

ARTS & LETTERS

# The Etrog

Fiction by Nobel laureate S.Y. Agnon, for Sukkot, in a new English translation by Jeffrey Saks

BY S. Y. AGNON

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O WITNESS HOW PRECIOUS THE MITZVAH OF ETROG IS TO THE JEWISH people one need only visit Meah Shearim between Elul and Sukkot. That neighborhood, which is like a withered plant all year long, becomes a verdant pleasure garden in that season, with stores full of etrogs, lulavs, and hadasim. Jews from all over Jerusalem crowd into those stores, inspecting the etrogs, lulavs, and hadasim, or sharing learned insights about them. Even the elderly, who never exit their own doorposts all year long, either due to weakness or fear of wasting moments from Torah study, come to purchase an etrog. Because of the importance of this mitzvah, they go to the trouble to select their own etrog—after all, an etrog selected by someone else cannot be compared to one chosen by one’s own hand. These elderly jump from courtyard to courtyard and from shop to shop, with renewed youth and vigor as the shopkeepers run to and fro with boxes full of etrogs, each according to the stature of the customer, and the budget he has to spend. In between push young boys with little baskets woven of the lulav palm fronds, used to bind the Sukkot species together, beautifying the mitzvah, and beautiful in and of themselves on account of their lovely shape.

The morning after Yom Kippur I went to purchase an etrog for myself. I pushed my way into the shop of a seller of old books, who abandons book selling during

the month or so before Sukkot in order to sell etrogs.

The shop was full of customers, aside from the usual scholars and the types that crowd about wherever crowds are gathered. A beautiful scent arose from the etrogs and hadasim, which masked the smell of old books, most of which had come from the apartments of poor folk, forced to sell off their libraries to buy Sabbath provisions or to marry off their daughters.

The book seller, who had become an *etrogger* (that is, a seller of etrogs), was busy with his merchandise. Very, very busy. He leaped from corner to corner, from shelf to shelf, pulling one etrog out of its wrapping while wrapping another etrog back up. He opened one crate of etrogs, hiding away an etrog or two, all the while running to greet his customers, sharing a word with this one and that, like a guest of honor glad to see each and every acquaintance who had come to rejoice with him. It is the manner of merchants that every deed is intended toward advancing their livelihood, and this fellow, too, acted to increase his income, yet love of the mitzvah itself elevated the man to act with alacrity in order that his customers might merit beautiful lulavs, beautiful etrogs, and triple-leaved hadasim. Know this to be true, for that year road travel was perilous, and he endangered himself, traveling to Transjordan and a variety of other terrible places, to import lulavs, etrogs, and hadasim the likes of which Jerusalem had never seen even in times of peace. If a person should say, “There’s a wrinkle in this here etrog,” know that this wrinkle is to the praise of the etrog, for the fruit that Eve ate in the Garden of Eden was none other than an etrog, and her teeth marks remain on the fruit in the shape of this wrinkle.

On seeing that the shop was packed, and the storekeeper preoccupied, I decided to leave. He pulled me back and said, “Wait a moment and I’ll give you an etrog that blesses those who bless on it.” He abandoned all his other customers, jumped about while presenting me with two or three etrogs; about each he asked, “Were you looking for one like this? Is this the one you desire?” I hadn’t a chance to examine them before he presented a fourth, fifth, and sixth etrog. I hadn’t a chance to examine any of these either before he left me to attend to another customer. As he

treated me, so he treated him. Despite the differences among the etrogs—in size, quality, and beauty—the storekeeper’s mouth had the same word of praise for each. While he was standing with an etrog held in the face of one customer, he had bounced back to me saying, “Nice choice. That’s the etrog I thought to suggest to you from the start.” When he told me its price, I set it aside. After all, aside from the etrog we have many other mitzvot, and none of them are free. I set aside that etrog and sought another more within my budget. The storekeeper smiled at me and said, “Rabban Gamliel purchased an etrog for one thousand zuz, and the sages did not even specify whether it was beautiful or not, and you set aside the choicest of etrogs on account of a few shillings?”

Aside from the storekeeper who at first ignored me, then attended me, then ignored me again, there were various others who didn’t leave me alone. They grabbed from my hand each etrog I picked up to inspect—either to buy it themselves or to speak some learned insight about it. In that way I heard the tales that are repeated each year: like the story of the rebbe from Nashkiz, who took all his savings to buy an etrog. He saw an old man crying over a dead horse. He asked the man why he was crying. The man replied, “I am a water carrier, and this horse would pull my wagon. Now that it is dead, so is my livelihood.” The rabbi took out all his money, giving it to the man to purchase a new horse. That righteous man said, “What’s the difference? Etrog is one of God’s commandments, as is giving charity. Let others recite a blessing over their etrogs. I will bless that horse.” Many other tales were told. Since they are old and well-known I will leave them be and only tell a new tale that has something new to teach us.

In a corner of the shop, away from all the other customers, stood an old man inspecting the etrogs in one of the boxes. Sometimes a person can stand in the thick of a crowd, and yet it is the lone man on the side who draws his attention. This is what happened to me with that old man at that time. I ignored the rest of the goings-on in the shop and stared at him.

When he selected an etrog he asked the storekeeper what it cost. He told him the price. Setting the etrog aside, the old man said, “That much money I do not have.

Give me one cheaper than this.” The storekeeper said, “Rabbi, if you want a kosher etrog you have to pay such-and-such a price, just as Rabbi Ploni and Gabbai Almoni paid for theirs. Do you know, rabbi, how much *they* paid?” At that point the storekeeper named an outrageous price, while looking at the etrog and declaring it to be the very embodiment of the Torah’s ideal of beauty, strictly kosher according to all opinions. The old man replied, “Even the money, with which one purchases the etrog, must also be kosher.” In the meantime the storekeeper had already sidled up to me, inquiring, “Have you found one yet?”

I turned to him and asked, “That man you called ‘Rabbi’—who is he?” He whispered, “Why, that’s the Rabbi of Teplik. I’m surprised you don’t know him. All of Jerusalem says he’s a true genius.” I told the shopkeeper, “I’ve heard his name but have never seen him face-to-face until now.”

What had I heard of him? Aside from his genius in Torah knowledge and great piety, he is renowned for his charitable works with the poor. He struggles on their behalf with the hard-hearted and uncharitable and degrades himself to deal with those appointed to administer the needs of the poor. On account of the mitzvah of tzedakah he thinks nothing of his own honor, nor of the trouble he exerts on behalf of the needy—which for his own benefit he would easily forgo. There are rabbis who are praised for their Torah knowledge, for their piety, their cleverness, or worldly knowledge—that rabbi possessed all these things. He was worthy to be crowned with gold and reside in splendor, but he lived in a poor neighborhood, in a small apartment, in worn-out garments, like most of the folks in Jerusalem who do not possess enough money to purchase fancy clothes. Most of his meager salary earned from the rabbinate was distributed to orphans and widows.

He finally found a kosher etrog that was within his budget. He took out his wallet and paid the storekeeper. From the way he opened the wallet and counted out the money, it was clear he didn’t have much to spare.

I, too, found an etrog. More than I wanted to spend or had budgeted I ended up splurging on that etrog. Its price having been driven up by the competition for a

beautiful etrog. After buying a lulav and hadasim I also got the small woven basket that holds the lulav for a mere two pennies. More than I delighted in my expensive etrog I was pleased with my two-penny basket. Whether one's etrog is beautiful or extra beautiful, he can always find one even more beautiful. If I had another three or four shillings to spend, I could have bought a truly, outstandingly beautiful etrog, but as for that basket—I doubt I could have ever found one better. The boys of Meah Shearim, who weave these baskets for the lulavs, even though they don't always take care to dress nicely, their handiwork is second to none.

Weary and worn, I left the etrog shop. The day before had been Yom Kippur, and I had spent 26 hours or more fasting and praying barefoot, and I hadn't felt tired—neither in body nor spirit. On the contrary, I experienced great joy from the onset through the ending of the Holy Day. But today I stood only three or four hours in the pursuit of an etrog, and felt not even a fraction of that joy. Even though I acquired a beautiful etrog, anything involving haggling over prices, even when it involves a mitzvah, brings me to exhaustion.

I have always been troubled by this: Mitzvot that are given to the whole of the Jewish people should be affordable to all Jews, yet some mitzvot are within reach of the rich but not the poor. Yet Torah and mitzvot were given to all Jews.

While I was still trying to digest this dilemma, a certain fellow said to me, “You should wish me Mazal Tov—my wife, *she should live and be well*, gave birth to a male son.” I wished him Mazal Tov on his son, and when I had exhausted all the blessings I had to bestow on him I asked when the *brit* would take place. He told me, “On the first day of Sukkot, following the services at the Perushim Synagogue in my neighborhood. As you know, our custom is not to ‘invite’ people to a *brit*, but I wanted to let you know when it would take place, and if you are my friend, and share in my joy, and would honor me with your presence, please come to the *brit*.” I nodded my head and answered, “Please God.”

On the first day of Sukkot I rose extra early, not in zeal for the mitzvah of etrog, as is the habit of the Righteous, some of whom remain awake all night in anticipation

for the first light of daybreak to take the lulav. Rather, against my will I was awoken by a ceaseless, honking automobile outside my home, arousing my neighbor to head off on a day-trip or shopping trip or hunting trip. The drivers are cruel: Because they are too lazy to get out of their vehicles and ring a doorbell, they sit and honk, disturbing all those around.

I was as agitated as any man woken early from his sleep. It was too early to get out of bed, but I was too annoyed to just lie there. I got up, washed my hands and face, entered my sukkah, and recited the blessing over the lulav and etrog. It would have been better not to be woken prematurely, so I could rise well-rested and in a good spirit and perform the mitzvah with joy. Having been woken early I was tired and knew not what to do. After thinking for a moment I went and poured myself a hot drink.

When I finished drinking I decided to go and keep my promise. Either way I needed to go, so what difference does it make whether I leave early or late? I took my tallit, my siddur, and my lulav and etrog, and headed off for the synagogue of that man making a *brit* for his son.

It was a nice day, neither too hot nor too chilly. The sukkot I saw along the way, and the lulavs of the men walking to synagogue, perfumed the air of my journey. After a bit more than an hour I arrived in the neighborhood where the *brit* would take place.

That neighborhood was quite impoverished, with neither nice homes nor maintained streets, gardens, or orchards to please the eye. Yet it was quiet. No automobiles drove there, certainly not on the Sabbath or Holy Days. Here no honking horns wake slumberers from their sleep, yet the residents had already awoken. From the synagogues where the worshippers pray with sunrise was heard the sound of their prayers, and from a few sukkot could be heard the sound of Torah study. Out of love for the mitzvah of sitting in the sukkah, the men sat learning Torah there. The abundance of sukkot, with their leafy green roofs, made the neighborhood look like a flowery garden, while etrogs and hadasim gave off a



pleasant fragrance, and the decorated cloth sukkah walls added beauty to the scene.

I entered the Persuhim Synagogue, set my lulav down on the windowsill, took a book from the shelf, and sat down to learn.

In the synagogue was but one old man, who stood bent over at the bookcase looking at a book. I had seen such a stance but a few days earlier.

After a moment he returned the book to its place and began pacing about like one troubled by a difficult matter he seeks to escape. I didn't raise my eyes to look at that old man, and neither did he look at me.

As he was pacing he passed the windowsill where my lulav and etrog rested. He looked and asked permission to see my etrog. Upon examining it he declared, "Kosher, kosher."

I remembered him and what he had said about the officials who waste communal funds to acquire beautiful etrogs for themselves. His exact words were: "Even the money used to buy the etrog needs to be kosher, that is, 'kosher money' is more important than adding to the beauty of the mitzvah."

While I was pondering his words, he said to me, "I would like to perform the mitzvah with your etrog." I said to him, "It is given to you as a gift." After he recited the blessing, he returned my etrog to me.

I asked him, "Rabbi, where is your etrog? You bought a lovely etrog, and with 'kosher' money did you purchase it."

He gazed at me with his large and lovely eyes, which God had graced with wisdom and innocence, and he said, "You were there when I bought my etrog? Indeed, a kosher etrog it was, but something happened to it.—Why are you standing?" I said to him, "If the rabbi doesn't sit, I don't sit either." He said, "I am used to standing, but so that you need not stand, I will sit."

He sat and said, “In my neighborhood there resides a certain householder. A tough, angry, irritable man, but careful about mitzvot. He bought an etrog for a half lira, maybe more. He bragged about it in front of his neighbors, that there was none finer. I’m not sure how beautiful it really was, but there’s no one in this neighborhood who can afford to buy an etrog for a half lira. This morning I heard a sound of crying coming from his house. I told my wife, I hear a child crying, go see why she is crying. My wife said, The girl was playing with the etrog her step-father bought for a half lira, the etrog fell from her hand, broke its *pitam* becoming invalid for the mitzvah, and her mother smacked her. My wife added, That poor wretch knows what’s in store for her from her husband on account of her daughter from her first marriage. I asked my wife, Where is he now?—He ran to the mikveh to immerse prior to taking the lulav. If he’s come out of the mikveh, he must be sitting in the sukkah of Rebbe Shlomo of Zvhil, to observe him as he waves the lulav, for his waving is like that of his father, who received the tradition from his father, and his father from his father back to the Maggid of Zloczow. I took my etrog to the girl and said to her, Don’t cry. Here is my etrog, give it to your mother. If your father asks, have your mother tell him: The rabbi was here and saw that your etrog was not kosher. To enable you to perform the mitzvah properly, he gave you his etrog as an unconditional gift. Because of that trouble I didn’t have time to recite the blessing on my own etrog.”

The rabbi added, “That’s the punishment for one who is hassled. Even if he exerts himself on behalf of an etrog, and purchases an etrog that is kosher according to all opinions, his haste prevents him from reciting the blessing over it!”

***Translated from Hebrew by Jeffrey Saks. For more on this story click here.*** Saks is the founding director of ATID. This original translation is forthcoming in a new anthology of Agnon’s short stories, The Outcast and Other Tales, edited by Jeffrey Saks, part of the S.Y. Agnon Library, featuring the writing of the Nobel



*laureate in new and revised English translations. Saks' courses given at the Agnon House in Jerusalem are broadcast at [WebYeshiva.org/Agnon](http://WebYeshiva.org/Agnon).*

*Shmuel Yosef Agnon shared the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature.*

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#TRANSLATION