



HIGH HOLIDAYS

Sukkot 1

Can a Boat Named S.S. *Etrog* Save Us from Hurricanes?

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CAN A BOAT NAMED S. S. ETROG SAVE US FROM HURRICANES?

ABSTRACT

We are coming off hurricane season. Harvey, Irma followed by Jose and Maria, blowing seemingly out of nowhere.

What message does Sukkot, a festival of flimsy, temporary huts teach us about withstanding the elements, the seasons and the winds and storms of life?

In 1950, Israel commissioned a 1,850-ton sea vessel. They named it, of all things, the *S.S. Etrog*.

Indeed, when Israel was considering its emblem and seal, one of the finalists was, the Etrog.

The Etrog is called *pri etz hadar* in the Torah. *Hadar* means beautiful, and it also means one “that dwells” through all the seasons.

What can the Etrog teach us about our essential *pintele yid* and tapping it to overcome and learn from every challenge – be it a seasonal hurricane or a personal storm?

1. Joke: Disaster (Comic) Relief Fund

In the month of Elul, a hurricane blew across the Caribbean on its way to Florida. Yankel was lounging on his 150-foot yacht, along with and his captain, Bartholomew. It didn't take long for the 100-million-dollar yacht to be swamped by high waves, sinking without a trace. Yankel and Bartholomew managed to swim to the closest island. After reaching the deserted strip of land, the captain was crying and very upset that they would never be found, destroyed by a hurricane. Yankel, however, was quite calm, relaxing against a tree.

“Yankel, Yankel how can you be so calm?” cried Bartholomew. “We're going to die on this lonely island, alone, forsaken and forgotten.”

“Sit down and listen to what I have to say, Bartholomew,” began the confident Yankel. “Five years ago, I gave \$500,000 to the Federation, another \$500,000 to my synagogue, and another \$500,000 to Israel. I donated the same amounts four years ago. Three years ago, I did very well in the stock market, so I contributed \$750,000 to each. Last year, business was even better, thank G-d, so good in fact that I contributed a million dollars to each of the charities.”

“So what?” yelled the exasperated Bartholomew. “Who cares how much charity you give – we’re stranded in middle of nowhere with a hurricane our only company!”

“Well,” said a smiling Yankel, “it’s almost Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, that time of year again. As the Jewish charities gear up for their annual fundraising drives, I guarantee without a shred of doubt that, hurricane schmurrricane, whether on an island in the Caribbean or a planet in outer space, those fundraisers and rabbis are going to find me!”

2. Opening: The Power of Kindness

While sailing on your yacht as a hurricane swirls is not recommended, the message is clear: *Tzedakah*, acts of righteousness, will ride out any storm and save us from anything.

As we witnessed during these recent hurricanes – the outpouring of kindness and support people showed for complete strangers.

Our hearts obviously go out to all those that suffered due to the havoc wreaked by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma across Texas, Florida, South Carolina, and Georgia. The lives lost, the communities destroyed, the people displaced, damages in the billions.

Yet, this tragedy also brought out the best in us, in a tremendous display of human concern and generosity.

Why is it that such goodness emerges only when our security is shaken and our homes are rattled (or worse)? Why can’t we learn to be kind to each other on a regular day?

The holiday of Sukkot offers us the answer.

3. Dome Home

Isn’t it ironic that as Florida and Houston are rebuilding their homes to the tune of tens of billions of dollars, we are moving out of our comfortable homes into the portable, flimsy shacks called Sukkot?!

Just a few weeks ago, many people in Texas, Florida, and Georgia were concerned that their homes would be destroyed. Today, we are leaving our homes to spend our time and eat our meals in Sukkot huts, not exactly the most hurricane-proof structures!

And yet, within the festival of Sukkot lies a profound lesson in how to withstand hurricanes (or any weather and seasonal challenges) and any stormy situation, and indeed use it to grow bigger, stronger, and more invincible.

4. The S.S. Ethrog

Yankel and Bartholomew's yacht, and the boats that are central to rescue efforts during and after storms, bring to mind another boat, a boat that was commissioned in 1950 by the fledgling Israeli government.

This from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, May 1, 1950.

Israel Ship Launched at Swedish Port; Government Officials Attend Ceremony.

The Swedish-built Israel fruit freighter "Ethrog" was launched here at a special ceremony. Among the many guests were prominent figures in Sweden's government and industry as well as leaders of the Swedish Jewish community.¹

And this from the JTA, August 17, 1953:

First Transport of German Reparations Goods Reaches Israel

The first shipment of goods from Germany under the terms of the German reparations pact arrived at the Israeli port of Jaffa this week-end. The vessel, originally scheduled to dock at Haifa, was diverted to Jaffa by the authorities to foil a planned demonstration by the Herut Party, right-wing group which has opposed dealing with the Germans from the first.

The cargo aboard the Israeli vessel, the S.S. Ethrog, consisted of 250 tons of caustic soda and iron shipped from Hamburg. Three hundred port laborers immediately began unloading the vessel. A heavy police guard was maintained on the sea about the ship and on the dock.²

Sadly, the S. S. Etrog went up in flames in 1961, while the 1,845-ton vessel carrying cotton and plywood from Haifa to Liverpool. Thank G-d, no one was hurt.³

On line from that 1961 dispatch reads rather demonstratively:

Ten crew members and the ship's master, Capt. Rafael Spirath, stayed aboard the Etrog to fight the blaze.

Imagine standing on board an Etrog, a giant 1,845-ton citron, to fight a fire and put out a storm? Perhaps that's what the Sukkot Etrog is all about...

1 http://pdfs.jta.org/1950/1950-03-01_041.pdf

2 http://pdfs.jta.org/1953/1953-08-17_158.pdf

3 http://pdfs.jta.org/1961/1961-06-27_122.pdf

5. One of a Kind

When Israel was considering its emblem and seal, one of the finalists was, the Etrog.⁴

Each of the three pilgrimage festivals has its unique Mitzvoth. On Passover we eat Matzah; on Shavuot we offer the Showbread (*Shtei HaLechem*); and today, on Sukkot, we sit in a Sukkah and we take and bind together the Four Kinds.

*And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, pri etz hadar, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d for seven days.*⁵

Three of these kinds are clear: they refer to a palm branch (*lulav*), the myrtle (*hadass*), and the willow (*arava*). The first kind numerated in the verse, the *pri etz hadar*, is cryptic.

Pri etz hadar literally translates as “fruit of the hadar tree.” What is a *hadar* tree? *Hadar* literally means “beautiful.” Which tree is called “beautiful?”

The Talmud elaborates on these three words, *pri etz hadar*, analyzing, dissecting, and unveiling their meaning. With various proofs, our holy sages reveal that it was the etrog, the citron that Moses and the Jews banded together with the *lulav*, *hadassim*, and *aravot*.

Listing the sages’ hermeneutical process would carry this sermon into Chol Hamoed. Let us however focus on one aspect of the *pri etz hadar* that holds a personal and relevant lesson in our lives today.

6. Celestial Seasoning

The Talmud⁶ reads the phrase *pri etz hadar* as a reference to the etrog, since the Hebrew word *hadar* (“beautiful”) can also be read *ha-dar*, “that which dwells,” so that the phrase also translates as “the fruit that dwells on its tree from year to year.” Unlike other fruits, which wither and fall off after a single season, the etrog continues to grow on its tree throughout the year, seemingly unaffected by the annual cycle.

Why is this unique?

Seasons define our year. As we read: *So long as the earth exists, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.*⁷

⁴ http://archive.jta.org/1948/10/31/archive/israeli-state-council-approves-proposed-state-flag-rejects-recommended-seal?_ga=2.236118274.2027519398.1505333000-439909463.1502827161.

⁵ Leviticus: 23:40.

⁶ Sukkah 31b, 35a.

⁷ Genesis 8:22.

The Torah teaches that there are six general seasons. True, there are four seasons of time; however there are six seasons in the agricultural cycle of development.⁸

Every fruit has its season: Some bloom in the season of seeding, some in the season of harvest. Some flora flourish in the cold, others in the heat. Some grow best during the summer, others during the winter. Barley and beans love winter; figs – summer.

The *etrog*, unlike any other fruit, dwells in all seasons, “it dwells on its tree from year to year.” Only the citron is able to bear every single of the six annual seasons, the seeding and the harvest, the cold and heat, and the summer and winter. The *etrog* bears and maximizes each of the seasons and their diversity.

7. The Kabbalah of Always Being in Season

Everything in the Torah is exact. What is the reason and lesson why the Torah commands us to use specifically an *etrog* – a fruit that is *badar*, that dwells on its tree through all the seasons?

Life is defined by the seasons. In the famous words of Ecclesiastes: *Everything has an appointed season, and there is a time for every matter under the heaven.*⁹ The journey of life travels through seasons, rhythms, cycles – they are called “lifecycles” for a reason.

There is the snow of winter and the beach of summer, the burn of heat, and the frost of cold, the crispness of autumn and the blossoming of spring. There is a time to seed and a time to harvest, a time to sow and a time to reap.

Ecclesiastes – which some communities read on Sukkot – describes life’s 28 emotional, social, developmental, and seasonal cycles:

A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot that which is planted.

A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break and a time to build.

A time to weep and a time to laugh; a time of wailing and a time of dancing.

A time to cast stones and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing.

⁸ See Bava Metzia 106b; Rashi to Genesis 8:22. Each of these six seasons has two months, as we learned: Half of Tishri, Marcheshvan, and half of Kislev are “seedtime.” Half of Kislev, Teveth, and half of Shevat are the “cold” season. “Winter” is the time for sowing barley and beans, which are early (*charifin*) to ripen quickly. The “winter” period is half of Shevat, Adar, and half of Nissan. “Harvest” is half of Nissan, Iyar, and half of Sivan. “Summer” is half of Sivan, Tamuz, and half of Av, which is the time of the gathering of the figs and the time when they dry (“*kayitz*”) them in the fields (II Sam. 16:2). “Heat” is the end of the sunny season, half of Av, Elul, and half of Tishri, when the world is hottest (Yoma 29a).

⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

A time to seek and a time to lose; a time to keep and a time to cast away.

A time to rend and a time to sew; a time to be silent and a time to speak.

A time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

Indeed, the year is called *shanah* in Hebrew precisely because it is rooted in the word *shinoi*, or “change.” The year, time, is defined by change, by seasons and cycles. The *shanah* – the year – contains all the various changes from one extreme to the other.

8. The Equilibrium

Life, in other words, is all about change.

But change can also have a downside. Sudden changes unnerve us. Extreme fluctuations upset us. They can disturb and disrupt our lives. They have the ability to confuse and disorient us.

Like a storm at sea, emotional shifts and weather changes in our lives, can cause us harm and capsize our boats. Powerful winds of change, like hurricanes, can displace and destabilize us.

How do we ride through these changes? How do we learn to harness these vicissitudes while navigating their waves? How do we, in effect, build powerful ships that can weather any season and storm – which is the key to a successful and balanced life? How do we find the equilibrium?

Enter the *Etrog*, “the fruit that dwells on its tree from year to year,” and it empowers us to navigate all the seasons and changes of life.

When we clutch the *Etrog* (with the other three species) to our hearts, we internalize its power – *v'lokachtem lochem, l'pnimiuschem*, you shall take to yourselves, to your insides – infusing us with the ability to absorb every single season, and navigate every cycle and change in life.

How does the *Etrog* have this power? Because it symbolizes the *pintele Yid* – the divine spark in each one of us, which transcends and unites all diversity of all the changings seasons of our lives.

The *Etrog* manifests the absolute faith of every Jew, which allows him to weather and ride through every wave in our lives.

9. The Sukkah: Ultimate Protection

The sukkah carries a similar message. We sit in sukkot to remind us of the clouds of glory that protected our ancestors in the wilderness after they left Egypt.

We dwell for these seven days in these vulnerable huts demonstrating that our ultimate security is not in the man-made edifices we build, but in our trust in G-d.

Remember the Titanic was built by professionals. The ark by an amateur – but an amateur with faith in G-d.

The sukkah is called *tzilah d'mehimmusa*¹⁰ – “shade of faith.” The Sukkah demonstrates our source of true security, and the mystery of true invincibility: Only when we are ready to surrender our own self-made delusions of power and comfort, only when we are ready to replace our dependence on material comforts and trust in financial wealth for dependence on the ethereal and trust in the sublime, can we ensure that our affluence and prosperity will not self-destruct.

Paradoxically, when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and trust in G-d, we discover our deepest source of invincibility. Because at the end of the day, nothing man-made can provide us absolute protection and security. Because everything man-made and everything material is by definition mortal and impermanent. Only G-d proves us with the connection to the eternal and immortal.

That is why our innate goodness emerges when we realize that our physical strictures are not our true source of security. As we witnessed during these last devastating hurricanes.

It therefore makes perfect sense that the Etrog is celebrated on Sukkot, because faith is what connects the Etrog to the divine that transcends the shifting changes of an insecure world.

Armed with the Etrog and the Sukkah we have the power to withstand any change, any force, any metaphorical hurricane. We have the ability to navigate because we are connected to a divine infinite strength that transcends any change and shift.

The Etrog is the ultimate ship – the true S.S. Etrog – which can withstand, absorbs and rode any wave and storm.

¹⁰ Zohar III, Emor, 103a.

10. S. S. Etrog: A Vessel Absorbing and Building on All Seasons

Seasons can be devastating. And they can be uplifting.

A hurricane can destroy a city, just as a gorgeous day can uplift a spirit.

Meteorologically speaking, we have just witnessed how seasonal storms can destroy lives, homes, cities. One tropical season could unleash hurricanes and mayhem.

In personal terms, a bad season, G-d forbid, can be reflected in a stormy relationship or a shattered family. We all experience ups and downs, and twists and turns in our lives. Each one of us goes through our seasons, both the life cycles from birth to the day we return our souls to our Creator, and the cycles in between – milestones, special days. We also each go through changes in our moods, attitudes and dispositions.

In professional terms, a stormy season could wreak havoc in a company. Strong winds of bad luck could flood one's warehouse and destroy one's stock.

These seasonal changes can also be positive ones: a successful season yields good fruit, which we reap and harvest.

Comes Sukkot and we preform the mitzvah of taking the four species, with the Etrog at the center, and we embrace the *pri etz hadar*, which dwells through all seasons. We recognize that G-d created the universe and all its cycles and seasons, and also created an Etrog, that transcends the seasons and allows us to use them more than they use us.

As we hold the *Etrog* today and every day of Sukkot we are reminded of our inner Etrog, the part of us that is more powerful than any hurricane and more in season than any season.

The Etrog is the secret to true invincibility. May it serve each of us and help us face all our seasons, changes and challenges in life.

Gut Yom Tov and Chag Sameach!

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