, but could still be a problem if using any non-valid sekhakh item is prohibited, a possibility Rosh 2:1 refutes.) Because of their characteristic opposition to Rabbi Zerahiah ha-Levi’s interpretations of Alfasi and his halakhic rulings, their defense of the position that he attributed to Alfasi may all be a back-and-forth about a straw-man. Alfasi (and Rambam as explained above) could respond to Rabbi Zerahiah’s critique by saying, “I actually agree with you that the Halakhah follows the Sages against Rabbi Yehudah.”

This would leave Raavad and Ramban’s defense of this position divorced from the actual position of Alfasi. Further frustrating their interpretation is that it does not accord with the material from the Tosefah and Yerushalmi cited by Rosh in support of his interpretation. Nonetheless, because of the prominence of Ramban and Ran in particular (as well as the fact that Rabbi Joel Sirks in his Bayit Hadash 629 s.v. ‘od strongly endorsed this approach), it entered the halakhic conversation, and is proposed as a stringency for which to strive.

Modern Halakhic Codes

Rabbi Yosef Karo in Shulhan Arukh 629:7 claims, based on a responsum of Rashba (n.215 of those originally attributed to Rambam) that it is “doubtful” whether one can use a ladder (which is arguably susceptible to impurity) to secure and support the sekhakh. This indicates his willingness to adopt the approach of Raavad, Ramban, and Ran against the approach of Rosh that he seemingly endorses later in 630:13.

Rabbi Avraham Gombiner in Magen Avraham 629:9, citing Bayit Hadash, notes this apparent inconsistency between the rulings recorded in Shulhan Arukh in 629:7 and 630:13, resolving it by explaining that Rabbi Yosef Karo adopts the more stringent approach as a stringency to be maintained ab initio when building the sukkah, but that post facto he adopts the more lenient approach, as above.

The reconciliation suggested by Magen Avraham is dismissed by Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (Beur ha-Gra 629:7) who strongly endorses the approach of Rosh that there is no problem of using a material susceptible to impurity to support the sekhakh.

Rabbi David Segal in Taz 629:10 understands the problem with the ladder as having nothing to do with it being a material which is susceptible to impurity supporting the sekhakh; rather the ladder is disqualified because it is 4 tefahim wide, and thus understands the Shulhan Arukh as universally adopting the ruling of Rosh against Raavad, Ramban, and Ran.

The rulings of Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan in Mishnah Berurah and Rabbi Yehiel Mikel Epstein in Arukh ha-Shulhan reflect these authors’ general approaches to dealing with these sorts of unresolved debates among medieval and early-modern commentators. Mishnah Berurah (630:59) first notes the accepted opinion of Rosh and then the stringency of Ramban:

Even though he supports [the sekhakh] on top of a bed which can become impure, we don’t care, because [the criterion that it not be susceptible to impurity] was stated regarding the sekhakh and not the walls; nonetheless, ab initio it is proper to be careful regarding this because some of the poskim are strict, see Magen Avraham 629:8.
Mishnah Berurah adopts the more stringent approach either because he usually relies heavily on Magen Avraham (in this case traced back through Bayit Hadash to Ramban and Ran) or because he has a penchant suggesting legal interpretations that fulfill as many medieval approaches as possible. However, in his Shoba ha-Tziyun n.60, he notes that although Alfasi, Rosh, and Rabbi Israel Isserlein (author of Terumat ha-Deshen) rejected the concern about the supporting material being susceptible to impurity, he nonetheless was concerned that Ran and Ritva’s interpretation of Alfasi was correct.

The Mishnah Berurah offers that after he explored the issue further, he discovered that many (perhaps even the majority of medieval commentators) reject this concern including Rabbi Yitzhak ibn Ghiyyat (Hil. Sukkah §241), Rambam, Rabbi Zerahiah ha-Levi, Rid (b. Sukkah 21b), and Rabbi Zedekiah ben Abraham (Shibolei ha-Leket §344 quoting Rid; however he also quotes Sefer ha-Ittur who rules like Rabbi Yehudah). He concludes his footnote with a hedging recommendation echoing Magen Avraham to be stringent even if the law truly accords with the more lenient approach that would permit supporting the sekhakh with a material susceptible to impurity:

Why should we be stringent, and further there are several challenging questions against this approach ... and since this is the decision of our teachers the authors of the Shulhan Arukh and the later authorities one should not be stringent in this matter.

Although he mentions that many (including Bayit Hadash, Magen Avraham, and Mishnah Berurah) see the ab initio stringency as a necessity, and commends their stringency, he concludes that the majority opinion and that which was codified in Shulhan Arukh is to be lenient, and that this is sufficient.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this sugya presents a range of practical conclusions stemming from a debate that illustrates many of the key details of talmud study: juggling different rules of adjudication—but we follow the majority or the opinion most discussed?—balancing the weight of Bavli and Yerushalmi, balancing the interpretations of different commentators, weighing how each of them is quoted and used by later authorities throughout the process of codification and super-commentary, and understanding the interplay between ab initio and post facto considerations.

Core pillars of halakhic jurisprudence—Rambam and Rosh—agree that there is no problem of using a material susceptible to impurity as a support for the sekhakh. This is also a plausible read of Alfasi and the Shulhan Arukh, leading me to agree with Arukh ha-Shulhan and the Vilna Gaon that regarding the practical Halakhah, one need not be overly concerned about this stringency.

Knowing that Raavad’s comments may have been written largely as a reaction to Rabbi Zerahiah ha-Levi’s comments, rather than to assert his own position and reading of the sugya and of Alfasi’s ruling, I am less inclined to adopt the interpretation of Raavad and Ramban. That said, the suggestion to be stringent as much as possible ab initio could very well be what the Mishnah and Alfasi really meant, and that position is certainly understandable.

In the final analysis, I am not compelled to be so overly concerned with this question to extend this already arguable stringency beyond its explicit scope—materials susceptible to impurity—to any material disqualified for use as sekhakh, e.g. plastic zip-ties. It is a difficult claim to make from within the text, and it is an unnecessary stringency that makes sukkah construction more difficult and dangerous for hard-working Jews during an already busy time of year.
In 1866, etrog merchants failed to deliver citrons on time to thousands of Jews in the United States. From New York to Texas, Louisiana to Kansas, “congregations were sadly disappointed,” opined one Jewish newspaperman at the time, “but not more so than the unfortunate importers, who, on the arrival of the steamer, received some splendid Corfu Esrogim, but, alas too late!”

The disappointment shared in the unhappy report indicates that many Jews in this so-called Treifene Medine had wished to observe the laws of Sukkot. Their plans, though, were stymied by the too-much-delayed delivery of the Greek etrogim. In fact, Jews in the United States had a long tradition—one that began with Shearith Israel in New York—of fundraising before Sukkot to ensure that anyone who wished could acquire the religious equipment to perform the holiday rituals.

Of course, America was not exactly the “Goldene Medine” either. By the 1870s, the etrog market was in steep decline. Mitzvah merchants—a terrific term coined by historian Annie Polland—like Hyman Sakolski continued to sell etrogim along with sacred books on Manhattan’s Division Street. However, Sakolski made it clear that etrogim were no longer a profitable item. He sold them to ensure that the dwindling number of interested Jews could observe the holiday. Peddlers and shopkeepers no longer bothered to make the necessary international arrangements to import the sacred goods. Accordingly, the number of newspaper circulars advertising etrogim for purchase speedily decreased. One Jew from Cincinnati summed up the sentiments of his coreligionists this way:

If you have no Esrog, no Lulav, etc., oranges, grapes, pears, and apples will do, not to be shaken, but to be gratefully enjoyed as God’s blessing bestowed upon our beautiful land. Instead of shaking, send a nice basket of choice fruit to some poor family or families, and you have done quite well. Be glad, be blessed.

Overall, religious observance among America’s Jews was at a nadir. It wasn’t that most observant Jews had migrated toward Reform and abandoned traditional rituals. Usually, it was the case in the post-Civil War period that young Jews no longer looked to any form of Judaism. Sukkot, therefore, suffered along with Shabbat and other Jewish holidays. In September 1876, one Lower East Side merchant claimed with some exaggeration that he was the lone provider of etrogim left to Jews in the United States.

Then, something happened. In 1887, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger of New York reported that the “number of merchants selling etrogim” had “increased greatly in recent years, and the competition is now exceedingly great.” Here are Rabbi Weinberger’s observations found in his Ha-Yehudim ve-Yahadut bi-New York, translated into English many years ago by my teacher, Jonathan Sarna:

This has brought with it a certain amount of good. In New York, any Jew can now easily observe these mitzvot in the strictest possible fashion, without worrying about spending more than he can afford. Only a few years ago, a poor man in New York could not buy a lulav and etrog of his own; even the most highly Orthodox had to observe the commandments with etrogim circulated around every morning by poor peddlers. Now it is hard to find any kosher traditional home without an etrog of its own. In many synagogues, especially the small ones, there are as many etrogim as worshippers.

What had happened? For one thing, the Jewish population in the United States spiked due to mass migration from Eastern Europe. In 1880, there were a quarter-million Jews living on American soil. By the turn of the century, that figure was closer to a million. The spike in interest in etrogim also had something to do with their new place of origin. For instance, the newspapers announced that Mr. J.H. Kantrowitz of 31 East Broadway had “imported from the Holy Land a choice lot of Esrogim. This is the first time that Esrogim grown in the Holy Land have been sold in this city, and Mr. Kantrowitz’s enterprise deserves liberal patronage.” Mr. Kantrowitz did quite well for himself, convincing others to arrange for etrog shipments from Eretz Yisrael, as well. In short order, American Jewry experienced a great spike in etrog sales—and, accordingly, etrog observance.

There is no requirement to use an etrog from Eretz Yisrael. Yet, the connection between observance and the Holy Land triggered something powerful. Jews started to take a greater interest in the fruitful holiday of Sukkot. No doubt, they were moved by the news of the pioneering efforts to rebuild and replant the Holy Land. To them, support of etrog importation meant support for the Yishuv.

Mitzvah merchants still peddled some Corfu etrogim. However, Holy Land etrogim emerged as the citron of choice. Orthodox Jews in the United States, for example, were happy to learn in 1881 that the “Agricultural School of Jaffa produces excellent white wine, and this year a small number of Esrogim were among its products.” Decades later, America’s Jews also started to purchase imported etrogim from Petah-Tikva. The lesson learned here is that religious observance can, and oftentimes is—inspired by ancillary, if not altogether righteous causes. In the case of etrogim, Zionism was this great cause.

Among the Orthodox, Zionism was not a controversial item. In June 1898, the founders of the Orthodox Union spent hours deliberating whether to call their new organization “Orthodox,” debating the pros and cons of such a nomenclature. However, the other plank decided at that inaugural meeting, on Zionism, required just minimal conversation and reached an overwhelming consensus in very short order. Likewise, the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim, established in 1902, was composed of much more religiously “rightwing” members compared to the Orthodox Union leadership. Yet, the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim agreed wholeheartedly with its Union counterparts.

The renewed prominence of the etrog in American Jewish life piqued the strange curiosity of Christian neighbors. In 1916, the editors of the Country Gentleman, the journal of record for the “farm, the garden and the fireside” in Philadelphia, told their readers about the “sacred Jewish citron” and the high prices paid for it by “Orthodox Hebrews.” The magazine noted that while most are imported from Palestine to the United States, to the delight of agricultural opportunists that, owing to the ongoing Great War, “it is possible that the etrog might be profitably grown on a small scale in some of the citrus sections of Florida and California.”

The plan did not work, but some still try. As of 2011, there was one 80-year-old etrog farmer who raises etrogim not too far from Sacramento. Aside from that, etrog yields from American soil are

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**How Zionism Saved the Etrog in America**

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**Sukkot**

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Sukkot

Something to Lose: Eviatar Banai and the Sukkot Paradox

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Eviatar Banai is an Israeli rock musician who comes from a well-known family of performers. He is also a ba’al-teshuva, a returnee to faith, and his songs reflect the various stages of the religious journey he has undergone in the public eye. In his mesmerizing new song “Pergola” he reflects upon many of the personal changes he has undergone - musical fame, self-affiliation with the Haredi community, and the material accoutrements that accompany both developments. Many of the lyrics read as ironic, such as references to certain trappings of a bourgeois lifestyle (a “Hyundai Santa Fe,” his “crazy mortgage,” and eating “Kosher sushi” in the tony Jerusalem neighborhood of Shaarei Chesed). He describes his fame in equally wry terms - poking fun even at the way people praise his religiosity and his contributions to the Israeli cultural landscape. Indeed, the song’s repeated refrain, “yesh li mah li-hafsid,” “I have something to lose,” points to the potential downside of success. One can become, as Banai sings, “a slave to the body, a slave to fear.” The more we have, the more we are vulnerable to our fears of losing it all.

Yet the music video which accompanies this song provides an intimate portrait of Banai’s own family, who share Banai’s bourgeois lifestyle with him, but also elevate it and turn it from a subject of ridicule into a source of visual beauty. A child with peyot dancing on the beach. This life is built on the same experience fundamentally focused on food and aesthetics. Yet, the Sukkot itself, reiterates the idea that much of what we believe to be permanent, our homes, our possessions and so forth, are in fact ephemeral as breath itself (hevel).

At the same time, Sukkot is a harvest festival, like Thanksgiving or Oktoberfest, or specifically, a time when the summer harvests were processed in advance of the rainy season. While Ecclesiastes reminds us that everything we toil for is in vain, Sukkot is also a celebration of the fruits of our labor. In Rabinic literature, Sukkot is “Zeman Simhateinu,” “the Time of our Rejoicing,” and many aspects of the holiday, both Biblically and Rabinically, have an explicitly joyous dimension. While the sukka is meant to recall a fragile desert dwelling, sukka are traditionally decorated in a beautiful manner, with furnishments and paraphernalia that are meant to recall one’s actual home.

Similar, in a way, to “Pergola,” the themes of Sukkot emphasize the ultimate meaninglessness of material possessions while simultaneously celebrating physical bounty with great joy. At the center of this paradox lies the “feast,” which appears prominently in the song and of course characterizes the holiday itself. At the climax of his song, Banai imagines a kind of feast, “I will bring wine... I will bring bread.” The sukka by definition is a site of feasting, as one is traditionally obligated to eat all of one’s holiday meals in the sukka. A feast, where a meal is both shared and consumed, is a physical experience fundamentally focused on food and aesthetics. Yet, the communal-social element of the feast, and the sanctification of the meal through blessings and other means, suggests that it is ultimately impossible to horde one’s bounty and keep it to oneself forever. While Ecclesiastes advocates for a kind of abnegation of the physical, the Sukkot holiday elevates these physical elements and transforms them into instruments of communal cohesion and spiritual growth. It is possible that Eviatar Banai did not intend to touch on all of the complex ritual and theological elements of Sukkot in his catchy song. Nevertheless, “Pergola” may help unpack some of the deeper messages of our most joyful Jewish holiday.

The chorus of the song raises the possibility of “going outside,” of leaving complicated modern trappings to engage in a simpler, more elemental kind of existence. “I will bring wine, I will bring a ray of sunshine,” sings Banai, “I will bring bread, I will bring wood and water” (ואלי יירא אתشهر יכם, ואלי יירא אתבחור יכם). These lines, especially when heard in Hebrew, have a Biblical cadence to them. They recall someone who is making offerings to God, not necessarily in a formal Temple context, but perhaps in the more homegrown way we associate with the book of Genesis. Alternatively, these elements may also obliquely allude to the holiday of Sukkot, a time when we specifically “go outside,” drink wine, eat bread, and sit in structures made from trees that filter in sunshine. Water too is an important part of the ritual landscape of Sukkot, coinciding with the anxious beginning of the rainy season in Israel, which affects the coming year’s crops (as in m. Rosh Hashana 1.2). A pergola itself may also recall Sukkot, as it is a lattice roofed structure that can easily be converted to a sukka with the addition of some natural greenery or bamboo.

Like the life that Banai describes in “Pergola,” there are contradictory elements at the heart of the Sukkot holiday. On the one hand, the sukka themselves are meant to recall the fragile temporary dwellings the Jews resided in when they were wandering in the desert (Lev. 23). Leaving our permanent homes to voluntarily enter this vulnerable setting, we are reminded of the fleeting nature of all our material accomplishments and of our ultimate dependence on God. This element of the holiday is reinforced by the book of Ecclesiastes, which is read every year on Sukkot. Ecclesiastes reminds us that “all is vanity,” it asks the question: מ-ה-ז-ה-ו-ל-דָּמָה: כל-שָׁמֶל-שָׁמַע, מה-תֵּשַּׁע, “What value is there for a man in all of his toil beneath the sun?” (Eccl. 1:3). The book, like the sukka itself, reiterates the idea that much of what we believe to be permanent, our homes, our possessions and so forth, are in fact ephemeral as breath itself (hevel).

The lyrics along with a rough translation may be found below. Please be warned that some of the contemporary Hebrew idioms don’t translate easily into English:

Sukkot

sparse if not non-existent. For more than a hundred years, Jewish bookstores and pop-up merchants in storefronts and residential basements urge their customers to purchase the slightly pricier Israeli etrog to support farmers in the Holy Land. Dutifully raised in a Religious Zionist home, I usually comply. It isn’t that Californian or Floridian etrogim would be any less kosher. However, there is much to be said for the ever-increasing extra layers of meaning of the mitzvot we observe.
I have something to lose, a Hyundai SUV, candy on my tongue, nice clothes.
One big, fancy house, a huge mortgage, a two-storey villa in Ramot.
Kosher Sushi in Shaarei Chesed, a permanent seat in the synagogue.
A pergola above and a pergola below.

I have something to lose, stopping in the street for pictures, they are full of compliments, I fill up Zappa
I also sanctify God’s name, play a role in Israeli culture, the gold albums.
I’m on every playlist.
I’ve got a halo ’round my head; I’m on billboards, in headphones; with a potbelly.
A pergola above and a pergola below.

I’ll bring wine, I’ll bring a ray of sunshine, I’ll bring bread, I’ll bring wood and water.
Come outside, let’s go.
Come outside, let’s go.

I have something to lose, shiny black shoes, on the blue carpet, with manicured trees circling around.
And there’s a competition, I can’t lose, just let them pass me by, play the drums harder.
A slave to the body, a slave to fear, the fruit of deception, an unexplored abyss.
A pergola above and a pergola below.

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