

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter LV: Shir haShirim (Song of Songs)

Essay 7: Why are Jewish children compared to an apple tree among trees of the forest?

פסוק כַּתְּפוּת בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר כִּן דּוּדֵי בֵּין הַבְּנִיִּים וְכוּ'. קִשְׁשָׁה לְמַה דְּנֻקָּא תְּפוּת, וְלְמַה דְּנֻקָּא בַּעֲצֵי הַיַּעַר, וְלְמַה דְּנֻקָּא בֵּין הַבְּנִיִּים. וַיּוֹבֵן בְּמֵאֵי דְגִרְסֵינָן בַּפְּרָק ג' דְּסוּכָה (דף ל"ו) אֲתֵרוּג הַבּוֹסֵר, רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא פּוֹסֵל, וְחֻכְמִים מְקַשְׁרִים. אָמַר רַבָּה, רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא וְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אָמְרוּ דְּבַר אֶחָד. רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא הָא דְאָמְרוּ. רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן מָאי הִיא, דְּתַנַּיָּא רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן פּוֹטֵר אֶת הָאֲתֵרוּגִים בְּקֻטְנָם. אָמַר לוֹ אַבְיֵי דְלֵמָא לֹא הִיא, עַד כָּאֵן לֹא קָאָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא הֵבָא, דְּבַעֲיָנוּ הֵדֵר וְלֵיפָא, אֲבָל הֵתָם כְּרַבְנָן סְבִירָא לֵיהּ. אֵי גַמִּי, עַד כָּאֵן לֹא קָאָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן הֵתָם אֲלֵא דְכַתִּיב עֵשֶׂר תַּעֲשֶׂר אֶת כָּל־תְּבוּאֹת וְרָעָה, כְּדִרְךָ שְׁבִנִי אָדָם מוֹצִיאִין לְזִרְעָה, אֲבָל הֵבָא, כְּרַבְנָן סְבִירָא לֵיהּ.

There is a verse, “Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths” (Song of Songs 2:3). The difficulty is: why specifically an apple, and why specifically among trees of the forest, and why specifically among the youths? This will be understood by what is presented in the third section of tractate Sukkah (page 36a):

Regarding an etrog that is unripe, Rabbi Akiva deems it unfit for waving during Sukkot, but the Rabbis deem it fit. Rabba said: Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon said one and the same statement. Rabbi Akiva said that which we said, that an unripe etrog is unfit for waving during Sukkot. Rabbi Shimon, what did he say? As taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Shimon exempts etrogim from having to be tithed if in their small state, not viewing an unripe etrog as a qualifying fruit.

Abaye said to [Rabba]: Perhaps it is not so that they share an opinion. Rabbi Akiva stated his opinion only here for Sukkot, as we require beauty in an etrog for Sukkot, and there is none when it's unripe. But there, regarding tithes, maybe he holds like the rabbis, in opposition to Rabbi Shimon, that tithing is required even for an unripe etrog.

Alternatively, Rabbi Shimon stated his opinion only there, exempting an unripe etrog from tithes, as it is written, “You shall surely tithe all the produce of your planting” (Deut. 14:22)—i.e., produce for which it's typical for people to take it out for sowing. However, maybe here he agrees with the rabbis, in opposition to Rabbi Akiva, who consider an unripe etrog suitable for Sukkot.

- Sukkah 36a

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ופירוש רש"י ז"ל פדרך שבגני אדם מוציאי לזריעה פרי העשוי לצמות, ולא משפחת לה אלא בבישל כל צרכו וכו'. נאפילו רבנו לא מתייבי בשאר פירות בקטנו, אלא דוקא אתרוגים ומפוחים, ובאתרוגים פליגי [] רבי שמעון, אבל בתפוחים מודי להו, דקים ליה דאף על פי שלא בישלו כל צרכם, צומחים עכ"ל.

Rashi of blessed memory explained Sukkah 36a in the manner that people go out to sow fruit that's likely to grow, and not to utilize [fruit] unless ripe. Even the rabbis don't oblige the payment of tithes on the other types of immature fruit with the specific exception of etrogs and apples, and for etrogs Rabbi Shimon takes exception with the rabbis, holding that etrogs should be included with the general rule that immature fruit need not be tithed. But for apples, he agrees with them that they are different, because even though they are not ripe, they will grow if planted.

ולמדנו מכאן שהתפוחים הם משוגים מכל האילנות שאפילו קטנים הם ראויים לזריעה, מה שאין כן שאר הפירות דבקטנו הם דומים לעצי היער.

We learned from here, from Rashi, that the apples are different from all the trees, in that even the small ones are suitable for sowing, something that is not true of the remainder of fruits, for which in their small state are similar to the trees of the forest in that they are not suitable for planting.

ואף הבנים הקטנים של ישראל יכולים ליתן שבח ותהלה ולהשתדל במצות ה'. ולזה אמר הכתוב כתפוח בעצי היער כמו התפוח שהוא משוגה מכל עצי היער שפירותיו קטנים הם טובים כגדולים, כן דודי בין הבנים. כן הקב"ה משמע שע אפילו בנערי ישראל קטנים, ומכל-שכן שנקראו הבל שאין בו חטא.

Even the small children of Israel are able to give praise and glory to G-d and to strive in fulfillment of the commandments of G-d, which is different from other groups of children. For this reason, Scripture says they are "Like an apple tree among trees of the forest." I.e., like the apple that is different from all the trees of the forest, in that even its small fruits are as good as big ones, "so is my beloved among the youths." Thus, the Holy One, Blessed be He, is delighted even with the small youth of Israel, who in any case are referred to as "breath in which there is no sin" (Shabbat 119b)¹.

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¹ Shabbat 119b: "Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: What is [the meaning of] that which is written: 'Do not touch My anointed ones and do My prophets no harm' (I Chron. 16:22)? 'Do not touch My anointed ones,' these are the schoolchildren; 'and do not harm My prophets,' these are Torah scholars. Reish Lakish said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda Nesi'a: The world exists only because of the breath [i.e., reciting Torah] of schoolchildren. Rav Pappa said to Abaye: What [is wrong with] mine and yours? [Abaye] said to him: The breath [of adults], which is [tainted by] sin, is not similar to the breath [of children], which is not [tainted by] sin."