

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Sukkot 5783

First Days of Sukkot Torah Readings in a Nutshell

The reading begins with an injunction that a newborn calf, lamb, or kid must be left with its mother for seven days; one may not slaughter an animal and its offspring on the same day.

The reading then lists the annual Callings of Holiness -- the festivals of the Jewish calendar: the weekly Shabbat; the bringing of the Passover offering on 14 Nissan; the seven-day Passoverfestival beginning on 15 Nissan; the bringing of the Omer offering from the first barley harvest on the 2nd day of Passover, and the commencement, on that day, of the 49-day Counting of the Omer, culminating in the festival of Shavuot on the 50th day; a "remembrance of shofar blowing" on 1 Tishrei; a solemn fast day on 10 Tishrei; the Sukkot festival -- during which we are to dwell in huts for seven days and take the "Four Kinds" -- beginning on 15 Tishrei; and the immediately following holiday of the "8th day" of Sukkot (Shemini Atzeret).

G-d declares the fifteenth day (and the subsequent 6 days) of the seventh month to be a holy convocation, no work shall be done during that time. The reading then describes the Sukkot offerings which were brought in the Holy Temple.

First Days of Sukkot Haftorahs in a Nutshell

Day One: Zachariah 14:1-21.

The prophet Zachariah prophesies about the world transformation that will occur in the end of days, when "the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His name one."

But first he describes a great war that will center around Jerusalem immediately before the ultimate Redemption. G-d will gather the nations for war, and He will do battle with them, by visiting various diseases and ailments upon them. Zachariah then notes that those of the nations who will survive this cataclysmic war will be required to go to Jerusalem every year on the holiday of Sukkot to pay homage to G-d.

Day Two: I Kings 8:2-21.

Today's haftorah describes the dedication of Solomon's Temple, which occurred during the holiday of Sukkot. (The celebration of the completion of the Holy Temple began a few days earlier, on the 8th of Tishrei.)

The construction of the Holy Temple was completed. King Solomon assembled the leaders and elders of the tribes to Jerusalem, and amidst great fanfare the Levites transported the Ark from its temporary location in the City of David and installed it in the Holy of Holies chamber in the Holy Temple. Immediately, G-d's presence appeared in the Temple, in the form of a smoky cloud.

King Solomon then blessed G-d. He recalled the history of the sanctuary, how his father, King David, had wanted to build it--but was told by G-d that it would be his son who would accomplish this feat. "And the L-rd has established His word that He spoke, and I have risen up in the place of David my father, and sit on the throne of Israel, as the L-rd spoke, and have built a house for the name of the L-rd, the G-d of Israel. And I have set there a place for the ark, wherein (is) the covenant of the Lord, which He made with our fathers, when He brought them out of the land of Egypt."

### Shabbat Chol Hamoed Torah Reading in a Nutshell

G-d agrees to Moses' request that His presence only dwell amongst the Jews. Moses requests to be shown G-d's glory. G-d agrees, but informs Moses that he will only be shown G-d's "back," not G-d's "face."

G-d tells Moses to carve new tablets upon which G-d will engrave the Ten Commandments. Moses takes the new tablets up to Mt. Sinai, where G-d reveals His glory to Moses while proclaiming His Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

G-d seals a covenant with Moses, assuring him again that His presence will only dwell with the Jews. G-d informs the Jewish people that He will drive the Canaanites from before them. He instructs them to destroy all vestiges of idolatry from the land, not to make molten gods, to refrain from making any covenants with its current inhabitants, to sanctify male firstborn humans and cattle, and not to cook meat together with milk.

The Jews are commanded to observe the three festivals -- including the holiday of Sukkot, "the festival of the ingathering, at the turn of the year." All males are commanded to make pilgrimage to "be seen by G-d" during these three festivals. The maftir, from the Book of Numbers, discusses the public offerings brought in the Temple on this day of Sukkot.

### Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot Haftorah in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 38:18-39:16

The subject of the haftorah of this Shabbat is the war of Gog and Magog that will precede the Final Redemption. Its connection to the holiday of Sukkot is that according to tradition the war will take place during the month of Tishrei, the month when the holiday of Sukkot falls. In addition, this war is identical to the one described in the fourteenth chapter of Zachariah, the haftorah read on the first day of Sukkot, which concludes by saying that the gentile survivors of this war will be required to go to Jerusalem every year on the holiday of Sukkot to pay homage to G-d.

The prophet describes Gog's war against Israel and G-d's furious response. G-d will send an earthquake, pestilence, great floods and hailstones and fire--utterly destroying Gog's armies.

"And I will reveal Myself in My greatness and in My holiness and will be recognized in the eyes of many nations, and they will know that I am the Lord. . . . I will make known My Holy Name in the midst of My people Israel, and I will no longer cause

My Holy Name to be profaned, and the nations will know that I, the Lord, am holy in Israel."

The haftorah concludes by saying that the weaponry of the defeated armies of Gog will provide fuel for fire for seven years! The Jews "shall carry no wood from the fields nor cut down any from the forests, for they shall make fires from the weapons." (*all nutshells are borrowed from chabad.org*)

### The Festival of Insecurity by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/archive/festival-insecurity-message-succot/>

What exactly is a succah? What is it supposed to represent?

The question is essential to the mitzvah itself. The Torah says:

"Live in succot for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in succot so that your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in succot when I brought them out of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Lev. 23:42-43

In other words, knowing – reflecting, understanding, being aware – is an integral part of the mitzvah. For that reason, says Rabbah in the Talmud (Succah 2a), a succah that is taller than twenty cubits (about thirty feet or nine metres high) is invalid because when the sechach, the "roof," is that far above your head, you are unaware of it.

So what is a succah? On this, two Mishnaic Sages disagreed. Rabbi Eliezer held that the succah represents the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Israelites during the wilderness years, protecting them from heat during the day, cold during the night, and bathing them with the radiance of the Divine Presence. This view is reflected in a number of the Targumim. Rashi in his commentary takes it as the "plain sense" of the verse. Rabbi Akiva on the other hand says succot mammash, meaning a succah is a succah, no more and no less: a hut, a booth, a temporary dwelling. It has no symbolism. It is what it is (Succah 11b).

The festival of Succot, according to Rashbam, exists to remind us of our humble origins so that we never fall into the complacency of taking freedom, the land of Israel and the blessings it yields, for granted, thinking that it happened in the normal course of history.

However there is another way of understanding Rabbi Akiva, and it lies in one of the most important lines in the prophetic literature. Jeremiah says, in words we recited on Rosh Hashanah, "I remember the loving-kindness of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jer. 2:2). This is one of the very rare lines in Tanach that speaks in praise not of God but of the people Israel.

"How odd of God / to choose the Jews," goes the famous rhyme, to which the answer is: "Not quite so odd: the Jews chose God." They may have been, at times, fractious, rebellious, ungrateful and wayward. But they had the courage to travel, to move, to leave security behind, and follow God's call, as did Abraham and

Sarah at the dawn of our history. If the succah represents God's Clouds of Glory, where was "the loving-kindness of your youth"? There is no sacrifice involved if God is visibly protecting you in every way and at all times. But if we follow Rabbi Akiva and see the succah as what it is, the temporary home of a temporarily homeless people, then it makes sense to say that Israel showed the courage of a bride willing to follow her husband on a risk-laden journey to a place she has never seen before – a love that shows itself in the fact that she is willing to live in a hut trusting her husband's promise that one day they will have a permanent home. If so, then a wonderful symmetry discloses itself in the three pilgrimage festivals. Pesach represents the love of God for His people. Succot represents the love of the people for God. Shavuot represents the mutuality of love expressed in the covenant at Sinai in which God pledged Himself to the people, and the people to God. (For a similar conclusion, reached by a slightly different route, see R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, *Meshech Chochmah* to Deut. 5:15. I am grateful to David Frei of the London Beth Din for this reference.)

Succot, on this reading, becomes a metaphor for the Jewish condition not only during the forty years in the desert but also the almost 2,000 years spent in exile and dispersion. For centuries Jews lived, not knowing whether the place in which they lived would prove to be a mere temporary dwelling. To take just one period as an example: Jews were expelled from England in 1290, and during the next two centuries from almost every country in Europe, culminating in the Spanish Expulsion in 1492, and the Portuguese in 1497. They lived in a state of permanent insecurity. Succot is the festival of insecurity.

What is truly remarkable is that it is called, by tradition, *zeman simchatenu*, "our time of joy." That to me is the wonder at the heart of the Jewish experience: that Jews throughout the ages were able to experience risk and uncertainty at every level of their existence and yet – while they sat *betzila de-mehemnuta*, "under the shadow of faith" (this is the Zohar's description of the succah: Zohar, Emor, 103a) – they were able to rejoice. That is spiritual courage of a high order. I have often argued that faith is not certainty: faith is the courage to live with uncertainty. That is what Succot represents if what we celebrate is *succot mammash*, not the Clouds of Glory but the vulnerability of actual huts, open to the wind, the rain and the cold. I find that faith today in the people and the State of Israel. It is astonishing to me how Israelis have been able to live with an almost constant threat of war and terror since the State was born, and not give way to fear. I sense even in the most secular Israelis a profound faith, not perhaps "religious" in the conventional sense, but faith nonetheless: in life, and the future, and hope. Israelis seem to me perfectly to exemplify what tradition says was God's reply to Moses when he doubted the people's capacity to believe: "They are believers, the children of believers" (Shabbat 97a). Today's Israel is a living embodiment of what it is to exist in a state of insecurity and still rejoice.

And that is Succot's message to the world. Succot is the only festival about which Tanach says that it will one day be celebrated by the whole world (Zechariah 14:16-19). The twenty-first century is teaching us what this might mean. For most of history, most people have experienced a universe that did not change fundamentally in their lifetimes. But there have been rare great ages of transition: the birth of agriculture, the first cities, the dawn of civilisation, the invention of printing, and the industrial revolution. These were destabilising times, and they brought disruption in their wake. The age of transition we have experienced in our lifetime, born primarily out of the invention of the computer and instantaneous global communication, will one day be seen as the greatest and most rapid era of change since Homo sapiens first set foot on earth.

Since 9/11 2001, we have experienced the convulsions. As I write these words, some nations are tearing themselves apart, and no nation is free of the threat of terror. There are parts of the Middle East and beyond that recall Hobbes' famous description of the "state of nature," a "war of every man against every man" in which there is "continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes, The Leviathan, chapter XI). Insecurity begets fear, fear begets hate, hate begets violence, and violence eventually turns against its perpetrators. The twenty-first century will one day be seen by historians as the Age of Insecurity. We, as Jews, are the world's experts in insecurity, having lived with it for millennia. And the supreme response to insecurity is Succot, when we leave behind the safety of our houses and sit in succot mammash, in huts exposed to the elements. To be able to do so and still say, this is zeman simchatenu, our festival of joy, is the supreme achievement of faith, the ultimate antidote to fear.

Faith is the ability to rejoice in the midst of instability and change, travelling through the wilderness of time toward an unknown destination. Faith is not fear. Faith is not hate. Faith is not violence. These are vital truths, never more needed than now.

### The Saga of the Citron by Toby Sonneman

<https://reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/sukkot/saga-citron>

This Sukkot, take the time to inhale the aroma of a citron - that giant, knobby, lemon-shaped fruit with thick, dense skin - and you'll encounter an exhilarating fragrance. It may be almost inedible - bitter and dry, with little pulp or juice - but its unique scent of lemon and lime and its ever-bearing tree have endowed this native plant of northeast India with curative and ritual status. From ancient through medieval times, people utilized the fruit as a remedy for everything from snakebites and seasickness to muscular pain and skin disease.

The citron was first esteemed by the ancient Hindus as a symbol of prosperity, perhaps because of its generous size (the Hindu god of wealth, Kuvera, is always shown holding a citron). The fruit reached China sometime in the fourth century

CE, at which time the many-lobed ornamental variety called the Buddha's Hand (when its finger-like lobes are closed, the fruit resembles a hand in prayer) became revered as a symbol of happiness. To this day, Buddhists value the citron as a religious offering in both temple and home altars.

## **THE CITRON & SUKKOT**

It is not known when the Jews first encountered the citron (etrog in Hebrew), though scholars believe that Jewish exiles in Babylonia brought it back to Palestine sometime before 600 BCE. During the Second Temple period (515 BCE to 70 CE), when Jews regarded the harvest festival of Sukkot as the most important holiday of the year (so much so that Sukkot was known simply as HeHag--The Festival), the etrog was a frequent motif on coins and synagogue mosaics of the time. It remains a matter of debate when exactly the etrog was adopted to fulfill the Torah commandment to "take the fruit of a beautiful tree" during Sukkot. Though it has been proposed that the biblical "fruit of the goodly tree" was originally a different fruit, later replaced by the citron, most scholars have rejected this theory on the grounds that Jews of the era were very conservative in adhering to religious traditions.

Why the etrog? Again, this remains a matter of scholarly speculation. In advancing proofs that the etrog was indeed the "fruit of the goodly tree," and perhaps even the fruit eaten in the Garden of Eden, the rabbinic authors of the Talmud asserted that since both the fruit and the tree had flavor, the etrog met both qualifications of the phrase, the tree being as "goodly" as the fruit. One rabbi demonstrated that the numerical value of the phrase "fruit of a goodly tree" was the same as the word etrogim, the plural of etrog. Still others compared the tapered oval shape to a heart, thus justifying its standing as the heart of the festival's prayer.

## **ETROGIM THROUGH THE AGES**

Having chosen the citron to fulfill the mitzvah of Sukkot, the Jews cultivated the fruit wherever they settled. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, exiled Jews planted citrus orchards in Europe (Spain, Greece, and Italy) as well as in North Africa and Asia Minor. Some food experts have linked the Jewish demand for the etrog to the development of Mediterranean citrus (derived from "citron") culture, as the citron was the first fruit to be cultivated in Europe.

Jews who resided in communities north of warm citron-growing areas were dependent on imported etrogim, which caused them much anxiety given the dangers and uncertainties of sea travel. Obtaining the fruit became even more difficult in the sixteenth century, when a series of rabbinical edicts forbade the use of citron from grafted trees. As grafting was widespread in Italy, Jewish communities had to find new sources. By the seventeenth century some of the most popular sources were Spanish Catalonia and the islands of Corsica and Corfu. At first, the citrons of Corsica - where wild, ungrafted fruits grew abundantly - were the most prized, but as a result of political instability in the region, in the

early 1800s the Ionian island of Corfu had taken Corsica's place as the wellspring for pure, ungrafted citrons. The father in Sholom Aleichem's story "The Esrog," checking the quality of the etrog he is about to buy, asks, "But is it from the island of Corfu?" and is reassured: "Nowhere else but from Corfu!"

Corfu's status as the standard by which all other etrogim were measured began to diminish in the mid-century, when it was discovered that cultivation standards had lapsed and that merchants had been dumping etrogim into the Adriatic in order to create an artificial shortage and raise prices. Decades later, antisemitic uprisings on the island, by then a part of Greece, led to rabbinic edicts prohibiting the ritual use of etrogim from Corfu and a worldwide Jewish boycott. A ritual murder accusation and subsequent pogroms against Jewish residents in 1891 would put an end to the reign of the Corfiot etrog. The attempt by citron growers in Corfu to market the fruit to American Jews met with protestations and failure. An 1892 broadside published in the United States labeled the New York dealers in Greek etrogim "traders in the blood of Israel."

Jewish communities in Europe and America then turned to Palestine, where etrog farmers had been marketing etrogim to Europe since the late 1850s through The Fruit of the Goodly Tree Association. Some Jewish communities, such as the Sephardim, still preferred citrons from Italy, Greece, Morocco, or Yemen, but most Jews seeking citrons turned to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel.

The etrog would acquire a special cachet among the Jews of Eastern Europe - many of them impoverished - perhaps because of the imported fruit's significant expense. They stored their etrogim in finely crafted, flax-lined boxes of silver and wood to protect them and prevent them from drying out during the seven days of the holiday, as only a fresh fruit could be used in the blessing. And so it was that Sholom Aleichem likened the etrog to "a diamond or a rare gemstone or a cherished heirloom which has been entrusted for safekeeping, as precious as life itself...swaddled in flax, as one would a delicate child..." Many Jewish immigrants considered the etrog box one of their most prized possessions, bringing these boxes to America along with their Shabbos candlesticks and Havdalah spice boxes.

Folk wisdom endowed etrogim with special powers related to fertility and childbirth. The Talmud advised a pregnant woman to eat the etrog after the holiday so she would have a "fragrant" child - the equivalent of a "good" child. In the shtetl, a childless woman who wanted to bear a son was advised to bite the tip of the fruit. A woman in labor was advised to place the tip under her pillow to ease the pain of a difficult childbirth.

My grandmother, who emigrated from Russia to Rock Island, Illinois in 1912, always used her post-Sukkot etrog to make marmalade, which she gave to postpartum mothers. My mother was the recipient of a least one of these jars of

"etrog jelly," and she makes a marmalade from lemons (a descendant of the citron) to preserve the custom.

## **ETROGIM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

These days, American Jews continue to import the majority of their holiday etrogim from Israel, grown mostly by the Ludmir family on seventy-four acres of etrog groves in Bnei Brak. Their company, The Central Israel Etrog Co., supplies some seventy percent of Israel's etrogim and exports about 100,000 etrogim to the U.S. each Sukkot season - that is, except every seventh year, when the Ludmir family observes sh'mita, the Jewish law requiring the land to lie fallow. During sh'mita years, the most devout Jews will buy etrogim from Italy, the Greek islands (including Corfu), Morocco, Yemen, and in recent years California.

Only one grower in the United States has successfully harvested significant numbers of etrogim. For more than 20 years, John Kirkpatrick, a Presbyterian who farms near the town of Exeter in the San Joaquin Valley, has cultivated some 250 citron trees under rabbinical supervision. He also tends 35 acres of lemons and tangelos, but says that the two acres of etrogim take most of his time. Religious regulations prohibit grafting etrog trees onto stronger, disease-resistant rootstocks, so the trees are short-lived and vulnerable to disease and frost. Add to this the highly labor-intensive process of growing and selecting the fruit. Using a magnifying glass and a mirror, Kirkpatrick and his employees cull any blemished or imperfect fruit through the growing season and protect each promising etrog in an individual cloth bag secured to a branch. Of the 100,000 immature etrogim, about 12,000 are cultivated to full size; after sorting and grading, only 2,000-4,000 are good enough to sell for ritual use in the extremely brief time period prior to Sukkot. David Wiseman of Dallas, who markets some of Kirkpatrick's citrons through his company Zaide Reuven's Esrog Farm, says of the endeavor: "You've basically got to be crazy to do this."

This isn't the first time the Jewish obsession with the etrog has been called crazy. Writing for Commentary in 1958, Erich and Rael Isaac cited a fourth-century Christian bishop who called it both shameful and foolish for the Jews to make such a fuss over a lemon. The Isaacs rejected such arguments. "A symbol of world history and Jewish national persistence, a finite object in the natural world revealing God's divine and infinite mystery, the etrog is clearly an object of the highest significance," they wrote. "To the Jew it is a tree rooted in eternity, its creation antedating man; a tree from whose branches sprang the fruit which, in bringing the end to man's sojourn in Eden, gave us human life and history as we know it."

[Joy is...an Open Roof, an Open Door, an Open Heart by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/videos/joy-open-roof-open-door-open-heart/)

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I don't know about you, but when I sit in a succah I think to myself: that's how our ancestors lived. Not just in the desert in the days of Moses, but for most of twenty centuries of exile, not knowing from one year to the next whether they'd still be there, or be forced to move on, as Jews were forced to leave England in 1290, Spain in 1492, and in the years between from almost everywhere in Europe. For all that time, Jews knew what it was like to have no fixed home, to know that the place where you are living is just a "dirat arai" – a temporary dwelling – which is what a succah is.

Yet what did they call Succot? That's the strange thing. They called it z'man simchateinu – the season of our rejoicing. Somehow Succot decodes for us the secret of joy. Joy doesn't come from great buildings of brick and stone – it doesn't come from what we shut out – but from what we let in. Joy comes from a roof open to heaven, a door open to guests, and a heart open to thanksgiving.

Ben Zoma was right when he said: Who is rich? Not one who has everything he wants, but one who celebrates everything he has. Succot is one of the world's great seminars in happiness, because it shows us that you can sit in a shack with only leaves for a roof, exposed to all the hazards of the cold, the wind, and the rain, and yet still rejoice, when you are surrounded by God and the people you love. Have that, and you have everything.

Chag Sameach!

### [Reb Aryeh's Etrog by Haim Be'er](#)

*For Sukkot, a story by Israeli Novelist Haim Be'er, in a first English Translation*

One late afternoon between Yom Kippur and Sukkot 1963 I stood in the dark recesses of Jerusalem's Ohr bookshop, a treasure house of old and antique holy texts. The delightful aroma that wafted off the etrogs, precisely as described in a story by S.Y. Agnon, obliterated the mustiness of the old books, most of which had come from the homes of poor folks. I inspected the recent acquisitions the moykher-seforim, the bookseller Rabbi Avrum Rubinstein, had made from the estate of a Torah scholar recently departed to eternal rest. That dead man's sons, who had strayed from the traditions of their father and had no need for his library of rare and valuable volumes, sold them to the bookseller for a pittance.

The small shop, located at the end of Meah Shearim Street, had been well known to me since the time I had begun my hunting expeditions in search of coveted books. It was here that I once passed a test posed to me by the bookseller. He showed me a large stack of old tomes, including entire anthologies of Hebrew poetry from Yemen, and said that if I succeeded in identifying the most valuable book in the lot I would receive it as a gift.

It was also in this shop that I met Hebrew literature's most famous author, Agnon, for the first and only time. To my embarrassment I did not recognize him, mistaking him for a retired Galician businessman who had taken up book collecting in old age. He asked what family I came from. As I offered up my family tree stretching back seven generations, like a peddler laying out his wares, Agnon suppressed a smile and said,

“You only know that far back? A person ought to know who his ancestors are going back to Adam in Eden.”

When I entered the bookshop the doorway was clogged with a half-minyan’s worth of men, armed with magnifying glasses, examining the etrogs by the last light of the setting sun. The etrogs, on display in wooden crates on scattered, impromptu tabletops, had been disrobed of their flaxen wrappings.

From my spot, behind the bookseller who was sitting at his counter engrossed in a book, I noticed a sudden commotion at the front of the store. The crowd parted with respect and awe, quickly clearing a path for a small, old man who entered with a gentle shuffle of his feet. The man greeted Rabbi Avrum warmly, and asked in a whisper if he might receive the etrog which Rabbi Avrum had set aside for him.

“Certainly, Reb Aryeh, certainly,” said the moykher-seforim, in a tone of unparalleled reverence and love.

This was the tzadik, Rabbi Aryeh Levin, the renowned Jerusalem saint.

I knew Reb Aryeh well. He was a regular visitor at my parents’ grocery store at 12 Geulah Street (the address was later changed to 16 Malkhei Yisrael Street). Two or three times a month he would enter the store to talk privately with my father. The content of these secret meetings was revealed to my mother and me only after my father passed away, about two months before I saw Reb Aryeh in the bookstore, when he came to comfort us while we were sitting shiva in our apartment behind the store. He sat on a stool between myself and Mother, caressing my hand with his own unimaginably soft palm, like the touch of an angel, and told us that only now was he permitted to reveal the secret behind his frequent visits to our store. It turned out that Father had been his partner in a long line of charitable acts. Whenever Reb Aryeh became aware that a neighborhood family was suffering financial woe he and Father would put a plan into action. The family would buy their groceries on credit, Father would forgo his profits on the sale, Reb Aryeh would pay half the amount accumulated on that month’s bill, and the family would be charged only about 40 percent of the actual value of the purchases. The families remained unaware of the discount or that they had been the recipients of charity. Mother informed Reb Aryeh that she would maintain these arrangements. Our guest placed his hand gently on hers and said, “May you be comforted from Heaven.” At the book store that day, two months after Father’s death, my youthful brashness allowed me to ask, “Reb Aryeh, don’t think poorly of me for asking, but are you one of the lamed-vovniks—one of the 36 hidden saints who sustain the world?”

He immediately recognized me, even though I had sprouted a beard by not shaving since the shiva. He caressed my hand in his and asked after my mother. Then he answered my question: “A lamed-vovnik? From time to time, mein kind. From time to time, my child.” He placed his hand on my head and said something like the following: “To be a lamed-vovnik is not a job. One is not appointed to the position for life. It’s more or less a temporary assignment. At the moment a person does an act of kindness he joins the rank of the hidden 36 tzadikim who sustain the world—but in the blink of an eye the title is transferred when the next person does a good deed, until his task is completed.” Reb Aryeh shut his eyes and, after a silent pause, added, “It’s that simple. Anyone can become a lamed-vovnik. You too, mein kind.”

The bookseller, incessantly sucking on a peppermint, now presented the etrog to Reb Aryeh. Reb Aryeh thanked him, cast a quick glance at the etrog, swathed it in its flaxen wrapping, tucked it away in his coat pocket, and hastened from the store.

Unable to restrain myself I ran after him. “Reb Aryeh, Reb Aryeh, I must ask you something,” I called out.

“What do you wish to ask, mein kind?” he said without breaking his stride.

“Why does everyone painstakingly examine the etrogs with magnifying glasses for the slightest blemish, but you, Reb Aryeh, made due with a quick peek as you ran out?”

“You ask a good question, my precious boy,” replied Reb Aryeh, continuing on his way.

“Everyone knows there are two mitzvot the Torah requires us to beautify. One is, of course, the etrog, about which it is stated ‘Take a fruit of a beautiful tree.’ Those men were inspecting the etrogs to ensure no defect ruins their beauty and lessens the mitzvah. The other commandment is, ‘Beautify the face of the elderly,’ meaning, show them respect. I was compelled to choose which of these two commandments takes precedence. On my way to the bookshop I stopped at the dental laboratory to retrieve the dentures of a man from the old age home which I had dropped off for repair on the day after Yom Kippur. By not dawdling at Rabbi Avrum’s bookshop I might make it, God willing, to deliver the teeth to the man who needs them to eat his evening meal.

Hopefully he will finally be able to enjoy his food like a proper human being, instead of softening his bread in milk as he has been forced to do these past two days. Now, forgive me, I am rushing to the number 11 bus which will arrive at any moment.”

Reb Aryeh implored me to keep a close eye on Mother to ensure that she not overdo it running the store, and dashed off to the bus stop.

I watched him recede into the distance. I could not take my eyes off the soles of his shoes, worn out from his pursuit of righteous deeds. I knew that on the day he was summoned to the next world an angel would descend from heaven to collect those worn-out shoes and grant them a place of honor next to God’s divine throne. There they will remain “under His feet like a surface of brilliant sapphire, shining as bright as the

blue sky itself.” *(Translated from Hebrew by Jeffrey Saks. This story appears in Haim Be’er’s recent collection of Hebrew nonfiction, Keshet LeEchad: People, Places and Stories of Jerusalem (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2017), and appears here courtesy of the author and publisher.)*