

The Esrog

His full name was Avraham, but everybody, including his own parents, called him Avi, because he was really not very tall for his age. In fact the only thing that Avi Pinchas really resented was when people showed pity because he was thin and short. Otherwise, he was a bright young Yeshivah boy, and a wizard at sports, as well as at *Chumash*, *Rashi*, and at figures. His spelling was still a little unsure, for after all, he was only two years in America.

Like all new immigrants, Avi’s parents had quite a struggle finding a decent job and earning enough to keep up the regular payments for rent, food, clothing and the “*S’char Limmud*,” the little they had to pay for Avi’s tuition. Things got worse when Avi’s father became ill and was unable to hold a job that demanded steady work. Most of the time he had to spend in bed, because the years in the concentration camps and in the D.P. camps had sapped his strength. The little which Mrs. Pinchas earned in the factory as a seamstress, was just barely enough to keep them from starving.

Yet the Pinchas family were pious people who had *Bitachon*, trust in the L-rd and in His help, and they did not despair. Avi naturally kept thinking about all kinds of jobs he could do before and after school, when he would be older and stronger. Yet all he earned were the tips for delivering orders on Friday afternoon, when there were no classes at the Yeshiva. And even then he could not handle the bigger orders, because they were too heavy for him.

Before Yom Kippur, several of the stores in the Jewish neighborhood, where the Pinchas family lived, rented their window space to Esrog dealers, who displayed the precious yellow fruits in open boxes, bedded on pillows of cotton or wood shavings. Their fragrance filled the air of the crowded streets. In his class several of the boys bragged about the *Hadar*, the specially beautiful Esrogim which their fathers had purchased in time, in order to have first choice of the finest of these fruits used for the *Arba Minim* on Sukkoth. Avi was certainly not jealous, because he realized how grateful he had to be to have his parents, and to have escaped from the hell of Europe during the years of Nazi terror and the post war trouble. He did not mind wearing old clothes, some of them hand-me-downs from rich relatives, and others hand-sewn by his skilled mother.

Yet it hurt Avi to think that his pious and learned father, once one of the foremost students of a great European Yeshivah, should not have an Esrog, not to speak of a *Hadar*, as befitted a man of his scholarly rank. Secretly he hoped that something would happen that would enable him to get hold of \$10. Why just \$10, you ask? Well, you see, on his tours of the Esrogim displays he had fallen in love with one that was almost a *Hadar*. It was a rather slim fruit, still somewhat green at the bottom, yet oh so well grown! Avi could not resist the temptation. One late afternoon, after his Yeshivah class was over, he had walked into the store. The kind old *Sofer*, a scribe of Torah scrolls and *Mezuzoth*, who owned the particular Esrogim-display as a side line to implement his meager income, had noticed the thin youngster who, every evening, after Yeshivah, walked by his store window and looked at his precious fruits. “What can I do for you, my young friend?” he asked kindly.

Somewhat shaky and afraid that he would be chased away for his impertinence, Avi said: "I have no money to purchase an *Esrog*, nor has my father. Yet, I would love to see that beautiful *Esrog*, the last one in the first row in the window. I promise you I will hold it carefully, so that it will not drop, the *Pittem* will not break."

"Sure, sure, my young friend," said the old *Sofer*, looking curiously at the thin youngster and at his shabby clothes." Just be very careful with it. It has to bring me at least ten dollars."

"Ten dollars," echoed Avi sadly, and with all his might he held on to the precious, slim *Esrog*, inhaling its fragrance and observing that it did not have a single spot, scratch or other flaw. It took a long while to tear himself away and return the *Esrog* to the old *Sofer*.

Ever since, Avi checked every morning and evening to see whether "his" *Esrog* was still there, or whether it had already been bought by a more fortunate buyer. He even told his father about it, somehow hoping that, who knows how, a way could be found for Mr. Pinchas to purchase the precious *Esrog* for Arba Minim of his own.

"Have patience, Avrehmele. *Hashem* is kind and good to us. If not this year, perhaps next year we shall be able to buy a real *Hadar*. Meanwhile, let's be grateful for what we have. One must not sin and covet what other people have. Just think how rich we are compared to those 'whom we left behind on the other side.'"

"You are so right, my dear father," replied Avi, yet he could not help sighing as he thought of "his" *Esrog*, the last one in the first row of the old *Sofer's* display.

Yom Kippur passed. One day, another, and another, and the merchandise in the *Esrogim* windows kept getting less and less, and what was left was really far from perfect, or too expensive. Avi shivered when he thought that "his" *Esrog* might be among those gone. Twice, on the day before *Erev Sukkoth* he asked for permission to leave class, and he ran down the two blocks to the *Sofer's* display window. Somehow, miracle upon miracle, two thirds of the *Sofer's* merchandise had been sold, yet by evening the precious one, "his" one, was still there. The old *Sofer* nodded to Avi through the window, as if to say: "Don't worry, son. It is still there. Don't give up hope. One can never tell."

Frankly speaking, that night, the eve of *Erev Sukkoth*, Avi did not have much hope left. He tortured his brain, trying to figure out all kinds of schemes to raise the \$10. But he was too smart not to realize that it was, almost impossible for him. He was not old enough to cut *S'chach* (covering for the *Sukkah*) or sell *Hoshanos* (twigs) like the older and stronger *Yeshivah* boys.

As he was thus thinking, tossing back and forth on the old couch that served as his bed, (it sagged in the middle and some of the springs came loose, sticking him in the side) he heard their neighbor, Reb Yankel the Watchmaker, come to visit his father.

"Reb David," he heard him say in his thick voice, "last year you made me one of the old European basket weave holder; for my *Lulov* that was the envy of all the members in our Shul. Here, I brought you a whole old *Lulov*, make me one for myself and one for my son-in-law. I'll pay you for it."

Something flashed through Avi's mind. Carefully he watched his father tear off a few strips from the palm branch leaves and fold and weave them skillfully into the most

beautiful holder he had ever seen. “Here is a dollar, Reb David,” said the watchmaker. “They are even more beautiful than last year’s. I thank you.”

As soon as Reb Yankel had closed the door behind him, Avi slipped from his bed and went over to his father. “Tatti, Tatti, please don’t laugh. Listen to me. I think I know how we can afford to purchase that precious *Esrog*. Look here, in this old Lulov there are enough strips to make a few more of the basket-weave holders. Tomorrow we have no *Yeshivah*. I am going to sell them in the street, in front of the Esrogim displays.”

Though Mr. Pinchas was somewhat doubtful whether the people would be as foolish as the well-to-do watchmaker to pay \$1 for two such holders, he did not want to discourage his son, knowing how much this meant to him. “Just don’t be disappointed if you can’t get rid of them, or if no one wants to pay a decent price for them,” he said.

Overjoyed, Avi went back to bed. G-d had helped and sent Reb Yankel to his house to give him the right idea. Next morning he got up early and prayed with the first Minyan — but not before he had a peek at the beautiful holders his father had made. In fact, he took them along to shul, in the hope that he might sell them right then and there. As soon as he had finished *Aleinu*, he ran out, sat down on top of the stoop that led up to the synagogue, and spread out the paper in which he had wrapped his precious merchandise. In his mind he saw everyone grabbing for them, and himself running to the old *Sofer*’s to buy “his” *Esrog* that is, if it was still there.

Everyone who came out of the synagogue, or who passed by, commented on the beautiful basket weave of the Lulov holders. Yet only two men offered him a quarter for one. The rest shrugged their shoulders and put the little baskets down. “A cheaper one will also do.” When his stomach reminded him that he had not eaten breakfast, he was about to gather his beautiful merchandise together, hoping for better luck later. Just then the old *Sofer* came out of the synagogue.

How are you, my young friend. Your *Esrog* is still waiting for you. Somehow no one has taken it, though I sold much less perfect ones.” Following Avi’s eyes he looked down at the holders which Mr. Pinchas had made in the night, and which had not yet found the right customers. He picked one up, inspected it carefully, and turned to Avi and said:

“Are you selling these? Where did you get them?” Quickly Avi told him of his idea to earn enough money for the beautiful *Esrog* that he wanted so much for his father and for himself. “Why, I think it’s a splendid idea. I think I can use a dozen myself, I’m sure. Though I don’t think I can pay you more than a quarter apiece. But come over to my store, I’ll give you a few more old *Lulovim*. Bring them to your father, so that he can make some more. I am sure there are enough people around who appreciate this artistic type of holder.

Avi was so grateful that he could have kissed the old man’s hand, Fifteen minutes later he was back home to tell his father of his good fortune, and give him the old *Lulovim* for more work. “The old *Sofer* must be a kind man. It really seems as if Divine Providence has sent him to help us have our own *Arba Minim*, and that fabulous *Esrog* you keep speaking about,” his father said thoughtfully.

Thus started the busiest day in young Avi’s life. Right after breakfast he canvassed all the *Esrogim* stores in the neighborhood with a few samples of the holders that his

father had produced. A few bought some, while others said they were not interested, despite Avi's pleas and his willingness to reduce his price. Avi even went so far as to walk across the bridge to another neighborhood, where they also sold Esrogim, to offer his merchandise.

It was noon by the time he returned. He still had only six dollars. 'Four more dollars,' he mumbled to himself. Quickly he ran over to the old Sofer to assure himself that "his" Esrog was not yet sold. Business was going briskly now. Even those who had not been anxious to spend too much money were now buying their Arba Minim. Rapidly the windows of the Esrogim stores emptied, and people burned home, proudly showing each other their "lucky" purchases — a beautiful Esrog at a cheap price.

Father had really outdone himself. The last holders Avi picked up to sell during the afternoon were his most beautiful. Avi posted himself right in front of the old *Sofer's* store, to make sure that no one would buy "his" *Esrog*, and in a loud voice he offered his "beautiful holders for your Lulov." Many people looked, some stopped to examine his merchandise, and once in a while some man bought one or two. But it was slow going. Eight dollars, eight fifty. The last dollar and a half were the hardest to get, it seemed.

"Hey, wait a minute, this is my Esrog," shouted Avi in despair, as he saw one well-clad man taking "his" Esrog from the window and looking it over carefully. "I have only \$8.75, but I will get the rest yet," he shouted at the old *Sofer*, running into the store.

"I'll give you fifteen dollars for this Esrog," said the stranger as if he had not heard the boy's terrified voice. The old *Sofer* looked at the man and at the boy. The seconds seemed like hours, until he said:

"The L-rd knows that I could use the few extra dollars for *Yomtov*. Yet I think this boy has earned this *Esrog*. He has worked so hard for it, that I must give it to him. I have another one just as beautiful as this one for you, Reb Yid."

Somehow he convinced the rich customer. In fact the wealthy man was so impressed by the story of Avi, and by his fathers beautiful holders, that he bought two of them for a dollar.

That Sukkoth no one was prouder than Avi when he walked next to his father to Shul, and in his hand the precious *Esrog*. "A true *Hadar*, indeed," his learned father had said, when he came home just an hour before *Yomtov* with his precious purchase. "I have never seen one as beautifully grown and as fragrant as this."

Avi's clothes were far from new, and the house was bare of luxuries, though perfectly clean. Yet to Avi, this was the most beautiful holiday he had ever experienced. He felt like a king when his father let him have his *Arba Minim* to use after him at *Hallel*, and to take part in the Lulov parade during the *Hoshanoth*.