

THE LESSON OF THE ETROG: REMEMBERING WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT

Shanah Tova! What a joy it is to see all of you here tonight, and to officially open – christen is definitely the wrong term – our newly renovated sanctuary. I'll have more to say about that tomorrow morning.

Tonight, just one story, a story which is told about Rabbi Aryeh Levin, who was known as the *tzaddik* of Jerusalem.

Born in Lithuania in 1885, Aryeh Levin came to the land of Israel early in the twentieth century. In 1931 Rav Kook, the chief Rabbi of Israel, appointed him the chaplain for members of the Haganah imprisoned in Jerusalem by the British. One prisoner, whose death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment partly as a result of the rabbi's efforts wrote of him, "...there is one person in particular to whom I remain grateful first and foremost; ... It was he who stormed heaven and earth for me; and more important — it was he who brought me closer to my Maker in those fateful days... He left and we remained in the prison. He couldn't take us with him out into the free world, but he always brought the outside world in to us." Rabbi Levin considered this important and holy work, but according to his biography, "A Tzaddik in Our Time," he earned the title *tzaddik* –saint- not from his work with the prisoners, but from his work with the poor, the sick and the elderly. Aryeh Levin died in 1969, living long enough to see the reunification of his beloved Jerusalem.

The story I want to tell you tonight takes place just after Yom Kippur in an unknown year. If you ever have the good fortune to be in Jerusalem during the four days that follow Yom Kippur, you will be amazed at the activity. Walk down the street of any residential neighborhood and you'll hear the sounds of hammering as people put up their Sukkot. Go to Machane Yehuda, the Jewish market, and you'll see stall after stall selling *lulavs* and *etrogs* for the holiday, and each stall will be surrounded by people carefully considering which *lulav* and which *etrog* to buy. And they pay particular attention to the *etrog*.

The truth is that to fulfill the mitzvah of holding the *lulav* and *etrog* in a *sukkah*, the *etrog* does not have to be anything special. Any *etrog* will do, as long as it still has the *pitam*, the point on the end. But there is a concept in

Judaism of *hiddur mitzvah*, not simply fulfilling a commandment, but doing it in a particularly beautiful way. So, people who care about such things spend a great deal of time shopping for their *etrog*, going from stall to stall, looking for one that is particularly beautiful, with no defects and no blemishes. Some especially pious people are known to spend hours making their choice because they want their *etrog* to be the best they can find. They do this with the *etrog* in particular because while the idea of *hiddur mitzvah* can apply to any commandment, it has special meaning at Sukkot. The Torah commands us: “*U'l'kach-tem la-chem p'ri etz hadar*”—you shall take for yourself a fruit from a tree which is *hadar*, beautiful or special or precious. *Hadar*, from the same root as *hiddur mitzvah*. The tree itself is already *hadar-beautiful*-, so it takes extra effort and attention to fulfill this in a specially beautiful way. And no, I haven't forgotten that tonight is Rosh Hashanah and not Sukkot.

The story is told that one year, as always, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the *tzaddik* of Jerusalem, went to the market place to buy an *etrog*. This was not a task you delegated to others. His disciples followed him, wanting to learn the proper way to fulfill this commandment. Rabbi Levin went to the first store in the marketplace, picked up an *etrog*, looked at it and put it down. He picked up another *etrog*, examined it and put it down. Then he picked up the first one again and purchased it. He then quickly chose a *lulav* along with the myrtle and willow to go with it, and was finished with the whole business in less than ten minutes.

His disciples were astonished. Other rabbis examined dozens of *etrogim* before they selected the one that they felt was the most beautiful. How could their Rabbi have only looked at two before making his choice? They didn't understand what had happened, and as they turned for home one of the students decided to go after the Rabbi ask him to explain.

Rabbi Levin had already left the market heading to his next appointment, and because he had a head start and because he was hurrying, the student had a hard time catching up. And before he did, Rabbi Levin arrived at his destination, one of the Old Age Homes of Jerusalem, and disappeared inside. Not wanting to be rude and interrupt him, the student waited outside for his rabbi. He thought, “How long can it take the Rabbi to see whoever he is

visiting inside? Five minutes? Ten minutes? So he sat down on a bench to wait until Rabbi Levin came out. But the rabbi did not come out in five minutes or in ten, or in half an hour, or in an hour, or even in two hours. It was more than two and a half hours before Rabbi Levin came out, and even then he shook hands and spoke for a few minutes to each of the people who were sitting on the porch. Only when he had greeted everyone did he finally come down the steps.

As he turned up the street, he noticed his student standing in front of the bench. “Yankele, have you been waiting here this entire time?”

“Yes Rabbi. I had a question to ask you in the market place, but you were walking so quickly that I couldn’t catch up. And now, after waiting here for so long, I’m even more confused.”

“So, *nu*, here I am. Ask!”

“Rabbi, when you were in the market, you spent only a few moments selecting an *etrog*, and then here you spent hours with the elderly. But the *mitzvah* of visiting the old can be observed on any day of the year. The *mitzvah* of choosing the right *etrog* can only be done once a year, in the four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot. So my question, Rabbi, is why didn’t you take more time in the market today to choose the proper *etrog*, and shorten your visit here, or perhaps even put off visiting the elderly to some other day?”

Rabbi Levin sat down on the bench, indicating that Yankele should join him. Out of his pocket he drew a small Tanach, and opening it, he said, “Let me show you something Yankele. Look, the word ‘*hadar*’- choice or special or beautiful - is found only twice in the Torah. The second time the word appears, it refers to *Sukkot*: “*U'l'kach-tem la-chem p'ri etz hadar*”—you shall take for yourself the fruit of a beautiful or a valuable tree. That’s the *mitzvah* of the *etrog*. But the first time the word *hadar* appears, the Torah says: “*v'hadarta piney zaken*—you shall honor—or revere—or respect—or value the face of the aged.”

“Since the same word—*hadar*—which as a verb means to show respect for or to appreciate the beauty of, is used in both places, it’s clear that we are commanded to show respect to both the *etrog* and to the old person. But I ask you, Yankele, if I don’t show any great reverence in the selection of the *etrog*, if I rush through the purchase, does the *etrog* know? Of course not –

it's piece of fruit. The *etrog* has no feelings, so it can't be hurt if I don't pay that much attention to it. But if I don't show reverence to an elder, the person knows. If I rush through the visit, the person knows. If I don't show up when I'm expected, the person knows. Unlike the *etrog*, the person has feelings. And that's why I don't put off my regular visit to the Old Age Home just before Sukkot, and why I hurry when buying the *etrog* to have more time to spend here. It's more important to show reverence to a person than to an *etrog*."

It's important to note that Rabbi Levin was not saying that having an *etrog* was important. He cared both about having a kosher *etrog* as well as visiting the elderly. It's just that he just had his priorities straight. And for me, that's the real point of the story. Both things needed to get done. But in a day – in a life - with a finite amount of time, we need to very consciously choose what things we will give ten minutes and what things we will give 2 ½ hours.

I don't imagine many of us have spent very much time – maybe any time - choosing an *etrog*. But the idea of course applies across all areas of our lives. All the clichés are true. We ought to value people more than things. Our loved ones and our friends should take priority over our work. No one says on their deathbed I should have spent more time at the office. All the clichés are true. We should not violate the second commandment by making idols of the work of our hands – things which have no feelings – and neglect our relationships with friends, relatives, lovers – all of whom do have feelings. Martin Buber said that it is precisely in relationships that we find divinity; not in our interaction with things, but in our interplay with others. When we show love or reverence or caring or even interest in others – this is when God enters our lives.

So this Holy Day season, consider: "In the past year, how did you divide your time? To what – to whom - did you give 10 minutes, and to what – to whom – 2 ½ hours?" Did you spend more time selecting the new car or talking to your mom? Visiting the golf course or visiting the sick? Building a portfolio or building a relationship? Make no mistake – all of those actions have places in our lives. It's just a question of where we put the emphasis. There are only so many hours in a day, in a new year, in a life and we get to choose how we spend them. You can do the math yourself –

and everyone's priorities may be slightly different. But my hope and my prayer for us all is that in this bright New Year, 5773 we will spend more time honoring and revering people, and less time choosing *etrogs*.