



YANOVER ESROGIM

EXCELLENCE *of* ORIGIN

AN OVERVIEW

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לזכות

ח' מושקא בת יהודית תח'
לרגל יום הולדתה 'שלושים לכח'
לאורך ימים ושנים טובות

שנזכה לרוב נחת חסידותי מכל יוצ"ח
מתוך בריאות, הרחבה, ושמחה

CALABRIA,

along the southern coast of Italy, “the toe of Italy’s boot,” is famous for its sprawling beaches with stunning views of the northern Mediterranean, for its ancient castles and archeological parks, and for its agricultural richness. It was one of the first regions in Italy to have a human population and has a long and storied history.

For a Lubavitcher Chossid, the name Calabria evokes other associations. The name of this popular Italian vacation spot has a unique meaning, a special ring. It reminds one of the simcha of Sukkos, of the sweet smell of the esrog, the passion for *hiddur mitzvah*. It recalls the *mesiras nefesh* of generations of Rebbeim and their Chassidim who sacrificed so much to procure an esrog from this locale to fulfill Hashem’s command.

The Rebbe identifies this region as “איטליא של יון”, the “Italy of Greece”, the choice land Esav was blessed with in the *possuk* “משמני הארץ יהי מושבך” as cited by Chazal. This is consistent with the historical etymology of the name Italy, which was originally used for this region by the Greeks, when they conquered portions of it in the eighth century CE.

Esrogim from Calabria are more popularly referred to as ‘Yanover Esrogim.’ The term originates from the Yiddish pronunciation of the port city of Genoa, Italy (Yanoveh).¹ It was from that city that freshly harvested esrogim from throughout Calabria would be shipped off for sale to the rest of the Jewish world. This transit point has become forever associated with this special breed of esrog.

The first recorded instance of Yidden using the Yanover Esrog dates to the time of the Baalei haTosfos who are said to have insisted on using that breed of esrog to fulfill the mitzvah. This was recorded by the Chasam Sofer who advocated the use of these Esrogim by arguing that esrogim, like birds,

require a *mesorah* to secure their status as kosher. Thus, for hundreds of years, Yidden have gone to extreme lengths to bench esrog on this specimen.

In Chabad tradition however, the minhag dates to the beginning of the mitzvah: The Alter Rebbe related that when Hashem commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to take a “פרי עץ הדר” for the mitzvah, messengers were sent on clouds to Calabria to bring esrogim from there. The Rebbe Rashab would share this tradition every year at the Seudah on the first night of Sukkos.²

On one occasion, the Rebbe Rashab offered a different reason for this minhag: “The reason we prefer esrogim from Calabria despite their lack of beauty, is because there are no Jews living there, and therefore [one can fulfill the *possuk*] “ובקשתם משם את האלוקין”, to elevate the sparks of *kedushah* even in such a place.”³

Over the years, the Rebbeim continued to be *makpid* on the Yanover Esrog, even in times of extreme hardship and danger. The Alter Rebbe was so scrupulous about this minhag that he wanted to send shlichim to obtain them during the Napoleonic War, when travel was fraught with danger. Similarly, during the Russian Revolution, special efforts were made to obtain Yanover Esrogim for the Rebbe Rashab.

Likewise, when the Rebbe was in France during World War II, he is said to have placed himself in great danger, sneaking across the border to obtain an esrog from Calabria.⁴

In Elul 5704*, as the Allies advanced through Europe, pushing back the Axis forces, southern Italy was liberated. The Frierdiker Rebbe sent a letter to the War Department (today called the Defense Department) in an effort to obtain Yanover Esrogim. Here are some excerpts from that letter⁵:

“For several generations it has been the sacred custom of my ancestors, who have been the heads of the Chabad Hierarchy and the recognized leaders of world orthodox Jewry, to get the kind of citrus fruit known as 'Ethrog', which is needed for the ritual of our festival of Succoth (Tabernacles), from Calabria— the peninsula in the southeast of Italy. Even during the last war, facilities were granted to my saintly father to have a special emissary bring a number of those citrus fruits from Calabria to Stockholm and thence to Russia, so that my late father and I and some of our Hierarchy members could perform the sacred precept of our religion in accordance with the custom of our ancestors.

“Now that Calabria is liberated, thank G-d, I would deem it a great privilege to once again be able to observe this sacred and cherished precept of my faith on Calabria-grown 'Ethrogs,' and at the same time offer a special prayer for the speedy and complete victory of the Allies over fruit grown on liberated soil.

“I therefore venture to ask you for the great favor of cabling to the competent authorities in that particular district to send out per Air Mail some ten 'Ethrogs' grown in Calabria, so that I may get them before our Succoth Festival which takes place from October 2nd to October 10th.”

The response from the War Department was not long in coming. In a letter dated September 21 and addressed to the Frierdiker Rebbe, they expressed regret at being unable to fulfill his request, due to the fact that the airmail service was restricted to missions essential to the war effort. Any exception could set a precedent and invite a deluge of similar requests from other religious figures and denominations.

This is just a glimpse of the efforts the Rabbeim expended to obtain Yanover Esrogim even in times of upheaval, while people had other concerns on their mind. As in this case, their efforts were not always successful and the Rabbeim sometimes needed to use Esrogim from other locales. On one such occasion, when the Rebbe Rashab was unable to procure an esrog from Calabria, and instead used one from Eretz Yisroel, he wept as he made the *bracha*. The Rebbeim strongly advocated that Chassidim use Yanover Esrogim, considering them preferable even to those of Eretz Yisroel. (The Rebbeim themselves often made use of both, as we shall soon see).

The Frierdiker Rebbe writes in a letter, “In answer to his letter exhorting Anash to purchase Esrogim from Eretz Yisroel: If [this exhortation is] because of the preciousness of Eretz Yisroel, none other than the Alter Rebbe, who was

moser nefesh to strengthen the land and inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel, always chose Esrogim from Calabria for the mitzvah, saying: ‘When Hashem commanded Moshe “ולקחתם לכם” messengers were sent to the forests of Calabria to bring back Esrogim with which to fulfill the mitzvah.’ Why should this year be different than any other?⁶”

Challenges and Transportation

In the early years of the Rebbe's *nesius* there was a discernible change in the esrogim being imported from Calabria. In past years, the esrogim were weak and dull, whereas now they were much more beautiful. This triggered doubts about their legitimacy and gave rise to suspicion that they had been grafted (*murkav*). The Rebbe first addressed these concerns in a letter to Reb Mordechai Perlow, then serving as the rav of the Chabad community in Milan, Italy: “Regarding the question of the Calabrian Esrogim: In truth I am not happy that he has doubts regarding this matter, but being that [this has already been raised] it is appropriate that he should travel there and determine the situation...”⁷

The Rebbe eventually sent Reb Yisroel Jacobson to determine the status of the esrog orchards in Calabria and ensure that the esrogim being harvested and sent around the world were not *murkavim*. After investigating the situation, Reb Yisroel concluded that there were indeed many farmers in Calabria who grafted their Esrogim. When he reported these findings to the Rebbe, the Rebbe instructed that from then on, esrog orchards should be supervised to ensure their kashrus.

As a result of these concerns, it was suggested to the Rebbe that Calabria Esrogim should be transplanted to an orchard



CHASSIDIM PURCHASE YANOVER ESROGIM, CROWN HEIGHTS, EREV SUKKOS 5737.

* 5704-1944

HALACHIC IMPLICATIONS OF MURKAV

The issue of an *esrog murkav*, an *Esrog* that comes from a grafted tree, is widely addressed in the halachic literature of modern times, though we find no mention of it in the *Gemara* or *Rishonim*. The agricultural process known as grafting consists of removing a branch from a tree and then attaching it to a tree of another species. The purpose is to shore up the genetic properties of the fruits, making them stronger, bigger or more beautiful.

This issue was first addressed by the *Acharonim* in response to the increasingly common practice among farmers to improve the *esrog's* appearance by grafting *esrog* branches onto lemon trees. Two issues were raised by the *Acharonim* regarding the *esrog murkav*:

- 1) It no longer has the status of an *esrog*.
- 2) Since grafting violates the *issur* of *kilayim*, it is a *mitzvah ha'baah ba'veirah*.

There are several reasons why the *esrog* might lose its status as the fruit designated by *Torah*. The most prominent reason, which seems to have been accepted by the *Tzemach Tzedek* (on the occasion that he used a *Corfu esrog*), is that the *Esrog* does not have a full *shiur*, since part of the fruit is a lemon. Thus, in the case of a bigger *esrog*, in which the "esrog portion" is large enough, it is fit for use. Another reason is that using a fruit that was grafted onto a lemon tree would violate the *issur* of "bal tosif", as it would be adding a fifth species (a lemon) to the *Daled Minim*.

Regarding the second concern, the *Levush* (*Orach Chaim* 649) rules that the issue with a grafted *esrog* applies even when the grafting was done by non-Jews, citing the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* that says that non-Jews are also prohibited from planting *kilayim*.

The *Ta'z* disagrees, citing the *Gemara* in *Sukkah* (30b) where *Rav Huna* instructs merchants who would purchase *hadassim* from local gentiles to insist that they not harvest the *hadassim* themselves, so as not to be guilty of potential theft. This demonstrates that a *mitzvah haba'ah ba'veirah* applies only to the one actually committing the *aveirah*. But in our instance, when the grafting was already done by a non-Jewish farmer, the *esrog* is still kosher.

in *Eretz Yisroel*, where they could be better supervised. The *Rebbe* approved this plan, which was implemented in the summer of 5716*.

It is important to note that the *Rebbe* clarifies⁸ that these *esrogim* do not have the same status as *esrogim* grown in *Calabria*. The reason for this is based on the above-cited *Midrash*, that considers *Calabria* "מטובי הארץ", the choicest soil, and therefore most proper for growing *esrogim*. Thus, although the transplanted *esrogim* are certainly kosher and not *murkav*, they lack the special quality of *Yanover Esrogim* grown on their original soil. This is also consistent with the *Rebbe's* *minhag* to only *bentch* on an *esrog* grown in *Calabria*, even though the *Rebbe* used *esrogim* grown in *Eretz Yisroel* as well, as we shall see.

The Corfu Esrog

In addition to the *Yanover Esrog*, there is another specimen of *esrog* with a special place in *Chabad* tradition. But whereas the *Yanover esrog* is famous for its positive qualities, the controversial *esrog* of *Corfu* is notorious for being deemed unfit for the *mitzvah*.

Esrogim grown on the Greek island of *Corfu* were preferred by much of European Jewry for many years. Ironically, it was the beauty of these *esrogim* that sparked speculation that they were *murkav* (grafted), and therefore *possul* for the *mitzvah*⁹.

The earliest *teshuva* on the subject was written by *Rav Daniel* of *Grodno* in 1808, who ruled that since they did not have a *chazakah* as non-*murkav*, one cannot make a *bracha* on them using *Hashem's* name, but should instead say, "ברוך רחמנא אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וציוונו על נטילת", "לולב" to avoid making a *bracha levatalah*.



AN ORCHARD OF TRANSPLANTED YANOVER ESROGIM IN KFAR CHABAD.

In 1846 a major debate broke out on the topic of the Corfu esrog, with many rabbis taking different sides. The Chasam Sofer came out against the Corfu Esrogim, saying that it was preferable to take an esrog from Eretz Yisroel being that they have a *chazakah* of kashrus, even if they are less beautiful than the Corfu variety¹⁰.

In 1875 the Corfu farmers banded together to hike the prices of their Esrogim, reinvigorating the debate. The rabbonim of Europe responded by banning the Corfu Esrog until the price was stabilized and the kashrus status of the esrog was determined.

The final death knell of the popularity of the Corfu Esrog came in 1891, when a Jewish girl named Rubina Sarda, was found dead in Corfu. Upon finding the body, local Greek residents claimed that the girl was Christian and had been killed by the Jews in order to use her blood for matzah. In the ensuing pogrom, many Jews were murdered, and many others were forced to flee. The response of the global Jewish community was to boycott the Corfu Esrog, seeing it as “dripping with Jewish blood.” Thus, the issue of the Corfu Esrog was finally laid to rest.

An individual wrote to the Rebbe, asking why the Chabad custom is to use esrogim from Calabria, when it would seem more appropriate to use those grown in Eretz Yisroel, thereby supporting the Jewish homeland, etc. The Rebbe responded:

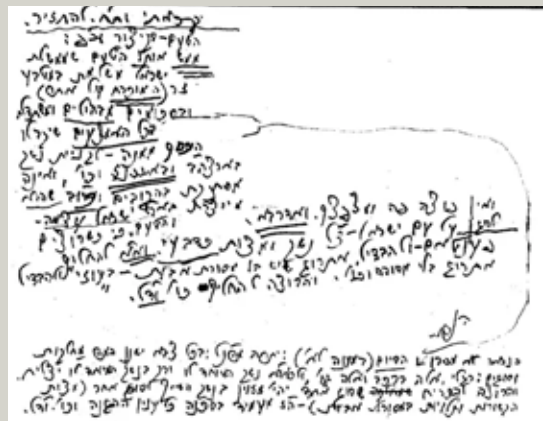
...הטעם - בקיצור עכ"פ: ממש אותו הטעם שממשלת ישראל משלמת במטבע זר (המוכר על אחר) ובסכומים מבהילים ומשתדלת בכל האמצעים שיקבלו הכסף ממנה - לקניית נשק בארצה"ב [= בארצות הברית] ובאשכנז וכו',

ואינה מסתפקת בהרובים וכיו"ב שהיא מייצרת בארץ ישראל עצמה. ואין פוצה פה ומצפצף. ואדרבא. והטעם כי כשרוצים להגן על עם ישראל - צ"ל [= צריך להיות] נשק ומצות כדבעי. וא"א [= ואי אפשר] להחליף פענטאם - ולהבדיל, אתרוג שיש בו מסורת אבות - ב"עוזי" ולהבדיל אתרוג בלי מסורה. והרוצה להחליף כו' וד"ל, [= ודי למבין]

כנראה לא מסרו הסיים (במענה לא): יתירה מהנ"ל: בכל צבא ישנן כמה מחלקות וסוגים: רגלי, אלה ברכב ואלה גו', ולכאור"א נשק המיוחד לו ורק בנשק המיוחד לו יצליח, והרוצה להכריח שסוג אחד יה' מזוין בנשק השייך לסוג אחר (מצות הקשורות ותלויות במסורת אבות) - ה"ז [= הרי זה] מעמיד בסכנה כל ענין ההגנה וכו'. וד"ל.

The reason—at least in brief—is: exactly the same reason why the Israeli government pays with foreign currency (which is otherwise **needed** locally), expending **astronomical** amounts of money and applying **all methods** of pressure that their money should be accepted—to purchase weaponry in the United States, in **Germany**, etc.

They do not suffice with the guns and such which **they** themselves produce in **Eretz Yisroel**. And no one seems to have a query with this—**on the contrary**. The reason is: when we want to protect the lives of the Jewish people, we need **suitable** ammunition, and [suitable] mitzvos. It would be **unconscionable** to replace a phantom or, *lihavdil*, an esrog with a



strong-rooted tradition, with an “Uzi” or, *lihavdil*, an esrog that is not in accordance with tradition. One who wishes to make this switch [is careless about protecting life] etc., this is sufficient for the wise.

[In the following section the Rebbe explains why this applies only to some people, and how it can be true that other Yidden fulfill their mitzvah with esrogim from Eretz Yisroel:]

It seems like you were not given the **conclusion** (of my response to question 1):

Moreover: In every army there are units and brigades: footsoldiers, some in chariots [and some on horses] etc. Each and every one has their own specific ammunition, and only with that ammunition will they succeed.

If someone wants to force members of one brigade to arm themselves with ammunition made for another (in our instance: [to force people to fulfill the mitzvah] in a way that is [contrary] to the tradition of their ancestors) — he is placing the entire strategy of defense in jeopardy. This is sufficient for the wise.



SELECT CHASSIDIM PASS BEFORE THE REBBE TO RECEIVE A YANOVER ESROG.

The Rebbeim's Attitude Towards The Corfu Esrog

The Rebbeim's opposition to the Corfu Esrog, however, dates to the times of the Tzemach Tzedek. The famed Chossid, Reb Dovid Tzvi Chein of Tchernigov, known as the Radatz, reported in the name of his father, Reb Peretz, who heard directly from the Tzemach Tzedek that "Esrogim from Corfu are certainly *murkav*."¹¹

The Rebbe Maharash was even sharper in his condemnation of the Corfu Esrog, saying, "There are three things that are beautiful, but it is doubtful whether they are the real thing: 1) A Corfu Esrog is very beautiful, yet it is in doubt whether it is in fact an esrog or merely a lemon¹²..."

On another occasion¹³ the Rebbe Rashab said, "I would wrap a Corfu Esrog in a machine-made tallis and throw it in a fire." Regarding the tradition that Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev used to use an esrog from Corfu, he said that a seed of an esrog fell in Corfu and it was from that specific tree that Reb Levi Yitzchak would take his Esrog.¹⁴

Nevertheless, there was one occasion on which the Tzemach Tzedek did use a Corfu Esrog: One year Yanover Esrogim were hard to come by. The Tzemach Tzedek related

that his Chossid, Reb Yitzchak Aizik of Vitebsk had once visited the famed Reb Ephraim Zalman Margulies, author of the *Beis Ephraim*. They discussed many Torah topics, including the status of the Corfu Esrog. They reached the conclusion that if the Esrog is large enough that there is a shiur esrog outside of the part that is *murkav*, it is kosher. The Tzemach Tzedek relied on their *psak* for this matter.¹⁵

The Rebbe's Selection Of Daled Minim

The Rebbe's selection of the Daled Minim would begin on Yud-Gimmel Tishrei, upon returning from the Ohel. Esrogim would be brought by Reb Yisroel Jacobson and his son in law, Reb Mordechai Altein. After Reb Yisroel's passing in the summer of 5735*, Rabbi Altein was joined by his son in law, Rabbi Yitzchok Meir Gurary. In earlier years they would lay them out in the Rebbe's room, and after 5738* in *Gan Eden Hatachton*.

In addition to the esrogim that were brought in on Yud-Gimmel Tishrei, Reb Leibel Bistritzky would bring an esrog, along with the other *minim*, to the Rebbe on Erev Yom Tov. Reb Sholom Hecht and Reb Binyomin Gorodetzky would also usually give the Rebbe esrogim at this time (Reb Binyomin would generally give three, through the Mazkirus).

The Rabbeim's Use Of The Esrog

It has been recorded that the Rebbe Rashab and the Frieddiker Rebbe would often make a bracha on a Yanover Esrog but then use an esrog from Eretz Yisroel for Hallel. In 5711*, it was observed that the Rebbe used two Esrogim, one with a *pitum* and one without. The former was assumed to be from Eretz Yisroel, since in those days, no Calabria Esrogim had *pitums*. In the morning, the Rebbe *bentched* on the one without a *pitum*, and then used the other one for Hallel. In later years, however, the Rebbe would use a Calabria Esrog both in the morning and for Hallel, using one from Eretz Yisroel at another point, without a bracha.

Reb Levi Bistritzky (Reb Leibel's son) relates: "One year, the Rebbe had an Esrog with a *pitum*, which fell off while someone was using it. The Rebbe would usually go down for davening while people continued to *bentch* on the Rebbe's Daled Minim. Before Hallel, they would bring the Daled Minim back to the Rebbe. This time, when they brought the Daled Minim to the Rebbe, they informed him that the *pitum* had fallen off. Nevertheless, the Rebbe took this esrog and used it during Hallel.


"My father heard about this immediately. He knew a Yid in Brooklyn who owned an unopened box of Italian esrogim. My father approached him and offered to buy his entire stock if the Rebbe would choose one of his esrogim. Before the Rebbe finished davening, my father was already waiting with the box of esrogim. The Rebbe thanked my father for his efforts, but said that since the first day of Yom Tov had passed, and there was no longer a requirement to own one's esrog (based on the *possuk* ולקחתם לכם), he could use the Rebbetzin's esrog at home. (Generally, the Rebbe would purchase a set of Daled Minim for the Rebbetzin at home, while the Rebbe's set would remain in 770)."¹⁶

Reb Meir Harlig shared another related story: "Once, an

PAYING FOR DALED MINIM

The Torah's requirement of "*U'lekachtem lachem*" is explained by Chazal to mean that one must be in full ownership of his Daled Minim in order to fulfill this mitzvah. Many *poskim* infer that one must pay for the Daled Minim before Yom Tov begins, in order to be fully in possession of it. Their rationale is that only a *kinyan mi'de'oraisa* (acquiring by paying with money) can be effective for the purposes of fulfilling a *chiyuv de'oraisa*. Other *poskim* disagree and say that *kinyan me'derabanan* is sufficient, so payment before Yom Tov is not necessary.

The Rebbe once related that in the first year after coming to America, he asked the Frieddiker Rebbe to pay Reb Yisroel Jacobson (who provided the Rebbe's Daled Minim in those years) before Yom Tov. The Frieddiker Rebbe responded "Does Reb Yisroel need the money for Yom Tov?" from which the Rebbe inferred that the Frieddiker Rebbe was not particular about paying for the Daled Minim before Yom Tov. The Rebbe however, was careful to pay in advance or immediately after receiving the Daled Minim.

elderly Chossid shook the Rebbe's lulav with much emotion and dropped the Rebbe's Esrog. To our shock and dismay, the *pitum* fell off. With no other option, I went to the Rebbe and told him what happened. Hearing this, the Rebbe said not to tell him who had dropped it, because 'it won't be good for me or for him,' and he gave us another esrog to use."¹⁷ 

1. Igros Kodesh, vol. 3 page 280.

2. Harav Yaakov Landau, *Lubavitch V'Chayaleha*, page 31.

3. From a letter of Reb Michael Vilensky, 6 Kislev 5708. Otzar Minhagei Chabad Elul - Tishrei, pg. 277.

4. Rabbi Menachem Teichtel in an interview with JEM.

5. Igros Kodesh Rayatz vol. 8, pg. 409.

6. Igros Kodesh Rayatz vol. 13 page 476.

7. Igros Kodesh vol. 7 pg. 161.

8. Igros Kodesh vol. 13 pg. 110.

9. The question of whether an Esrog *murkav* is kosher is debated by the Acharonim, but the consensus is that it is *possul*.

10. Shaalos U'Teshuvos Chasam Sofer Orach Chaim 207.

11. See Otzar Minhagei Chabad p. 281.

12. Ramach Osiyos #153

13. Igros Kodesh Admur HaRashab, vol. 1, pg. 926. See Otzar Minhagei Chabad pg. 278, fn. 4.

14. Igros Kodesh *ibid*.

15. Beis Rebbe part I, pg. 75, fn. 1.

16. Hiskashrus issue #481.

17. For further reading, see comprehensive article published in Heichal HaBaal Shem Tov, winter 5780, by Rabbi Boruch Oberlander. And Esrogim BeHalacha—Mesores Esrogei Calabria, published by Rabbi Eliyahu Matusof, 5783.