How Does an Etrog Glorify God?

_Hiddur Mitzvah, the Individual, and the Community_

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_Ateret Zvi Prize in Hiddushei Torah 5778_

In the short story _The Etrog_, Shai Agnon, in his incomparable style, describes the giddy rush, the pushing and pulling, the smells and the sights, that are part of the experience of purchasing an etrog. Agnon explains that the etrogger, the etrog merchant, acts out of “love of the mitzvah itself,” “in order that his customers might merit beautiful lulavs, beautiful etrogs, and triple-leaved hadasim.” The salesperson, in his desire to have collected the widest variety, the most beautiful etrogim for his customers, “endangered himself, traveling to Transjordan and a variety of other terrible places, to import lulavs, etrogs, and hadasim the likes of which Jerusalem had never seen even in times of peace.”

The description in Agnon’s story is familiar to anyone who has crowded into a small shop or someone’s home to pick out and purchase a lulav and etrog. I remember as a young girl accompanying my father the day after Yom Kippur to the home of a local rabbi, wandering through the crowded, dimly lit rooms and digging through the piles of lulavim and etrogim to pick the most beautiful specimens—that fit within our budget. The other men there (I do not remember seeing any women) would closely inspect each etrog, looking for brown spots and pitoms and wrinkles, lifting the fruit up to their noses to smell its enticing perfume. Picking out an etrog is not like choosing which packet of lettuce to buy at Safeway—it is an action invested with kedushah, one that merits attention and intention.

The actual mitzvah on Sukkot is to take the lulav and etrog—but there is a further mitzvah at play here which is why the act of choosing an etrog is invested with so much care. The use of a beautiful etrog is a paradigmatic example of hiddur mitzvah, the idea that we can and should

elevate the fulfillment of mitzvot by putting in extra effort to perform them beautifully, rather than in the plainest or most convenient manner. The Talmud Bavli, expounding on the phrase from Shirat Ha-Yam “זֶה אָלִיךָ אָמַנְתָּה,” “This is my God whom I will glorify,” explains:

הַלּוֹם בֵּיתָי שָׁבָת כָּלָּה.

The rabbis in this sugya are asking what the phrase “זֶה אָלִיךָ אָמַנְתָּה” means: what does the Israelites’ praise, their promise to glorify God after having witnessed the extraordinary miracle of the splitting of the sea, mean for Jews living centuries later? Somehow the use of beautiful, sweet-smelling, fresh-looking lulavim and etrogim are part of this promise made by the Jews in Shirat Ha-Yam. They serve to glorify God.

At heart the rabbis are wrestling with an impossible theological question. How can we, as limited, finite, imperfect human beings, glorify God? How can our measly actions really bring honor and majesty to the Creator? For the rabbis, although doing mitzvot is good and necessary, the simple fulfillment of a mitzvah, something you are already commanded to perform, does not accomplish this extra level, does not fully bring glory to God. The mitzvot need beauty, effort, work, intention and creativity. Although it is hard to conceive how a limited body and soul can really glorify the infinite, omnipotent, omnipresent God, the rabbis in the Talmud offer a fairly simple solution. Don’t light just one candle on Hanukkah in order to fulfill the bare minimum requirement. Instead, on the last night, light all eight candles, made out of colorful wax or the finest olive oil, in a marvelous hanukiah, set in a beautiful window sill, looking out at a bustling street or scenic landscape. This way one not only fulfills the mitzvot of the holiday, but also the additional one of hiddur, of bringing glory to the God who brought us the miracles and commanded these mitzvot in the first place.

I am particularly enchanted by the sugya’s use of the Torah scroll as an example of this paradigm of hiddur. Learning Torah is one of the greatest of mitzvot. Indeed, every morning in

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2 Translation from the William Davidson Edition of the online Koren Translation.
davening, after we bless the action of Torah study, we remind ourselves that learning Torah is one of the mitzvot she-ein la-hem shiur, that is immeasurable. We continue from there by saying that Torah study outweighs even those mitzvot, like honoring our parents and visiting the sick, which “yield immediate fruit in this world and continue to yield fruit in the World to Come.” Yet even though Torah study is such a great mitzvah, we can make it even more “glorious” by using “beautiful parchment for the Torah scroll” we learn out of, and by hiring an “expert scribe to write in beautiful ink” with a “beautiful quill.” And when the scribe is done we can wrap the scroll in “beautiful silk fabric.” According to the fourteenth-century Spanish philosopher and grammarian Profiat Duran, author of the Ma’aseh Efod, using beautiful copies of the Torah, as well as other Jewish texts, improves our own learning, our love of learning, and the health of our soul. He wrote:

Study should always be in beautiful books, pleasant for their beauty and the splendor of their scripts and parchments, with elegant ornament and covers. And the places for study should be desirable, the study halls beautifully built so that people’s love and desire for the study will increase. Memory will also improve since contemplation and study occur amidst beautifully developed forms and beautiful drawings, with the result that the soul will expand and be encouraged and strengthen its powers.

By actively making our books hiddur, we fulfill both the mitzvah of studying Torah and of glorifying God. But as Doran points out, we also improve ourselves. Our souls expand and strengthen when we learn Torah accompanied by aesthetic beauty. The earlier rabbinic sources on hiddur mitzvah also focus on the internal, personal aspects of practicing hiddur mitzvah. The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael for example states that hiddur is about beautifying oneself first. In the text, R. Yishmael is troubled by this same question: how is it possible to fulfill the tall order of “ואנוהוери/”I will ‘host’ Him!” R. Yishmael says: Is it possible to “host” one’s Master? Rather, read "ve-anvehu" as “I shall beautify myself before God with mitzvot— with a beautiful lulav, beautiful tzitzit, a beautiful shofar, beautiful prayer. Abba Shaul says: “I will liken myself to God” (from reading “ve-anvehu” as “ani ve-hu”, “I and He”). Just as He is merciful and gracious, you, too, be merciful and gracious.”

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Mekhilta de-Shirah 3

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3 From Jewish Texts on the Visual Arts edited by Vivian Mann.
4 Translation from Sefaria.
At first, Rabbi Yishmael understands *anveihu* to mean “to host,” and it seems rather impossible to him for someone to play host or hostess to God. He therefore turns instead to the aesthetic *hiddur mitzvah* paradigm. But this concept is about the individual as much as it is about God. Notice the inclusion of the first person, of the phrase “I shall beautify myself,” here. A green *lulav* or *tzitzit* of the brightest *t’heilet* does not actually just beautify God—instead we beautify ourselves before God, and with our more beautiful bodies, objects, and souls we glorify God. Aesthetic splendor is as much about ourselves, how we operate internally, as it is about any object. Abba Shaul, who follows R. Yishmael’s question in the Mekhilta, defines “*ve’anvehu*” differently, not as pertaining to aesthetics per se, but instead as relating to *immatatio dei*, to the attempt to emulate God. But Abba Shaul’s idea that the phrase אֶנֶּה הַיָּלִי is connected to the individual’s internal Godly traits, to mercy and grace, is not unrelated to the concept of *hiddur mitzvah*, nor is it placed next to R. Yishmael’s comment randomly. Although we might think of *hiddur mitzvah* first through the care we take when picking out an *etrog*, in reality the concept is about making ourselves handsome through the intentionality and creativity with which we perform the *mitzvot*. Here aesthetics is linked to morality and personal improvement. At some metaphysical level, an exquisite *etrog* or *shofar* makes us more beautiful, more compassionate, more Godlike.

This idea is furthered by a charming comment in Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah. Commenting on the verse: “Ah, you are fair, my darling, ah, you are fair, with your dove-like eyes!” (Shir Ha-Shirim 4:1), the *midrash* explains that the *ra’ayah*, the lover, the darling of God, is made fair through all sorts of *mitzvot*, from acts of *hesed* to tithing properly:

*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 4:1*

“Ah, you are fair, my darling, ah, you are fair.” Behold you are fair through act of kindness. Behold you are fair through active *mitzvot*. Behold you are fair through negative *mitzvot*. Behold you are fair through the *mitzvot* of the household; through the division of *terumah* (priestly gifts) and *ma’aser* (tithes). Behold you are fair through the commandments of the field; through the leaving of the sheaves and the corners of the field for the poor, through *ma’aser sheni* and ownerless objects. Behold you are fair through not mixing species. Behold you are fair through the clothing of *tzitzit*. Behold you are fair through the laws of...
planting. Behold you are fair through orlah (not eating fruit for the first 3 years of a tree). Behold you are fair through netah reva’i (bringing the fourth year produce to Jerusalem). Behold you are fair through circumcision. Behold you are fair through uncovering in circumcision. Behold you are fair through prayer. Behold you are fair through saying the Shema. Behold you are fair through mezuzah. Behold you are fair through tefillin. Behold you are fair through sukkah. Behold you are fair through lulav and etrog. Behold you are fair through doing repentance. Behold you are fair through good deeds. Behold you are fair in this world. Behold you are fair in the World to Come.

The lover in Shir Ha-Shirim, here meant to be the Jewish people, is not fair because of (or despite of) her black skin or dove-like eyes, but because of the mitzvot she performs. Following the mitzvot of tefillin, mezuzah, and kilayim (the refraining from mixing species) makes us the beautiful darlings of God. We are God’s lovers and partners, enhancing ourselves and the world (both this world and the World to Come) by following the positive and negative commandments, performing good deeds, and doing teshuvah and hesed.

There is something troubling about this source and its long list of mitzvot. It is fairly clear how we can enhance the physical objects of the mitzvot—how to choose and make exquisite shofars, and etrogs, and tefillin—but the midrash discusses non-physical mitzvot. How does one beautify a negative commandment? I’m not sure one can abstain from stealing in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Both the Mekhila above, which focuses mainly on mitzvot which require physical objects like shofar and lulav, and the midrash, mention one mitzvah that appears challenging to beautify. The Mekhila mentions tefillah na’eh, beautiful prayer, and the midrash discussed being beautified through prayer. But prayer, whatever it might be, is not physical and is hard to make aesthetic in of itself. You can’t touch or feel prayer (although you can touch and feel the garments of prayer, tefillin and tallit, which bring an important embodied physical aspect to this most metaphysical of Jewish rituals, but that’s a sermon for another time). What does it mean to aesthetically enhance prayer? The most obvious answer to me is using song. Setting the words of prayer to euphonic tunes, singing in melodious harmonies, these are actions that make the act of tefillah more aesthetically pleasing. I could also imagine setting prayer in appealing spaces, building inspiring synagogues or situating minyanim in those places of natural beauty that cannot help but inspire contemplation of the divine.

All of these ideas do contribute to נאה תפלה. But the Tosafists have another suggestion. According to their commentary on the question of pausing in the middle of the Amidah, prayer is more pleasing when it is participatory. The Tosafists explain that it is permissible to fulfill one’s requirement in the kedushah of the Amidah by listening, but it is preferable for everyone to answer. They write:
Tosafot Sukkah 38b

Even though we know that one who listens is like one who answers, in any case it is preferable to answer, and it is the more beautiful way to do the mitzvah.

Graceful davening is not simply about song or architecture, but about joining together in community to answer to God’s glory. Although it is possible to daven alone, just the action of answering the shliach tzibbur in unison, as a group, is part of hiddur. Although the sources above make it seem as though performing hiddur mitzvah makes one individually more beautiful while participating in glorifying God, here hiddur becomes a group action. We glorify God as a group when we pray together, answer together, and we become more exquisite individuals and a more harmonious community through this joint project.

Hiddur mitzvah is thus a paradigm for how we can practice mitzvot, both individually and communally. When we think about halakhah, we should think about how it can be practiced in a stripped down way, and then how it can be made beautiful—or, more precisely, how we can make ourselves and our communities beautiful in the performance of mitzvot. We should approach a halakhic text with the question: how does the mitzvah described, through its aesthetics, come to glorify God? Sometimes this might be obvious, and sometimes, like in the case of tefillah, less so. And non-traditional sources, like artwork itself, can provide insight.

There is a painting held in the Whitney Collection that I have for a long time been inspired and intrigued by, although as far as I know it has never been displayed. It is by Max Weber, the early twentieth-century American-Jewish artist. Weber is mainly known now as a significant American cubist. His most famous painting, “Chinese Restaurant,” can be seen hanging in the Whitney today. But Weber was also a frum yid—he kept kosher—and after his more famous cubist phase he took to painting expressionist canvases depicting the Jewish community. These paintings are far less famous than the cubist canvases—you are unlikely to see them on the walls of our popular museums. I, however, find them captivating, the wavy figures expressing a quiet religious devotion that is devoid from most modern art. My favorite painting from this series, the one sitting in a Whitney storage room, is from 1944 and called “Adoration of the Moon.” It depicts of a group of men performing that most esoteric of Jewish prayer rituals, kiddush levanah. As a woman who usually finds myself in prayer groups dominated by men, I have for a long time felt alienated from the practice of kiddush levanah. It is a strange blessing; people often complain that it feels pagan, like moon worship. But I have felt excluded by its communal nature—the prayer includes greeting your neighbor and

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5 Not to be confused with the German theorist of modernity, also called Max Weber.
shaking hands, and as often the only woman at Ma’ariv I usually have no one to turn to, no one to greet. But Weber’s painting is compelling in its grouping of figures; four men interact as they pray, a pale moon hanging right above their overlong bodies. Unlike so many portrayals of Jewish prayer, these men do not appear to be performing, nor are they alone. Instead, they turn to one another, creating an exquisite tableau of prayerful interaction, of prayerful beauty. Kiddush levanah, as a relatively obscure prayer, is an odd subject for a painting. For Weber it was a chance to depict human interaction within a ritual context. Kiddush levanah is, in a very obvious way, about being with the other people who are praying alongside you, as you turn to say “shalom aleikhem.” Although I am frustrated by my lack of prayer colleagues, there is something special about having a tefillah that requires acknowledgment of those who daven beside you. When I think of what it means to make prayer more exquisite by davening together, by answering one another, I think of Weber’s painting, in its far off storage unit, truthfully portraying the aesthetic of tefillah na’eh, of hiddur mitzvah.

Chagall is the more famous artist when it comes to these kinds of depictions of Jewish genre scenes, and to return to the paradigmatic example of hiddur mitzvah, Chagall did make several images of a rabbi holding an etrog. In each of these depictions the rabbi stands alone, wrapped in a tallit, a bit forlorn, contemplating the fruit in his hand. This image is a bit odd: at least in shul, lulav and etrog is a communal ritual. All of those who have attended shul on Sukkot and have marched lulav and etrog in hand know that there is a certain majesty to the procession of plants and bodies, the tall lulavim waving in the air as the room fills with the scent of the etrogs, picked so carefully by their owners. The etrogger and the etrog buyer may obsess over the ripeness, shape and texture of their fruit. But fulfilling the mitzvah of lulav and etrog, and indeed of hiddur mitzvah, is not simply about the quality of the etrog one purchases. It is also about the community one fulfills the mitzvah with and how one participates in the Hallel and in the communal hakafot. Because it is through that communal march that we fulfill the promise of ואנוהו אלי זה—of glorifying God through the beauty of our ritual objects, and also the beauty of our prayer and our communities.