



How Does an *Etrog* Glorify God?

Hiddur Mitzvah, the Individual, and the Community

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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*.¹ 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

¹ Translation by Jeffrey Saks, published in *Tablet* in 2015.
<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/193747/the-etrog>.



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 “זה אלי ואנוהו,” “This is my God whom I will glorify,” explains:

תלמוד בבלי שבת קלג:

דתניא זה אלי ואנוהו התנאה לפניו במצות עשה לפניו סוכה נאה ולולב נאה ושופר נאה וציצית נאה
ספר תורה נאה וכתוב בו לשמו בדיו נאה בקולמוס נאה בלבלר אומן וכורכו בשיראין נאין

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 133b

As it was taught in a *baraita* with regard to the verse: “This is my God and I will glorify Him [*anveihu*].” [The Sages interpreted *anveihu* as related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the verse:] Beautify yourself before Him in *mitzvot*. Make before Him a beautiful *sukkah*, a beautiful *lulav*, a beautiful *shofar*, beautiful *tzitzit*, beautiful parchment for a Torah scroll, and write in it in God’s name in beautiful ink, with a beautiful quill by an expert scribe, and wrap the scroll in beautiful silk fabric.”²

The rabbis in this *sugya* are asking what the phrase “זה אלי ואנוהו” 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

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.³

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 “זה אלי ואנוהו”?

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל מכילתא דשירה פרשה 3

ואנוהו, ר' ישמעאל אומר וכי אפשר לבשר ודם להנוות לקונו אלא אנוה לו במצות אעשה לפניו לולב נאה סוכה נאה ציצית נאה תפלה נאה. אבא שאול אומר אדמה לו מה הוא רחום וחנון אף אתה רחום וחנון.

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Mekhilta de-Shirah 3

“*Ve-anvehu*”/“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.⁴

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 *imatio dei*, to the attempt to emulate God. But Abba Shaul’s idea that the phrase *זה אלי ואנוהו* 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: *הַנָּה יָפָה רַעִיָתִי הַנָּה יָפָה רַעִיָתִי הַנָּה יָפָה עֵינֶיךָ יוֹנִים*, “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:

שיר השירים רבה ד:א

"הַנָּה יָפָה רַעִיָתִי הַנָּה יָפָה", הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִצְוֹת, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּגִמְלוֹת חֲסָדִים. הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה. הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִצְוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה. הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִצְוֹת הַבַּיִת, בְּחִלּוּק תְּרוּמָה וּמַעֲשָׂרוֹת. הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִצְוֹת הַשְּׂדֵה, בְּלִקֵּט שִׁכְחָה וּפָאָה, וּמַעֲשֵׂר עֲנִי וְהִתְפַּקֵּר, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּכֹלָאִים, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּסֻדִּין בְּצִיצִית, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּנִטְיָעָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּעֶרְלָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּנִטְע רַבְעֵי הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִילָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּפְרִיעָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּתַפְלָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּקָרִיאת שְׁמַע, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמִזְזָה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּתַפְלִין, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּסִפָּה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּלוּלָב וְאַתְרוֹג, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּתִשְׁבָּה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּמַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, הַנָּה יָפָה בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

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 Mekhilta 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 Mekhilta 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 תפלה נאה. 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 *shlich 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.⁵ 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

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 זֶה אֵלֵי וְאִנּוּהוּ—of glorifying God through the beauty of our ritual objects, and also the beauty of our prayer and our communities.

