

SHAKING UP OUR PRIORITIES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

R' Yitzchak's wife and children all knew there was no mitzvah quite as dear to their father as the mitzvah of Arba Minim - the four species taken on Sukkos; Esrog, Lulav, Hadasim, and Aravos. The Torah (Vayikra/Leviticus 23:40) describes the Esrog as, "P'ri Eitz Hadar - A magnificent fruit of a tree," and R' Yitzchak made it his business to settle for nothing less than the most magnificent. All year long he set aside a portion of his wages so that when the time came for the customary haggling to procure the rare and unique fruits, he could offer whatever it took. Not that R' Yitzchak was a haughty man; he gladly allowed anyone who asked to use his Esrog as well. "Will the Almighty not have equally great pleasure from others using such a beautiful Esrog as well?" he would say. He simply had an inextinguishable love for the once-a-year mitzvah of Lulav and Esrog.

One year, as he always did before Sukkos, R' Yitzchak gathered his belongings, including all the rubles that he had put aside, and left home to travel to a nearby town where the Four Species could be bought. Travelling along the roadside, he stopped suddenly when he heard the sound of someone crying. Indeed, a Jewish man sat in a nearby field, head in his knees, crying and moaning bitterly. R' Yitzchak approached him. "Reb Yid, what's the matter?"

"Don't even ask," the Jew said, "a bittere pekel tzures - what a bitter portion the Almighty has dealt me! Woe is to me. I had one horse. That might not seem like much, but it was enough to support my family. It was a good horse. I rode it from town to town, delivering people's mail, parcels - whatever they needed. I didn't make a fortune, but we had what to eat, and we were happy. But today I awoke, and - woe is me - I found her dead. She must have passed away overnight. As it is, we live from hand to mouth. If I have to deliver by foot, I don't stand a chance of making a living. Woe is me!"

"Tell me," asked R' Yitzchak, "what would a new horse cost you. I'm sure she was a good horse, but there are other horses out there."

"Of course there are other horses, for someone who has 300 rubles to spend! It would take me almost a year to earn that kind of money! So you see, all is lost!"

Without further ado, R' Yitzchak took out his wallet and counted out 300 rubles, leaving for himself only the smallest sum from all the money he had so carefully put aside. He placed it in the pocket of the forlorn Jew, who had all the while never taken his head out from between his knees. Sticking his hand into his pocket, he was flabbergasted to find the entire sum he needed to buy himself a new horse. "What... What have you done. I... I never expected." Completely choked up with emotion, he

barely managed to thank R' Yitzchak for his magnanimity. Little did he know, R' Yitzchak himself was not a rich man, and that he had just parted with the lion's share of his own savings.

That year R' Yitzchak had to settle for the plainest of Esrogim, much to the surprise and wonder of his friends and family. Despite their best attempts to find out, he told no one of what had come of his plans to purchase the most beautiful Esrog, nor of his savings, except to say, cryptically, that "the money was not lost - in fact it had just galloped off and was being put to very good use."

During Chol Ha-Moed (the Intermediate Days of Sukkos), R' Yitzchak travelled to Lublin to visit his Rebbe, the famed Choize (Seer) of Lublin. At the festive Yom Tov meal, the Choize remarked to his disciples, "The mitzvah of Arba Minim must be performed with great joy. We must thank Hashem that we all managed to perform the mitzvah of waving the Lulav and Esrog. When we wave the mitzvos, all the Heavenly spheres and realms are awakened, and much joy and goodness permeate the upper realms, ultimately reflecting that joy and goodness back down to this world where we can reap its benefits. We all shook the Lulav and Esrog, but, R' Yitzchak," he said, turing as he did so to face him, "to wave a horse - now that is a truly original and exceptional way to perform a mitzvah!"

The Sukkah of the holy R' Mottele Twersky zt"l was likely the most famous Sukkah in the Old City of Jerusalem. Its panels were made of the finest wood. When R' Mottele emigrated from Russia, he brought along the panels which he had inherited from his saintly ancestors. Its walls were full of inscriptions and carvings, and those who knew said that its drawings depicted combinations of letters and esoteric meanings which mortal eyes could not even discern. There were seven panels, corresponding to the seven Sefiros - or Heavenly spheres. It was said that one merely had to pass by the Sukkah, and one would be enveloped with an aura of holiness. It is told that R' Shmuel Salant, chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, once passed by this Sukkah. Though already blind, he stopped in his tracks and remarked to his shamash, "I can sense the aroma of Gan Eden!"

How shocking it was, then, when in the year 5676 R' Mottele's Sukkah never went up. All Sukkos people talked and hypothesized about what could have come of the famed panels. R' Mottele himself had nothing to say. It was only months later that the elderly R' Yisroel Meir Gottlieb revealed the answer to the mystery, at a meal he hosted at his home. "Several months ago," he began, "My grandson Shlomo became critically ill. The doctors had all but given up hope. Thanks to Hashem's great mercy, he has in fact had a complete recovery. It is necessary that I tell you how this transpired.

"The doctors concurred that the only way to save the boy's life was to bathe him several times a day with hot water. But from where was one to squeeze a drop of kerosene or a branch of firewood in these bitter times? In my desperation, I turned to R' Mottele, pouring out my tale of woe. He immediately rushed and led me to the place where his marvellous Sukkah was stored, saying, 'Quickly, Yisrael Meir, take these boards and burn them for firewood!' At first I was appalled by the suggestion. But R' Mottele demanded that I obey by virtue of his rabbinical status. I had no choice.

We burned the panels to prepare hot baths for the boy whose life was thereby saved."

R' Shaul Yitzchak Freund, who was also at the meal, was suddenly reminded of another story concerning the Sukkah. In 5668 the wealthy R' Heshel Genichovsky arrived in Jerusalem for a visit. R' Heshel was famous for collecting valuable Judaica. Having heard of the celebrated Sukkah, he offered R' Mottele a price that could have supported him and his family for the rest of their days. Yet R' Mottele refused to even hear of it. "Yet now," R' Shaul Yitzchak concluded, "when the mitzvah of saving a life presented itself, he did not hesitate for even a minute, but immediately gave his priceless Sukkah away to burn! How great is his love for a mitzvah!" (Adapted from *The Heavenly City* v. 2 pp. 156-178)

In a sense, Sukkos itself is about getting our priorities straight. Here we just finished with the Days of Judgement, hopefully with Hashem's blessings for a year of prosperity and success. Yet the first thing we do with our new-found blessings is to leave our comfortable homes for the temporary shade of the Sukkah. We thereby acknowledge that there can be no greater "success" in life than to do what Hashem really desires, even when it's not what's most comfortable. Sometimes we shake with the Esrog and sometimes we shake with the horse - the main thing is to strive to understand what Hashem wants of us in a given situation, not what we want or what makes us feel good. As the pasuk says (Mishlei/Proverbs 3:6), "In all your ways know Him; He will straighten your paths."

Wishing our readers a Good Shabbos and a Chag Sameach.

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