



History
Esrogey
Altein
(Jacobson)

By
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Elul 5775

Forward

Our family has had the merit to provide Yanever Esrogim for Anash in general and more notably for Beis Chyenu for more than eighty years.

I thought it appropriate to share, at least in general, the history of importing the esrogim throughout the years, and the tremendous trust the Rabeim had in our family in this regard. As well as the current situation of our family harvesting esrogim.

May we all merit to “go with our lulav in our hands and announce didan notzach”, the ultimate and speedy redemption of Moshiach tzidkeinu.

Yaakov Leib Altein

1. The principal hidur of Calabria esrogim is that they have a chazakah of not being grafted, not their outer beauty

It is known the custom in many communities to specifically use a Calabrian esrog. We have a tradition that the Alter Rebbe would only make a bracha on a Calabrian esrog. This was also the custom of all the Chabad Rabbeim.

Subsequently, this has become the custom of Chabad Chassidim. (See in detail Otzar Minhagei Chabad).

The Rebbe Rashab in a letter (vol. 1 letter 27) writes that during the French Russian war the Alter Rebbe wanted to send a special emissary to Italy to acquire a Calabrian esrog. It is also known how the Rebbe placed himself in danger while in France during world war two to acquire an esrog from Italy.

The reason for this is explained in Shaar Hakolel, and by the Rebbe Rashab in the above mentioned letter, based on the famous opinion of the Chasam Sofer (Shu"t Orach Chayim 207) that the esrogim of Calabria have a chazaka of not being murkavim, to the extent that they do not require any additional signs, this is a tradition passed on from generation to generation. The Rebbe Rashab writes in that letter that the Calabrian esrogim are better than any other esrogim even those grown and harvested with good supervision.

It is also known what the Rebbe Rashab retold many times in the name of the Alter Rebbe that when Hashem told Moshe the mitzvah of daled minim they sent messengers on clouds to bring back Calabrian esrogim.. Rabbi Yaakov

Landau recounted that the Rebbe Rashab would say this every year on the first night of Sukkos. (The Rebbe's grandfather, Rabbi Baruch Shneur, writes in his diary that he heard this from the Rebbe Rashab (in 5676) in the name of the Baal Shem Tov.)

The Rebbe explains this based on the obligation to perform mitzvos in the best possible way, "all the 'fats' should be for Hashem", and Chazal say that when the Passuk says "the fats of the land" this refers to Italy.

In summary:

The hidur of Calbrian esrogim is not their outer beauty, for there are much nicer esrogim from other locations, rather only the chazakah that they are not grafted. As the Rebbe Rashab writes in the letter, about these that are more concerned about the outer beauty over the concern of being grafted...

My grandfather, Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, (the first to import Calabrian esrogim to America, as will be expounded on,) testified about the unpleasant appearances of the Calbrian esrogim, "they look horrible." He researched the reason for this and worked hard over the years that they should send nicer esrogim.

Being that the main hidur of Calbrian esrogim is the fact that they are not grafted, something that is not apparent on the outside, it is understood that to be cautious of this requires a person to be extremely G-d fearing,

To appreciate the current situation of the Calbrian esrogim, we need to first retell the history of importing Calabrian esrogim to America.



2. The first imports of Calabrian esrogim to the United States

The first to bring Calabrian Esrogim to the USA was my illustrious grandfather Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson. He arrived to America in 5686 (1926). At the end of the year, as Tishrei was approaching, he began searching for a Calabrian esrog, and was told that you cannot get one in America, and people use esrogim from Eretz Yisroel. My grandfather decided right then that for the next year he will definitely make a bracha on a Calabrian esrog.

My grandfather who was very strong minded, anything that he thought to be right, even things that seemed as dreams for other, he did not rest until he managed to bring to reality. For example in the '60s he envisioned opening a Yeshiva for baalei teshuva, it seemed very strange that an old Chassidic Jew, a student of the Yeshiva in Lubavitch, should be able to open a Yeshiva for American students. What common language would they share? But with his strong will he founded the first baal teshuva yeshiva in America, Hadar Hatorah. His students testify that he found a path to their hearts, for he first of all sincerely cared for the good of another, both their physical and spiritual needs, and would do all that he was able for them. Thus throughout the years he helped many families with their personal needs, shalom bayis, parnassa etc.

So too with the Calabrian esrogim, in addition to deciding to arrange for a Calabrian esrog for himself to make a

bracha on , he decided to arrange for Calabrian esrogim for all of Anash. And he succeeded!

In summary: the importing of Calabrian esrogim by my grandfather was not primarily for the financial benefit (while he did also benefit from them), but rather because of his feeling responsible for Anash, to be able to provide them with the opportunity to make a bracha on a Calabrian esrog, as the Chabad custom through the generations.



3. providing daled minim for the Rabbeim

In 5690 (1929) when the Friediker Ebbe came to America for a visit my grandfather had the merit to provide the Rebbe with a Calabrian esrog. Although the Friediker Rebbe brought with him an esrog, yet, being that my grandfather had a nicer esrog, he gave the Rebbe his esrog. Then the Rebbe instructed him to bring the other minim as well, and gave him signs of what to look for in a lulov. As a result of this, as he recounts in his memoirs, he merited to see an open miracle for his daughter Rebetzin Chaya Hecht, a”h, who was a young girl at the time and had trouble with her eye sight, and the Rebbe cured her miraculously on the spot.

When the Friediker Rebbe settled in America in 5700 (1940) my grandfather continued to provide the Friediker Rebbe with daled minim until 5710 (1950), and after that continued to provide for the Rebbe. See the sicha of Rosh Chodesh Sivan where the Rebbe discusses the custom of the Rabbeim not to pay for the daled minim before Sukkos. The Rebbe then also gave my grandfather a bracha.



4. My grandfather travels to Calabria

In 5715-16 (1955-56) it became apparent that the goyim in Calabria were starting to graft trees. At that point the Rebbe instructed my grandfather that he needs to travel to Italy to ascertain that the esrogim are not being harvested from grafted trees. He also instructed him that there should be two witnesses to testify on each esrog that they came from tree which were not grafted.

Indeed from that year forward my grandfather travelled each year to Calabria.

Truthfully, if one inquires to what transpires in Calabria one will find that it is very difficult to be careful not to accidently harvest esrogim from grafted trees. The goyim don't care to try to fool as much as they are able. One therefore needs to be an extremely G-d fearing person, and strong character to withstand the trial.



5. I speak of those who know me well – the Rebbe's reliance on my grandfather

My grandfather was a person who always got to the root of things, understood and was very knowledgeable in many areas, especially as it pertained to his role as a rabbi and posek, invested himself in understanding well the science of grafting as was being practiced in Calabria. This way he was able to be certain that the esrogim he was collecting were not from grafted trees.

Above all, the Rebbe relied on him.

As the Rebbe wrote in a letter on 4 Sivan, 5729 in this regard:

“In response to your letter from Rosh Chodesh Sivan, in which he asks whether he can rely on Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson for Calabrian esrogim, for he is subjective, particularly that harvesting the esrogim require great trouble etc.

It is known that the halachic ruling that one witness is believed concerning religious laws, even if it is associated with a bother, even though in our current times of doubled darkness this chazakah and believe can be questioned in some areas.

I speak, however, of those who know me well, the above mentioned rabbi, who learned in the holy yeshiva of Tomchei Temimim, and currently also is a mashpia of Chassidus there, and he trust worthy in this regard.”

If one reads carefully into the Rebbe's words one can see clearly that the Rebbe felt that there is now a question concerning the chazakah of one witness, but he relied on my grandfather because "I speak of those who know me well, and he is trust worthy."



6. My father travels to Italy

In the first years of my grandfather traveling to Italy, my father, may he live well, accompanied him. My grandfather taught my father the profession well. For various reasons my father was unable to continue making the trip yearly, but he remained a partner in the business, traveling occasionally with my grandfather.

After a few years the Rebbe instructed that Rabbi Moshe Lazar, who is a Shliach in Milan, to accompany my grandfather. Rabbi Lazar did so for a number of years until my father was able to once again travel.

In 1969 my grandfather had a serious heart attack and the doctors forbid him to travel to Calabria, my father then started to travel himself and be joined in Italy by Rabbi Moshe Lazar to harvest the esrogim.

After my grandfather's passing in 1975 my father inherited the business.



7. Rabbi Lazar and Rabbi Rodel appointed to harvest the Esrogim

In 1976 my father had a heart attack and the Doctors forbid him to travel, the Rebbe instructed that Rabbi Shmuel Rodel, also a shliach in Milan, should join Rabbi Lazar and be the ones to harvest the esrogim. From that point on, they are the ones that harvest the esrogim for our business, with the best esrogim, of course, being for the Rebbe. And so it continues till this very day, they are the mashgichim for our business.

This explains the story that Rabbi Zalman Gurarie relates (printed in the book bchol beisi neeman hu):

One year Rabbi Gurarie suggested to an esrog dealer, not a member of anash, from whom Rabbi Gurarie would buy his esrog, to bring the Rebbe a beautiful esrog.

When he reported this to the Rebbe, the Rebbe responded: "Based on the commandment of our sages that one is not allowed to fool a person etc., my custom is to take my daled minim from the one that my father in law, the Rebbe would take his from (with payment, as understood), and this year as well. In any case he is well intended and appreciated, azkir al hatziyon."

It is therefore no wonder that the Rebbe continues to rely on my father as well as Rabbi Lazar and Rabbi Rodel.

All of them have in common that they are great G-d fearing people, which are not looking for business opportunity;

rather their entire objective is to fulfill the Rebbe's shlichus, spread Yidishkeit and strengthen it in their respective places of shlichus.

This is all the past. What is happening now in 5775?

When I received the business from my father a number of years ago, knowing my standing that I am not on the level of Yiras Shamoyim as my father and grandfather, I decided not to put myself in the face of the test, and not to travel to Italy, despite this being the cheapest way of importing esrogim to America, as is done by many dealers, especially since I do not know how to check for grafted trees.

(Incidentally, this work is done under the darkness of the tree, far from the lenses of the camera...) I can only see if the outer appearances of the esrogim are big, beautiful and clean. But then I will know that all that I am concerned with is their price on the market, not their kashrus and certainty of not being grafted!

Moreover, the above mentioned rabbis are not partners in the business, they are paid for their efforts and work regardless of the amount and quality of the esrogim. The only thing that is demanded of them is to make sure that the esrogim are not grafted and that they should spare no effort and money to be sure of this. And being that I am not present, there is no pressure of the owner looking over the mashgichim shoulders pressuring them to harvest as many big nice esrogim as possible, regardless of their source, for greater sales. Nor is there a time pressure to provide the esrogim in time for the owner to return with the

merchandise. They can stay there with their families for as long as they need to do their job comfortably and carefully, being paid for all their time.

I accepted this on myself despite the tremendous cost, as long as I can continue to the best of my ability our family tradition that one can be certain that the esrogim that one buys from us are definitely not from grafted tress.

One more important point:

The success in assuring that the tress are not grafted depend to a certain extend on the non-Jews on the field.

Over the years Rabbi Lazar has developed a very strong relationship with the farmers. (As well as with the government authorities there, they respect and love him very much, and especially since he is able to help them too.) He is therefore able to accomplish a tremendous amount in preventing the farmers from grafting trees.

As he once related. One year there was a shortage of esrogim, he saw the farmers collecting esrogim on a different field with esrogim dealers. He asked the farmer, why don't we go to that field? He responded, that field is not for you. He took him there and showed him how the trees were grafted in a way that was very difficult to see.



So when someone asks, **“Why should we buy from Altein’s Esrogim?”**

The answer is very simple!

Because you can be certain that the esrogim are certainly not grafted!

The esrogim are harvested by and under the hashgacha of Rabbi Moshe Lazar and Rabbi Shmuel Rodel from Milan, Italy.

As is well known, they are:

- 1) Tremendous experts in this field, working more than 40 years harvesting esrogim.
- 2) They are very big yarei shomyim, spending the whole year as the Rebbe’s shlichim in Milan.
- 3) They are not partners in the business and work without the owners hovering over them.
- 4) And above all, the Rebbe appointed them to harvest the esrogim for himself, he constantly bought and used the esrogim harvested by them.

If you are concerned that your esrog should be certainly not from a grafted tree, buy your esrog from Altein’s Esrogim!

If you are concerned “bein adad lchaveiro”, you want to show off your esrog in shul to your friends, you may find a nicer esrog elsewhere. If however you are concerned with “bein adam lamokom”, if you are buying an esrog that is certainly not grafted, something that is not necessarily seen by the eye, then you buy from Altein’s Esrogim!

