

# ORLAH - NO SHORTCUTS?

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

When you shall come to the Land, and you will plant any food-bearing tree, you shall withhold its fruits; for three years they shall be forbidden to you, they shall not be eaten. (19:23)

The mitzvah to refrain from partaking from the produce of a fruit-bearing tree for its first three years is called orlah. The fruits of the fourth year may only be eaten in Yerushalayim, and from the fifth year on, we may eat and enjoy its fruits without any further restrictions (after separating tithes etc.).

In its discussion of the mitzvah of orlah, the Midrash tells the following story:

The Roman Caesar Adryanus was once walking through the pathways of T'verya (Tiberias). He noticed a very old man who was preparing his orchard to plant fig trees. "Old man," he said, "just because you got up in the morning doesn't mean you'll live through the day! [Why bother planting trees at such an advanced age when you'll never live to see their fruits?!]" "I got up in the morning, and I will lay down at night - and whatever the Almighty has planned for me He will do," he said.

"Tell me," the Caesar asked, "how old are you?" "I am one hundred years old," he said. "One hundred - and you think you'll still live to eat these fruits?!" "If I merit, I will live to eat them. And if not, then just like my ancestors planted trees for me, so too will my trees provide for my children." "Promise me," he said, "that if you live to eat from these fruits, you will let me know."

Eventually, the trees bore fruit. The old man decided he would do as the Caesar had told him. He prepared a basket of figs, and took it to the palace. When the guards asked him what he was doing there, he told them his story, and they let him in to see the Caesar. "Who are you?" asked the Caesar, "and why have you brought me these figs?" "I am the old man you met in the streets of Tiberias - my trees bore fruit, and here they are!" "Take his basket of figs," said the Caesar, "and replace them with golden coins." "Why do you give such honour to a Jew?" his servants asked. "The Almighty has given him honour - should I not show him respect?"

The old man went home and told people his story - how the Caesar filled his basket with gold. Hearing this, his neighbour's wife had an idea. "The Caesar likes figs," she said to her husband. "He trades them for gold coins! Take a basket of figs, and go to the palace." He did so. When he reached the palace, the guards asked him what he wanted. "I heard the Caesar trades figs for gold coins, so I have brought him a basket of fine figs." "One moment," they said. They went and told the Caesar about his guest. "Tell him to stand by the gate with his basket," the Caesar said, "and let every man who passes through the gate take a fig and throw it in his face!"

When he returned home, his wife asked him what happened. "Thanks for all the honour you have brought me!" he said. "It's your own fault," she said. "You should have brought him esrogim - or perhaps the figs you brought were not ripe." (Vayikra Rabbah 25:5; Yalkut Shimoni 615)

A fascinating story, but how does it help us to understand the prohibition to eat the fruits of the first three years? And why does the Midrash bother to include the humorous incident with the neighbour?

What was it about the old man that so intrigued Adrayanus? Why was he so surprised that an elderly man should spend his time planting trees?

"Many men dream of finishing the entire Talmud (Shas) in one evening," R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l is said to have once quipped, "and to get a good night's sleep too!"

Today perhaps more than ever, we tend to focus our efforts and energies on things that have the potential to bring us swift results and immediate gratification. Western society and its "time-saving" innovations have left us acutely impatient and intolerant of even the slightest delays. Overnight shipping, once an expensive extravagance, is now the norm. We want what we want - and we want it now!

Adrayanus was amazed that someone at such an advanced age would actually have the patience to invest his time and effort in planting something, although he was unlikely to ever see the fruits of his labour. As a Caesar, he was likely accustomed to having the life's pleasures at his avail for the mere snap of a finger. The message of the old man - a message often borne by the elderly who have lived long enough to know good things come to those who wait - was that there is great value to be found in patiently awaiting the products of one's labour, even when they don't seem forthcoming.

Perhaps, too, this is one of the messages of the mitzvah of orlah. Wouldn't it be great to plant a seed, have a tree sprout overnight (perhaps for a premium one could acquire intraday seedlings!), and wake up the next morning ready to enjoy its fruits, without ever having to weed, water, or prune? Think about this: Suppose they were to tell a farmer that his crop must be uprooted because a highway is being routed through his property. Who would agonize over it more, the farmer who worked for many years to build-up his crop, or the "overnight farmer" whose seedlings sprout faster than you can say "Johnny Appleseed?"

Easy come, easy go. What we achieve with ease has little lasting value to us. If someone worked for weeks to knit a sweater or to weave a carpet, would he throw it out just like that? People have hanging around their homes hand-knit sweaters and blankets from their Bubbies that they just can't bear to throw away, even though they're thread-bare and worn. Why? Is it the cost of the wool? We easily discard items of far greater monetary value. It's because in our hearts we know the love, care, and effort that went into creating them.

The mitzvah of orlah acts against our impulsive nature and our need to see instant results from our

efforts. You will plant a tree, and you will wait three full years before you are allowed any kind of pleasure from its fruits.

Of course our need for immediate results and instantaneous gratification is not restricted to material things. In our avodas Hashem and our character development, we also tend to get easily frustrated when things don't proceed as quickly as we'd like. We tend to flock towards segulos, and often use them as substitutes for earnest long-term effort. "You want a segulah to remember what you study?" an elderly chassid renowned for his diligence and long hours in the beis ha-midrash once asked, "maybe try putting in more hours. If that doesn't work, you can always try putting your Gemara under your pillow and sleeping on top of it!"

The neighbour's wife in the story is convinced that fruit-baskets can be traded for gold coins just like that. There's nothing more to it. She fails to realize that there's more to the old man's fruits than meets the eye. It's not the fruits in the basket that so impressed the Caesar - it's how they got there. Even after their "efforts" are met with scorn, she remains unconvinced. "You should have brought a different fruit..." - maybe a different segulah would have worked...

We can't turn back the clocks. Mass-production and disposable goods are here to stay. Our task is to make sure the need for immediate gratification that so pervades our world doesn't invade our efforts in Torah, tefilah, and mitzvah performance, and chinuch ha-banim (education). Remember: What comes easily is parted with easily. The more of ourselves we invest in Torah, the more we value it, and the more dear it becomes.

*Have a good Shabbos.*

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