



# The Ethics of Etrogim

## SHORT ETROG STORIES

### The \$1,000 Etrog

(Heard from the *etrog* dealer who used to bring *etrogim* to Rav Eliahu.)

Rav Eliahu was famous for being able to assess an *etrog* in seconds. He would check hundreds of *etrogim* yet despite the huge quantity, he never once said “*pasul*”) invalid), but only “take another one.” Only once did I hear him say “*pasul*.”

A man came in and proudly told the Rav: “I paid \$1,000 for this beautiful *etrog*!” The Rav looked at it and asked the man: “If this *etrog* is *pasul*, will you get your money back?” “Yes,” said the man, “I bought it on condition the Rav says it’s kosher.” “Tell me,” replied Rav Eliahu. “Have you bought your wife some jewelry for the *chag*? That’s also a *mitzvah* – ושמחת בחגך.” The man mumbled something and the Rav decreed: “*Pasul*!”

“*Pasul*?! How can it be *pasul*?”

The Rav turned the *etrog* over and showed the man a very small hole near the stipe, partially covered by the stipe itself. And when the Rav moved the leaf, he revealed signs of a caterpillar burrowing into the fruit.

“You don’t need to splash out \$1,000 on an *etrog*. It’s fine to buy a *mehudar* (halachically beautiful) *etrog* like everybody else for 100 shekels and go make your wife happy with the rest of the money. That’s a positive Torah *mitzvah*!”

After the man left, we asked the Rav how he had managed to spot that tiny hidden hole. He told us that in Chassidic tradition, אתרוג stands for אלוהים רגל לא תבואני רגל גאווה (let not the foot of

pride come to me). “This *etrog* did not match its mnemonic.”

### The Rav’s Own Etrog

When the dealer brought Rav Eliahu *etrogim* for himself and his family, he would bring him the very best he had. The Rav would select a few, lay them all out in a line and say, “This one’s the most beautiful, but I won’t take it. I’ll take this one or that one.”

When the dealer asked him why he didn’t take the most beautiful one for himself he replied, “So as not to make Jews feel bad. When they see the Rabbi has an *etrog* with a slight dent – that he too is not perfect – they will value their own *etrog* more. They won’t think it’s sub-standard. And they won’t think that Rabbis take the best for themselves and leave whatever’s left for everyone else.”

### Fair Swap

“When I was eight, my father was tragically killed in an accident. When I reached *bar mitzvah*, I really wanted my own *etrog* but my mother couldn’t afford it. I saved up, little by little, until I had enough to go to Machane Yehuda and buy my very own *etrog* in a sealed box which said “*mehudar*” on the lid! I was overjoyed.

But when I opened the box, the *etrog* really wasn’t that beautiful. I didn’t know whether I’d been deceived or that I just didn’t know the *halachot*, so I decided to knock on Rav Mordechai Eliahu’s door (he lived very close to us).

The Rav studied my *etrog* from all angles... ‘*Kasher* (kosher).’ ‘Only *kasher*?’ I said. ‘Not *mehudar*?’ ‘*Kasher*.’ I kissed his hand and left.

I’d barely closed the door when someone came out and said, “Excuse me, the Rav asks you to come back inside.”

The Rav smiled at me and said, ‘Let’s do an exchange deal. You give me your *etrog*, the kosher one, and I’ll give you mine, the *mehudar* one.’

I blushed and couldn’t stop the tears. I gratefully accepted the Rav’s offer and I was the happiest boy in town.

The next day, I went to daven in Rav Eliahu’s *shul*. I wanted to see what *etrog* he would make the *beracha* on. Lo and behold... mine!

Suddenly, I understood.

### Zionist Etrogim

“Once I visited Rav Eliahu and we were talking about Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzeira, the Baba Sali זת”ל. ‘Come, I’ll show you something,’ said the Rav, and took out what looked like some very thin sticks. ‘What are they?’ I asked. ‘Dry *etrogim* originally grown in Morocco. The Baba Sali used to send me some every year.’

Then he added: ‘I never made a *beracha* on them though. I only say a *beracha* on *etrogim* from our holy Land. I told that to the Baba Sali and he still sent me his Moroccan ones. But there’s nothing like the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* and the *etrogim* of our holy Land.’

*Translated and adapted from* www.yeshiva.org.il.

**Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu זצ"ל** was the Rishon LeTzion and Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel.