

"THE ANATOMY OF AN ETROG"

The Rabbis were inclined to read a great deal of symbolic significance into the cluster of four species, the arba minnim, which we take in our hands in performance of the special mitzvah on this festival of Sukkot. It is in keeping with this sacred tradition that we may permit ourselves to indulge our imaginations and symbolically interpret certain details of this observance. Particularly, let us attempt to interpret the laws of the Halakhah as they relate to the anatomy of the etrog.

At either end of the etrog are two small appendages. At the base or broader end, where the fruit was originally attached to the tree, is the oketz, or stem. At the other end of the etrog, where it tapers off to a narrow point, is a small, brown, bulbous appendage, which biologists call the stigma and which in Hebrew is known as shoshanta. That word literally means "blossom," because it is shaped like a miniature blossom and is reminiscent of the flower of the etrog before the fruit was produced. In more colloquial parlance, this stigma or shoshanta is called the pitem.

Whether the absence of either the oketz or the pitem disqualifies the etrog is a matter of opinion; our greatest authorities differed in their decisions. Thus, R. Jacob b. Yakar maintained that our major concern is the pitem: if it is present, the etrog is valid for religious use, and if not it is disqualified.

R. Isaac Halevi maintains that it is irrelevant whether or not the etrog contains a shoshanta or a pitem; what matters is that the etrog possess its oketz or stem. There is a third opinion, that of Rabbi Alfasi, RaMBaM, and Tosafot, who require both the oketz and the pitem, and invalidate the etrog in the absence of either one. While the details of the Halakhic decision are rather intricate, we generally side with the third opinion and require the etrog to possess both stem and blossom (actually "stigma," but following the Hebrew word shoshanta, we shall call it the "blossom").

What do these represent? The pitem, as we have stated, looks like and reminds us of a blossom. It is a part of the fruit that protrudes as it grows, as if it were pointing in the direction of growth. It represents, therefore, the youthful openness to change, newness, the state of being pliable and alert and alive, in motion and full of promise. While the pitem represents change and growth, the oketz or stem is that which ties the fruit to the tree itself. It therefore symbolizes rootedness, stability, continuity, and endurance. While the pitem points the future, the oketz binds to the past. An etrog to be kosher needs both: change and stability, newness and continuity, past and future.

The Halakhic reasoning for the need for these two appendages deepens this symbolic awareness. If there is no oketz on the etrog, it is disqualified because it is considered haser, incomplete or lacking; it is simply not a full etrog. If it has no

pitem, however, it is considered shalem, complete, but invalidated because it does not fulfill the requirement of hadar, beauty. It is simply not an attractive etrog, and this particular fruit must be hadar or beautiful: the very name "etrog" is unknown in the Bible, where it is simply called peri etz hadar, "the fruit of a beautiful tree."

To lose the oketz, therefore, to sever one's relations with his past and his roots, to forego stability, is to be a haser, to lack something organic, part of one's self. None of us is created out of air; we all are the latest links in long chains. Whether we like it or not, we each of us embody the entire past, and when we ignore that past we annihilate part of ourselves -- we are haser, incomplete.

To be incapable of the pitem is to lack hadar, beauty. One who is not open to the future and who does not know how to change will find that his life is missing charm and freshness, vigor and color.

Judaism therefore reminds us that we must be both wholesome and handsome, complete and attractive, shalem and hadar: our lives must possess both oketz and pitem, stem and blossom.

In youth, we all possess the pitem and tend to overlook the oketz. Youth is the time of growth, of blossoming, of change. Perhaps it is more than coincidence that the symbol of the pitem, that of the blossom, has been adopted in the peculiar idiom of

contemporary youth: "flower-power!" In the obsession with change and blossoming, youth tends to ignore all that binds it to the past and to disdain those who represent such bonds. Once upon a time, the dividing line was the age of forty; today it is thirty and getting younger -- everyone over that age is consigned to the limbo of the old-fashioned, those whom the tides of history have swept aside. Youth is full of revolutionary fervor and idealistic enthusiasm; it is messianic and utopian. With increasing age, we tend to allow the pitem to wither, and become more conscious of the oketz: we accept membership in the established order of things, we are anxious to defend the gains of our own youth, we seek to instill a sense of tradition and contact with the past. We ourselves feel we have become part of the past that we wish to remember.

The etrog, therefore, reminds us of both. To those of us who are younger, it says: don't ignore the oketz. Without roots and stem, no flowers can flourish and no beauty can endure. Do not imagine you can remain the people of the pitem forever; those who are today under thirty will someday be over thirty! And to those of the middle ages and over, the etrog says: do not deride the pitem on the etrog of life. There can be no real, active life without change and growth and promise and the exploration of new pathways and discovery of new horizons. This is true even in religious life. The great Besht told us that every individual must

find his way to God both through his fathers and through his own searching. In our Amidah prayer we refer to God as Elokei Avraham and Elokei Yitzhak and Elokei Yaakov -- "the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Why do we not say simply, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?" Because, answers the Besht, while it is true that each of the fathers accepted God because his own father had told him about Him, because religion was part of a cherished tradition, that was not enough; he also had to discover God by his own initiative. God was indeed Elokei Avraham, the God of Abraham. But Isaac had to find Him on his own and make Him Elokei Yitzhak, the God of Isaac. And Jacob, though he knew of God from his father and grandfather, he too had to discover Him on his own, and make of God the Elokei Yaakov. That is why we refer to the Almighty as both Elokeinu and Elokei Avotenu, "our God," and "the God of our fathers."

This means that we must be patient with the exuberance of youth. We must recognize that it is worth practicing restraint in order to have an etrog with a pitem. Youth has too much to contribute to dismiss its zeal because of its excesses, because it is sometimes, or even most of the times, irritating. But that is a law of life: whoever seeks to change the status quo will step on toes and evoke opposition. The late Rabbi Maimon used to point to the proximity of the two phrases in the prayer before the Shema: oseh hadashot, baal milhamot, "who does new things and is a warrior" --

whoever seeks to innovate and introduce some new idea, will invariably evoke opposition and a struggle will ensue. But it is worth it: there can be no kosher etrog without a pitem.

Hence, a mature personality, like a beautiful and kosher etrog, will have both oketz and pitem, both stem and blossom. He will cherish the past and be open to the future. Each of us possesses, in his own personality, a liberal and conservative tendency, the ability to look to the future and to look to the past, to consolidate and to innovate. Both of these are important; a full personality can afford the absence of neither.

Similarly, a mature and viable organization, such as a synagogue or a school, will likewise possess both elements, and therefore be ready for change and yet seek stability, continue old and cherished traditions, yet never be afraid to experiment with new ideas and new forms.

A nation, in order to prosper, must have both qualities. In the absence of a pitem, it can turn repressive and tyrannical: when it lacks an oketz or roots, it becomes anarchic and wild.

Both these elements ought to be counter-poised, one against the other, in our personalities and in our community. According to Jewish law, the finest and most beautiful etrog is one in which the oketz and the pitem lie on one line or one axis: one against the other. The harmonious life is one in which there exists a balance between the elements of change and stability, innovation and consolidation, the old and the new, the loyalty to the past and

the openness to the future. If we have too much of an oketz and too small a pitem, we become stodgy and stagnant, rigid and inflexible. If we have too big a pitem and too small an oketz, we become unsteady and erratic, vagrant and spasmodic.

Our world, the one we live in, is characterized primarily by the pitem, by the principle of change and growth. We seem to lack the oketz, for we are buffeted by vicissitudes and the winds of change -- and this means that we must exercise extreme care and caution so that balance may be restored. (Interestingly, the name "etrog," as we mentioned, does not appear in the Bible. The word first appears in the Talmud, and linguists -- see Alexander Kohut's edition of the Arukh -- tell us that the name "etrog" comes from the Persian tarnag, which has two meanings: one is, beautiful, and the other, to kindle a flame or stoke a fire. This is probably so because of both the color and the shape of the etrog fruit which reminds one of a flame. So the principle of change, symbolized by the pitem can be beautiful == and it can also be serviceable, even as fire is. But, again like fire, it can get out of hand and burn down an entire world.)

It is evident to any observer that our general society is like an etrog with an oversized pitem and a diminutive oketz. Our society is mobile, changing, unsteady. According to the latest statistics most Americans change residences every five years, and jobs almost as often, as large industries learn to pluck executives from one community and replace them in another ever so often. The

American even changes spouses with not much greater infrequency. No wonder that he experiences anxiety, an awareness that he is lacking stem and root, and he seeks out this element of stability in ways that are sometimes silly and empty. Witness, for instance, the craze of possessing antique furniture, which sometimes is nothing more than socially sanctioned junk, as a way of expressing a desire to reach out to the past. Or, far sillier, the current obsession about obtaining the coat of arms that one's ancestors purportedly used.

If this is true of the general community, it is even more true of the Jewish community. Here too we find an inane expression of the legitimate desire for oketz. For if in our Orthodox community we sometimes show signs of too big an oketz and too small a pitem, of being too resistant to experimental approaches in education and in outer forms, there is a far greater problem in the rest of the community of an etrog that has an enormously large pitem and an oketz that has almost disappeared. The suburbanized Judaism of America is so grotesque as to be almost unrecognizable. In a recent study of a community that has been given the fictitious name of "Lakeville," two sociologists, Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum, describe the typical suburban Jew. Perhaps the best and most characteristic description is the statement to these sociologists by a woman member of the local Reform Temple: "I think most members of this congregation don't want to be Jewish, but want to give their children more than they had, and this is

the closest to nothing they can dream up." An etrog -- that is all pitem, with only a microscopic, artificial oketz! In the Jewish society of the Lakeville type, everything old must go, and yet -- there is an irrational search for the stem. This kind of Jew, therefore, is willing to cast away every symbol and observance of Jewishness, but is horrified if his child wants to marry out of the faith. Logically, it makes no sense: why should he not marry a non-Jew, if his own life is non-Jewish? Yet there is a desire for the oketz... The Lakeville Jew has long abandoned kashruth as just a vestigial dietary taboo -- but he cannot survive a Sunday morning without his bagels... He professes no special belief in God, he certainly is embarrassed by talk of immortality, and yet he recites the Yizkor for his parents, and wants his children to do so for him when the time comes... So there is a minimal desire for the oketz, but it is so imbalanced with the pitem as to be weird -- and also haser, incomplete, and invalid.

As individuals, therefore, as a people, as citizens and as members of individual institutions, we must seek to redress the balance and restore the harmony of oketz and pitem.

It is perhaps wisest to conclude with the words of an old Yiddish prayer, a tehinah, which may still be found in some of our older prayer books, and was probably recited by our grandmothers before performing the mitzvah of the arba minnim. It reads as follows: Yehi ratzon milefanekha, may it be Thy will, our God and

God of our fathers,

בו בראש חודש ניסן
 ז"ש אדונו נקדו פניו חיוני הוורד, ויון צדק זכות ואלים איך הלא
 לעומתו אין חיון הלא צדק ואתרוג ואלים צדק איך לעליביו
 בו צדק הוורד פיו צדק מצדק

"that You forgive me for all the untoward and unattractive thoughts of my heart, in the merit of my having taken in my hand the etrog which was compared by our Rabbis to the heart of a man."

Indeed, the etrog is like the heart; and the heart, like the etrog, must possess a harmonious blend of both elements in balance: change and stability, blossom and stem.

If, O Lord, our hearts are perchance found imbalanced in favor of one or the other extreme, then forgive us by virtue of holding in our hands the etrog, symbol of the heart; and may that same etrog teach us to restore the proper harmony, so that Yehi ratzon milefanekha, it shall be acceptable to Thee, our God and God of our fathers. Amen.