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HAZINU 5779

Does *Peri Etz Hadar* Mean Etrog?

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How Zionism Saved the Etrog in America

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DOES *PERI ETZ HADAR* MEAN ETROG?

DAVID MOSTER

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” (*peri*) is juxtaposed with “womb” (*beten*) we get “fruit of the womb” (*peri beten*). In some instances, three nouns are juxtaposed, such as our own “fruit” (*peri*) + “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 Yemenite 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.

I. *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:

Do not read the word *hadar* (beauty), rather read the word *ha-dir* (the animal pen). Just as an animal pen contains large and small ones, perfect and blemished, so too [the etrog tree has] large and small [fruit on it], perfect and blemished. (*Sukkah* 35a)

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 *hadar* 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 mishabbah trugin*). The word “praiseworthy” (*mishabbah*), which is singular, must be modifying “tree” (*ilan*), which is also singular. It cannot be modifying “fruits” (*peirei*), which is in the plural. For these Targumim, the tree is praiseworthy (*ilan mishabbah*), 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” (*perei 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 nuance means the fruits are *hadar* but not the tree. The translation of *peri etz hadar* is “the fruits of the tree, etrogim” (*peri ilana, etrogin*).

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

Hadar means “the dweller” [*ha-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:

[Solomon] was perplexed by the four species, as it says, “three things are beyond me... four I cannot fathom” (Proverbs 30:18). The [four] things that [Solomon] wished to understand were the four species of the lulav bundle. [He asked:] “*peri etz hadar*, who said that it is an etrog? All trees (*ilanot*) make beautiful fruit (*perot hadar*)!” (*Leviticus Rabbah* to 23:40)

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 (*peri etz*) 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 (*peri etz*) 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.

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*. Ramban'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 on 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.”

Rabbi Dr. David Z. Moster is the director of the Institute of Biblical Culture, an online learning community located at www.BiblicalCulture.org. His new book is titled [Etrog: How a Chinese Fruit Became a Jewish Symbol](#). David can be contacted [here](#).

HOW ZIONISM SAVED THE *ETROG* IN AMERICA

ZEV ELEFF

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 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.

Zev Eleff is Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew Theological College and Associate Professor of Jewish History at Touro College and University System