

Reb Aryeh's Etrog

For Sukkot, a story by Israeli novelist Haim Be'er, in a first English translation

By [Haim Be'er](#) | September 21, 2018 12:00 AM

One late afternoon between Yom Kippur and Sukkot 1963 I stood in the dark recesses of Jerusalem's Ohr bookshop, a treasure house of old and antique holy texts. The delightful aroma that wafted off the etrogs, [precisely as described in a story by S.Y. Agnon](#), obliterated the mustiness of the old books, most of which had come from the homes of poor folks. I inspected the recent acquisitions the *moykher-seforim*, the bookseller Rabbi Avrum Rubinstein, had made from the estate of a Torah scholar recently departed to eternal rest. That dead man's sons, who had strayed from the traditions of their father and had no need for his library of rare and valuable volumes, sold them to the bookseller for a pittance.

The small shop, located at the end of Meah Shearim Street, had been well known to me since the time I had begun my hunting expeditions in search of coveted books. It was here that I once passed a test posed to me by the bookseller. He showed me a large stack of old tomes, including entire anthologies of Hebrew poetry from Yemen, and said that if I succeeded in identifying the most valuable book in the lot I would receive it as a gift.

It was also in this shop that I met Hebrew literature's most famous author, Agnon, for the first and only time. To my embarrassment I did not recognize him, mistaking him for a retired Galician businessman who had taken up book collecting in old age. He asked what family I came from. As I offered up my family tree stretching back seven generations, like a peddler laying out his wares, Agnon suppressed a smile and said, "You only know that far back? A person ought to know who his ancestors are going back to Adam in Eden."

When I entered the bookshop the doorway was clogged with a half-minyan's worth of men, armed with magnifying glasses, examining the etrogs by the last light of the setting sun. The etrogs, on display in wooden crates on scattered, impromptu tabletops, had been disrobed of their flaxen wrappings.

From my spot, behind the bookseller who was sitting at his counter engrossed in a book, I noticed a sudden commotion at the front of the store. The crowd parted with respect and awe, quickly clearing a path for a small, old man who entered with a gentle shuffle of his feet. The man greeted Rabbi Avrum warmly, and asked in a whisper if he might receive the etrog which Rabbi Avrum had set aside for him.

"Certainly, Reb Aryeh, certainly," said the *moykher-seforim*, in a tone of unparalleled reverence and love.

This was the tzadik, [Rabbi Aryeh Levin](#), the [renowned Jerusalem saint](#).

I knew Reb Aryeh well. He was a regular visitor at my parents' grocery store at 12 Geulah Street (the address was later changed to [16 Malkhei Yisrael Street](#)). Two or three times a month he would enter the store to talk privately with my father. The content of these secret meetings was revealed to my

mother and me only after my father passed away, about two months before I saw Reb Aryeh in the bookstore, when he came to comfort us while we were sitting shiva in our apartment behind the store. He sat on a stool between myself and Mother, caressing my hand with his own unimaginably soft palm, like the touch of an angel, and told us that only now was he permitted to reveal the secret behind his frequent visits to our store. It turned out that Father had been his partner in a long line of charitable acts. Whenever Reb Aryeh became aware that a neighborhood family was suffering financial woe he and Father would put a plan into action. The family would buy their groceries on credit, Father would forgo his profits on the sale, Reb Aryeh would pay half the amount accumulated on that month's bill, and the family would be charged only about 40 percent of the actual value of the purchases. The families remained unaware of the discount or that they had been the recipients of charity. Mother informed Reb Aryeh that she would maintain these arrangements. Our guest placed his hand gently on hers and said, "May you be comforted from Heaven."

At the book store that day, two months after Father's death, my youthful brashness allowed me to ask, "Reb Aryeh, don't think poorly of me for asking, but are you one of the *lamed-vovniks* —one of the 36 hidden saints who sustain the world?"

He immediately recognized me, even though I had sprouted a beard by not shaving since the shiva. He caressed my hand in his and asked after my mother. Then he answered my question: "A *lamed-vovnik*? From time to time, *mein kind*. From time to time, my child." He placed his hand on my head and said something like the following: "To be a *lamed-vovnik* is not a job. One is not appointed to the position for life. It's more or less a temporary assignment. At the moment a person does an act of kindness he joins the rank of the hidden 36 *tzadikim* who sustain the world—but in the blink of an eye the title is transferred when the next person does a good deed, until his task is completed." Reb Aryeh shut his eyes and, after a silent pause, added, "It's that simple. Anyone can become a *lamed-vovnik*. You too, *mein kind*."

The bookseller, incessantly sucking on a peppermint, now presented the etrog to Reb Aryeh. Reb Aryeh thanked him, cast a quick glance at the etrog, swathed it in its flaxen wrapping, tucked it away in his coat pocket, and hastened from the store.

Unable to restrain myself I ran after him. "Reb Aryeh, Reb Aryeh, I must ask you something," I called out.

"What do you wish to ask, *mein kind*?" he said without breaking his stride.

"Why does everyone painstakingly examine the etrogs with magnifying glasses for the slightest blemish, but you, Reb Aryeh, made due with a quick peek as you ran out?"

"You ask a good question, my precious boy," replied Reb Aryeh, continuing on his way. "Everyone knows there are two *mitzvot* the Torah requires us to beautify. One is, of course, the etrog, about which it is stated '*Take a fruit of a beautiful tree*.' Those men were inspecting the etrogs to ensure no defect ruins their beauty and lessens the mitzvah. The other commandment is, '*Beautify the face of the elderly*,' meaning, show them respect. I was compelled to choose which of these two commandments takes precedence. On my way to the bookshop I stopped at the dental laboratory to retrieve the dentures of a man from the old age home which I had dropped off for repair on the day after Yom Kippur. By not dawdling at Rabbi Avrum's bookshop I might make it, God willing, to deliver the teeth to the man who needs them to eat his evening meal. Hopefully he will finally be able to enjoy his food like a proper human being, instead of softening his bread in milk as he has been forced to do these past two days. Now, forgive me, I am rushing to the number 11 bus which will arrive at any moment."

Reb Aryeh implored me to keep a close eye on Mother to ensure that she not overdo it running the store, and dashed off to the bus stop.

I watched him recede into the distance. I could not take my eyes off the soles of his shoes, worn out from his pursuit of righteous deeds. I knew that on the day he was summoned to the next world an angel would descend from heaven to collect those worn-out shoes and grant them a place of honor next to God's divine throne. There they will remain "under His feet like a surface of brilliant sapphire, shining as bright as the blue sky itself."

Translated from Hebrew by Jeffrey Saks . This story appears in Haim Be'er's recent collection of Hebrew nonfiction, Keshet LeEchad: People, Places and Stories of Jerusalem (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2017), and appears here courtesy of the author and publisher. Read an introduction to the story [here](#)

Haim Be'er is an Israeli novelist and literary critic. He is the 2018 recipient of the lifetime achievement Agnon Prize in Literature.

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