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Editors

The Citron Compendium

The Citron (Etrog) *Citrus medica* L.:
Science and Tradition

 Springer

Chapter 17

From ‘an Etrog’ to ‘One’s Etrog’: A Literary Analysis of S. Y. Agnon’s Story



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Abstract This chapter discusses the two strata—the obvious and the subtle—at which S.Y. Agnon’s short story, “The Tzaddik’s Etrog” may be read and understood. At the obvious level, Agnon describes a person who wishes to observe the halakhic injunction concerning the “Four Species” with extreme piety, paying careful attention to the excellence of the etrog. But upon arriving home with his precious etrog, the fruit accidentally falls on the ground, and thereby is no longer fit to be used to fulfill the law of the “Four Species.” At the deeper, hidden level, the reader becomes aware of the double meaning of the purchase of an expensive etrog. By making this purchase, the tzaddik (righteous man) places his costly citron above all human needs and completely ignores his commitments to his wife and family. By reading Agnon’s story at these two levels, the etrog is transformed from a botanical object used for a religious ritual into a symbol of a set of values that illuminates the priorities one must set in making crucial decisions during a lifetime.

17.1 Introduction

The origin and foundation of the genre of the “hassidic tale” coincides with the emergence of the “Ba’al Shem Tov,” R. Israel son of Eliezer and Sarah, who lived in Podolia (then a district in the southern kingdom of Poland, now in central Ukraine) between 1700 and 1760. The Ba’al Shem Tov himself did not write stories, but he told them to his followers as a supplementary tool to explicate his religious path. His stories were collected in 1815, about fifty years after his passing.

The stories have two main roles:

1. As *hagiography*, the purpose of which is to glorify the tzaddik, the leader of the community, as a unique personality who views his leadership methods as derived

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from his power to influence its fate and to redeem it from daily hardships. The community sees the tzaddik as the messenger of the Holy One Blessed be He, and his stories strengthen its faith in Him, its way of life as a community which maintains its existence in the conditions of exile with all of its implications, and its dependence on hidden powers that exist within the tzaddik for its salvation as a community and as individuals.

2. *Disseminating the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings while making them accessible to those studying in the beit midrash and to laypeople alike.* As an educational tool, the story has its own power to strengthen their faith in all of the above. By understanding the souls and abilities of his followers, the Ba'al Shem Tov succeeded in transmitting his teachings to each person according to their way—whether in person or via later writings. There were few during his lifetime who studied, as most were concerned with their livelihood. Thus, the stories' lessons pierced the hearts of both the common audience and the minds of the students learning his teachings in the beit midrash [study hall].

Following the Ba'al Shem Tov, the hassidic movement in its various manifestations and forms adopted the hassidic story as a regular method in delivering hassidic teachings. Hassidism never considered the story as a work of art, but rather only as an extension of the holy texts. With the arrival of *Shivhei ha-Besht (In Praise of the Ba'al Shem Tov)*, the stories reached other hassidic communities and were exposed to the critique of Yiddish readers. The Hebrew (or Yiddish) literature critics who discussed this genre of writing were critical not only of the style of writing, but primarily of the content of the stories. (Best-known among them is Joseph Perl who wrote *Megaleh Temirim [Revealer of the Secrets]* in 1819, which became a symbol for the struggles of the Haskala movement against the hassidic movement). Today, the hassidic story stands on the bookshelf as the preferred genre for every lover of stories and for the literary critic.

Agnon, whose story “The Tzaddik’s Etrog” appears below, gave the Ba'al Shem Tov’s tales a modern design, presenting a different understanding of their morals and rendering them universal and relevant to anyone regardless of religion, faith, and worldview, in any time and place.

17.2 Between the Etrog and ‘Etrogo’: A Study of S. Y. Agnon’s Story

It was within the narrative framework surrounding a particular tale transmitted through the generations in a hassidic community that Agnon wrote his story “*Etrogo shel oto tzaddik*”—“The Tzaddik’s Etrog.” The storyteller knows that the tale he is about to record was passed from one hassid to another and from a man to his household. It was in this way that it reached the author, who, knowing that each storyteller before him recounted it in his own way out of a desire to make it more pleasing to his audience, took his own literary liberties. Exercising his own artistic creativity,

Agnon tells his story to the audience and ends it with the words: "It is worthwhile to hear this tale twice."¹ This sentence establishes the difference between the etrog and *etrogo* for the reader.

The etrog is a citrus fruit, a scientific species with different strains, and is defined by genetics and botany. The scientific terminology is subject to change according to changes in nature, historical evidence, the genetic makeup of the species, and continuing study. For this reason, the scientific specification of the etrog should be treated as an emerging study as evidence accumulates for continued consideration.

"And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook" (Lev. 23:40), states the scriptural verse. It does not only say "and you shall take," which already contains the essential commandment itself, but rather continues with the added "for yourselves," valuable in that it instills the object with its belonging to a particular being.

The same is true of the *etrogo* in the title of the story, where the pronominal suffix instills the etrog with belonging, or being owned. This etrog may have been purchased, planted in a garden, or given as a gift, and thus does not resemble any other etrog past or present, and its uniqueness is in belonging to a particular individual. As such, in our story it has a unique significance distinguishing it from the scientifically defined botanical etrog mentioned above.

The event, originally recounted by R. Michel, the Maggid of Zlotchev's daughter-in-law, is transformed by Agnon from an account into a fable. It was thus removed from the context of a historical anecdote concerning the holy Maggid of Zlotchev—as his hassidim called him—and transposed into the realm of literature. And because the life story of every person is a proverb for anyone who takes an interest in him or her, the meaning of that "fabled etrog" becomes the "*etrogo*" of every listener and reader who can imbue it with personal significance.

Thus, "it is worthwhile to hear this tale twice": the first understanding pertains to the historical significance of transmitting family-tested events with the closest possible precision—and this is the meaning that the Maggid ascribes to his etrog. The second is the meaning that the reader will attribute to it according to his or her own worldview. Thus, the "scientific etrog," which is of interest to many authors of this present work, is transformed into an etrog that serves as a symbol which forms an existential reality that is not necessarily a historical truth, but may hold meaning for any person, at any time, and in any place.

The Maggid of Zlotchev was a pauper "unconcerned with his own needs but with the needs of the *Shekhinah* [the Divine spirit], which are the Torah, prayer, and good deeds." His wife, who "knew the soul of her righteous husband," managed the sparse household, taking great care not to disturb her husband with such matters "so that he should not desist from his holy work." One must note the author's irony which accompanies the story in its entirety, by considering the verse upon which this description is based: "The righteous man knows the life/soul [*nefesh*] of his

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all the quotes are from the story, "The Tzaddik's Etrog," in S.Y. Agnon, *The Fire and the Trees* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1974), 115–16. Emphases are by the article's author.

animal” (Prov. 12:10) That is to say, the righteous one knows the soul of the other (an animal or a person likened to one). But here, the soul revealed to the other is the one called “righteous,” while the sensitive wife who is so considerate of her husband is symbolized according to the scriptural parallel in the verse by referring to the inferiority of an animal.

Similar circumstances are found in the words of R. Akiva, who, upon returning from twenty-four years of study during which he was uninterruptedly dedicated to his holy work, encounters his wife: “When she went out to meet him she wore tatters; her friends said to her, ‘Borrow pleasant garments and get dressed and go out to him.’ She responded, ‘The righteous man knows the *nefesh* of his animal.’”² Rabbi Akiva’s wife’s character in this midrash illuminates the wife of the Maggid in two ways. (Both are unnamed by the narrator. As such, they serve as representative characters, and it is important to see them in this way). First: both know their husband’s soul well. Second: both diminish this knowledge which strengthens their personalities for the benefit of elevating the status of their husbands. Agnon, who employed older Hebrew literary foundations, did this with the purpose of saying something about the characters he was writing about. Thus, it appears that Agnon, in his ironic way, presented matters such that in his eyes the ones the “righteous man knows,” referenced in this story and in the story of R. Akiva, are the women, placing the woman above her husband. This will be elaborated on below.

17.3 The Story

Once, on the eve of Sukkot, the wife of the Maggid dared to stand at the doorway to his room and inform him that she still did not have the means to purchase the holiday necessities. The Maggid reproached her in his response, saying, “You are concerned with the fish and meat, while I am concerned with the etrog that I lack.” The wife left his room “disappointed.”

This is their first dialogue that continues throughout the story, establishing their differing needs surrounding the general situation that the family finds itself in on the eve of the festival. The wife is concerned with her family, and the Maggid is concerned with himself. The word “*me*” becomes a central motif in the ongoing dialogue. This divergence can be broadened when taking into consideration that the festival of Sukkot is the only one of the three holidays regarding which there is a commandment: “You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your winepress. *And you shall rejoice in your feast,*³ you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates” (Deut. 16:13–14) From the wife’s perspective, the commandment emphasizes the joy of the entire family.

² *Masekhtot ketanot, Masekhet avot de-rabbi Natan*, second addition to the first version, ch. 8.

³ The emphases in the verses are all mine.

Upon his wife's exit, the Maggid's thoughts turn to contemplating how he will purchase an etrog for himself. In his contemplations, the possibility occurs to him of selling his phylacteries which were considered very valuable because "a holy man of God scribed them." He justifies the idea of this unusual sale by reasoning that during the nine days of the festival, one is forbidden to wear phylacteries anyway.⁴ The Maggid does not concern himself with the days following the festival when he will need his phylacteries for the rest of the year. He takes his phylacteries, goes to the beit midrash, and sells them for a gold dinar. He then runs off to the etrog seller and chooses a handsome etrog which he found to be "kosher and beautiful," and pays for it with the gold dinar. He cheerfully goes home, finishes building the sukkah, and returns "to *his* room of seclusion." There, he ponders the uniqueness of the festival of Sukkot that "God adorned with many commandments."

Someone apparently informed "his wife, the rebbetzin" that the Maggid was in the market, and she again permitted herself to enter his room. Seeing the tremendous joy on his face, she said, "You must have brought *us* all of our festival necessities," and added that "the day is turning and going." The Maggid stood up from his chair and covered his eyes with his hands, blessing his creator for "meriting *me* with his grace and giving *me* all that *I* was lacking."

The rebbetzin, who understood from these words that he included herself and her children in these words, waited for him to give her the goods that she assumed he had brought, while he "went back to sitting and told her that he merited a kosher etrog." She responded, astonished, "From whence did you have coins to purchase an etrog *for yourself*?" He told her how he sold his phylacteries and "bought *myself* the etrog," to which she responded by requesting that he "give *me* the change."

This is one of the continuously intensifying climatic peaks of the story. At this point, the reader already knows that all the money was handed over in return for the etrog. The reader also knows that it was a lot of money, and he can imagine—already before the wife—the terrible upheaval about to occur. The Maggid's wife does not yet know what is awaiting her. This gap between the reader's knowledge and the wife's delayed understanding intensifies the storm of profound pain that is waiting to overwhelm her at any moment.

The Maggid, unable to comprehend her question which expressed her great astonishment at his actions, responded as though it was self-evident: "*I* was not given change, all the money that was given to *me* in my prayer *I* gave for *my* etrog." He then began exalting the virtues of the etrog with great enthusiasm.

This is the first instance in their loaded dialogue where she uses the word "*me*"—the only time in this entire exchange when she demands: "give me." And although it is expressed using simple words, without overtones of pain, disappointment, or anger, her cry, the sigh of misunderstanding, and her great sadness can be heard in that single word "*me*," which establishes all that she lacks in contrast to the Maggid's great fullness in his joy allotted to him by his God.

⁴ Outside of the land of Israel, because due to the "second day of holiday in Diaspora" the number of the days of the festival are nine and not eight as they are in Israel.

Their dialogue is like two parallel lines that do not meet. He does not comprehend her needs, and she does not comprehend his elevated spirit on the eve of the festival when they lack all the basic festival necessities for the household. She understands the need for an etrog, but cannot understand why the Maggid did not divide his money between their physical needs and his spiritual ones. In his joy, he misinterprets the reason for her entering his room, and wishes to share his joy in the beautiful etrog with her. She restrains herself from crying before him, but does not understand why he fails to see her misery and the misery of her children.

At this point in the story the etrog symbolizes the entirety of the various elements of their relationship, as well as the unbridgeable gap in their essential understandings of these different elements. The etrog is “his etrog”—that of the Maggid alone, who views it as one of the elements of the spiritual world without which life is not worth living. The rebbetzin views the etrog as only one aspect of life which is “the Torah,” but knows that it must be joined with the same devotion to the aspect of “flour,” without which her life and her children’s lives are not livable.

The Maggid’s wife restrained herself from crying so as not to disturb his joy, perhaps because she understood that her tears would be futile, and said, “I want to see the bargain you found.” The Maggid mistakenly thought that she wished to join in his happiness and removed the etrog from its wrappings. Here, the author writes, “Its beauty shone and its good scent rose, a delight to the eyes and desirable to bless.” This description is recounted by the “all-knowing narrator,” who knows the thoughts of the characters in his story.

The reader must ask himself from which vantage point the narrator examines the description taken from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, as it is written: “When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6) If we examine this verse from Genesis and compare it to the subsequent line in the story, “she outstretched her hand and took the etrog,” we must conclude that these descriptions are intended from the perspective of the Maggid’s wife, the reality unfolding before her eyes. Like Eve, who sees that the fruit is a delight to the eyes and “took of its fruit,” she too “took the etrog.”

The resemblance ends here. From this point, in contrast to Eve who took, ate, and gave some to her husband and they ate together, the wife of the Maggid took, “and remembered the sorrow of her children, who had *nothing* to eat, and now the holiday of Sukkot was upon them and she had *nothing* with which to make it joyful. Her hands collapsed in sorrow and the etrog dropped and *fell*. *Because* it fell, its *pitam* [blossom end] broke, and *because* its *pitam* broke, it was rendered *pasul* [disqualified for the mitzvah].” In their repetition, the three central words—“nothing,” “fell,” and “because”—intensify what transpired, and their presence in the passage is not unintentional. By repeating the words in the segment, the author emphasizes what is necessarily expected to transpire, as a series of dominos that knock each other over in an excited child’s game. Or perhaps we should say that it resembles a turning wheel which is not controlled by any cause, but only moves from the initial push that perpetuated it.

It transpired thus: the woman remained in her emptiness, filled with sadness, and as a result she did not drop or let the etrog fall, rather “it fell,” as though it was granted its own powers for “falling.” After this, the author describes the chain of events which could not be stopped until it arrived at its final predestined end. Thus, the repeated word “because” creates the feeling of necessity that everything that is caused creates a necessary result: was dropped [*nishmat*], fell [*nafal*], broke [*nishbar*], rendered *pasul* [*nifsal*]. All are passive verbs, the “*nif'al*” conjugation; and the passive is inactive. Or perhaps the necessary damaging of “the etrog of that *tzaddik*” can only be attributed to God, whom the Maggid thanked: “Lauded is the name of God, may he be blessed and elevated, that he merited me in his grace and gave me all that I was lacking.”

This moment, the women's emptiness in her inability to provide her home with anything for the joy of the festival, is equal to the Maggid's emptiness in his lack of joy in his now-worthless etrog. If the story had ended here, we would have been able to say that this story is one with a moral of *midah ke-neged middah* (measure for measure). By the same measure meted out by the Maggid for his family, leaving them with “absence,” God measured for him the same “nothing” in his festival joy. He who prevented the joy of the festival from his family saw his own joy upended.

Yet the story does not end here, and Agnon concludes with the words of the *tzaddik* examining what had transpired while pondering what to do, and so “he spread out the palms of his hands in despair and said: ‘I have *no* phylacteries, I have *no* etrog, I have *nothing* left but anger. But I shall *not* be angry, I shall *not* be angry.’” The two hands with which he enthusiastically held the etrog in all its brilliance and beauty now expressed a great despair. The repeating word “no”/“nothing”/(*ein*) is a testament to the great lack of the thing that was supposed to give him great joy. The repeating word “not” is also a testament to the lack of an emotional resilience to cope with his new reality. The Maggid's cry, “I have nothing left but anger” indicates that of all the tools that he had, beginning with his faith, his learnedness, and ending with his holiness, he has nothing but anger with which to cope with the forlorn reality that has befallen him.

Who is the Maggid angry at? At God, may He be blessed, who merited him with an etrog and took it away before he had blessed it? At his wife, whose great sadness made her helpless to the point that the strength left her hands, thus dropping the etrog so delightful to the eyes? It appears that neither one is the target of his anger. Rather, he himself renounces the anger that remained in him and prevents himself from using it, perhaps through observing the damaged etrog on the ground which to him symbolizes his failure in organizing the order of his world. For indeed, as in the beauty-filled tales of tragedy, it is not fate that brings down calamity upon man, but rather man himself, in his blindness to his fellow-man. The hubris that situated him at the center of his own existence carried him too far down his chosen path and guided him in a direction from which there was no rectification.

R. Michel, the Holy Maggid of Zlotchev, who viewed the beautification of the mitzvah of the etrog as the highest value and preferred it to his own household, withdrew in his glowing loneliness to the heights of his holiness. He was blind to the distraught living close by, and thus brought great despair upon himself. However,

unlike the classic tragedies, in the end the Maggid succeeds in taking the reality of his life and turning it toward a path with an end in sight, the path without anger. In this hassidic tale, although everything appears predictable, choice is granted for a person to choose the correct path to walk on.

The narrator does not tell us if in the end there was an etrog for that festival of Sukkot, if family necessities were provided, or if there was great joy. This is not essential in a story in which the “tzaddik’s etrog” served as the criterion for the behavior of a person concerned with his own needs and ignoring others. As for the rest—go and learn it.

So, what connection does “The Tzaddik’s Etrog,” the fable with a classic literary moral, have to the scientific etrog, with its taste and scent, that they should reside in tandem in the one book? It seems to me that each know that reality and imagination are intermixed both in the story and in science, and that both are worthy of different “readings” that complete each other in goodness and harmony.