

How Much is a “K’zayit”? *You* Be the Judge

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With everything else you have to worry about these days (“these days,” for those who may come across this entry in the distant future, are the days of the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide social distancing), one thing that you should *not* worry about is the precise amount of *matzah* that you need to eat in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* at the seder.

The commandment to eat *matzah* on the night of the seder is traditionally fulfilled by eating “an olive’s bulk” (כזית, *k’zayit*) of the unleavened bread. You may know that many Orthodox authorities rule that today’s olives are much smaller than those that existed in Rabbinic times, that the standard today is that an “olive’s bulk” is equivalent to 28.8 cubic centimeters, and that in many Orthodox households this means that the *mitzvah* is fulfilled by eating at least an entire machine-baked *matzah*! But it wasn’t always this way. Rabbi Dr. Natan Slifkin, the noted [Orthodox rationalist](#) and [bane](#) of the *haredi* leadership, has researched the evolution of the measurement (*shi`ur*) of *k’zayit* over the centuries. His [essay](#) tracing the history of “the expanding kezayis” is fascinating reading for those of us who understand *halakhah* as a changing phenomenon and halakhic decision as a reflection of the intellect, insights, and worldviews of fallible human beings.

We can add nothing to Rabbi Slifkin’s work. All we can do here is to present a portion of a responsum on this subject by the eminent 10th-century authority Rav Sherira Gaon (cited in *Sefer Ha`Eshkol*, 12th-century Provence, ed. Albeck, 125b-126a):

וששאלתם לפרש לכם אם יש משקל לגרוגרת ולזית ולכותבת ושאר שיעורים במשקל כספים של ערביים...
הו יודעים שאין לאלו שיעורים משקל כסף לא במשנה ולא בתלמוד שלנו כל עקר, ואלו בקשו לתת שיעור
משקל מן הדינרים היו עושין מעקרא, אלא שנתנו השיעור מקטנית ופירות שמצויין תמיד ואין לומר
שנשתנו...אלא כמתני' עבדינן הכל לפי דעתו של רואה... וכן לענין כזית וכגרוגרת הרי פורש לכל אחד מהן
בזו משנתנו לא גדול ולא קטן אלא בינוני, וגם הוא לפי דעתו של רואה.

You ask us to explain to you whether the weights of the fig, olive, and date and others can be measured according to the weight of Arab coins... Know that these measurements have no equivalents in coins in the Mishnah and the Talmud. Had the Rabbis wanted to translate these measurements into the equivalents of coins they would have done so at the outset. Rather, they established these measurements according to grain and fruit that were widely available. And we should not imagine that these measurements have changed... Rather, we practice according to the Mishnah (*Keilim* 17:6): “(measurements are made) according to *da`ato shel ro`eh*, the perception of the observer”... The same is true with respect to “an olive’s bulk” or “a fig’s bulk”- the Mishnah explains that each of these is measured neither according to large (olives or figs) or small ones but medium ones, and there, too, the standard is “according to the perception of the observer.”

According to the *gaon*, the determination of measurements like “an olive’s bulk” was always left up to each of us. The Rabbis figured that the average thinking human was capable of identifying a medium-size olive and of acting accordingly. And there is no reason to imagine that the size of any of the produce equivalents (olives, eggs, dates, etc.) has changed over the years, even though (as Slifkin shows) early and later Ashkenazic authorities, who lived in areas where olives were rare, decided to err on the side of caution. The Geonim and the S’fardic *rishonim*, by contrast, who knew all about olives and dates, were satisfied to leave the decision in the hands of the individual Jew.

Moral of the story: if you know your olives, then *you* be the judge as to how much *matzah* equals a *k’zayit*! There’s no need to consult Orthodox guidebooks that measure the *shi`urim*; this is something that all of us can determine on our own. And there is most certainly no requirement to force down an entire machine-baked *matzah* in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* at the seder.