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# ETROG

How A Chinese Fruit  
Became a Jewish  
Symbol

**David Z. Moster**



Etrog

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How A Chinese Fruit Became a Jewish Symbol

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Cover illustration: Pattern adapted from an Indian cotton print produced in the 19th century

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*To Hannab Beth, my first fruit*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** Moster introduces the etrog by describing the sights and scents of an etrog market just before the holiday of Sukkot (Tabernacles). After relating his particular interest in the fruit, which is also known as the citron or *Citrus medica*, Moster explains the etrog's importance to Jews in both the ancient and modern worlds. He next outlines the contents of the book and situates his writing in the context of the field of citrus studies, which began more than eight centuries ago. Moster ends the introduction with a note regarding the terminology of ancient lands that are contested today, especially the land of Israel/Palestine.

**Keywords** Etrog • *Citrus medica* • Citron • Sukkot • Citrus • Botany

There is nothing quite like the experience of picking out an etrog (אתרוג) for the holiday of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles). Every year around late September, I find myself in one of the etrog markets that pop up in Jewish neighborhoods around the world (see Fig. 1.1). Some of the markets are expansive and bustling bazaars, while others are small operations run out of the trunk of a seller's car. Etrogim (the plural of etrog) might be separated by shape, size, color, or country of origin, but they are most usually separated by price. Inexpensive etrogim can be bought for around 12 dollars but the sky is the limit for the choicest ones, which usually start at a few hundred dollars apiece (see Fig. 1.2). The most expensive etrogim



**Fig. 1.1** An etrog market on the streets of Brooklyn, New York

in New York City in 2017, for example, cost between one and two thousand dollars.

For me, choosing an etrog is highly personal; so I never get too impressed by the subjective price tags created by the merchants. I peruse the market until I find a fruit with an enticing shape, an energetic yellow hue, a solid firm grip, and, most importantly, a strong citrusy fragrance. Before entering the market, there is no way of telling which one of the hundreds of fruits will appeal to me—it just happens on its own. While the sights, sounds, feels, and aromas of the markets are always exciting, the most pleasurable moment is bringing my new acquisition home. I walk straight past the kitchen, where my regular fruits are stored, and place the etrog on the living room mantel in a silver box I received for my Bar Mitzvah. A few days later, I wave the etrog in prayer in synagogue, and dwell upon the