

## What's the Truth about...the Origins of the Sabra?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

**M**isconception: The sabra, a symbol of a native-born Israeli, is indigenous to the desert areas of Israel.

**Fact:** The sabra is native to the desert areas of Mexico and southern United States.

**Background:** The sabra is known in Hebrew as *tzabar*,<sup>1</sup> in English, as the prickly pear or Indian fig. Scientifically, it is in the family Cactaceae, binomial name, *Opuntia ficus-indica*. It is native to the desert areas of what is today known as Mexico and southern United States. The sabra plant is a shrubby cactus that grows as high as five meters (sixteen feet) and can have a three-meter (ten-foot) spread. The fruit is an ovoid that grows on flat, fleshy pads after the appearance of flowers, in an array of dazzling colors.

The sabra plant, which can exist in a staggering range of environments, quickly spread from the New World to the Old. It was introduced by the Spanish and spread throughout the Ottoman Empire. It was widely planted, most likely for dying purposes as well as for its fruit and ability to function as a natural fence. Because it is so hardy, it is found today in many areas of the world and has become the most widespread cactus in the Mediterranean.

Because the sabra plant, when grown in clusters, can form a barrier of spiny pads, for several hundred years it has been utilized by the Arab population to repel intruders. The misconception that the plant is a native of Israel may have arisen because today both cultured and wild sabra plants grow all over the country.

Jewish doctors ascribed medicinal value to the plant as early as the seventeenth century. Rabbi Chaim Vital

(1543-1620), the leading disciple of the Arizal, listed it among the known drugs and prescribed it to combat scitica. Jews in Yemen used it to treat ringworm and back pain.<sup>2</sup> In modern times, products derived from the fruit and the plant have been used to treat a variety of illnesses including urinary ailments, diabetes, hyperlipidemia and obesity. The sap from the pad can be used to soothe wounds and burns, similar to the way the aloe vera plant



The sabra plant is a shrubby cactus that grows as high as sixteen feet. Sabras grow on the plant's flat, fleshy pads.

is used. The melon-flavored sabra, which can be eaten fresh or cooked to make jelly, is low in fat and calories and high in fiber and complex carbohydrates. In Mexico, the pad of the fruit is also eaten.

Over the last three centuries, Jewish writers have attempted to identify the sabra in traditional sources, sometimes erroneously. In 1865, Rav Moshe Rischer wrote that the sabra was called the "fig of Adom," because it was assumed to be the fruit from which Adom and Chavah ate. He described it as being sweet as honey and inexpensive in Israel; he suggested that the fruit was the "shitin" mentioned in the Mishnah (*Demai* 1:1).<sup>3</sup> However, because the sabra is a New World species, it is highly unlikely that it appeared in the Garden of Eden or that it was known to the authors of the Mishnah.<sup>4</sup> In the nineteenth century, Rav Yehoseph Schwartz<sup>5</sup> reported:

*In the Land of Israel there is a "wild fig" called in Arabic "aljaber" but called by the masses the "fig of Adom harishon," because they say that it is from the leaves of that plant that Adom and Chavah made for themselves a garment, because the leaves are large and wide. . . . The fruit is in a soft peel that is full of many small, thin thorns. And it is good to eat.*

However, he pointed out that the common name is in error because there is no way to make a garment from the thorny leaves. And he correctly concluded that it is an American species.

The first chief rabbi of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, also erroneously identified the sabra with Talmudic plants.<sup>6</sup> In a letter written in 1913, he equated the sabra with the "hirduf" that the Gemara says is invalid for *aravot* (*Sukkah* 32b) and the "hirdufni" that is harmful to animals who eat it (*Chullin* 58b). His letter was written in response to an agronomist who had thought that it was prohibited to eat the sabra. Rav Kook explained that Judaism does not prohibit the consumption of any species of plant.

Sabra became a term used to refer to those born and raised in the Zionist settlement in Palestine in the 1930s

and 1940s,<sup>7</sup> and eventually to any native-born Israeli. The sabra was viewed as a metaphor for the Israeli—someone with a rough exterior but a sweet, sensitive soul.<sup>8</sup> There was an additional symbolic element—just as the sabra grew wild on the land, so were native Israelis said to be growing physically and mentally strong in their homeland. The metaphor further articulated the transformation of the "old Jew"—rootless, disconnected from the land, vulnerable, overly cerebral, unhealthy—to the "new Jew" as envisioned by Zionism—healthy, assertive, productive, physically strong and firmly rooted in the Land.

New, unusual fruits can raise interesting halachic questions regarding the appropriate *berachah* to say and the need to observe the rules of *orlah* (the *halachah* that fruit from a newly planted tree may not be eaten for the first three years.)

In regard to these issues, it is important to determine whether a particular plant is a tree, in which case its fruit would require the *berachah* *Haeitz* and would be subject to the laws of *orlah*. If the plant is not a tree, the *berachah* would be *Ha'adamah*, and the laws of *orlah* would not apply.<sup>9</sup> In *halachah*, something that requires yearly replanting is not halachically considered a tree; if, however, the roots, trunk and branches survive from year-to-year, it is a tree. (If only the subterranean roots survive, it is not a tree.) Early authorities differ as to how much of the roots, trunk and branches must survive above ground in order for the plant to be considered a tree. Thus, with regard to strawberries, Rashi maintained that one must recite *Ha'adamah*, while according to Rabbeinu Tam, one must recite *Haeitz* (see Yisroel Pinchos Bodner, *Halachos of Brochos* [Jerusalem, 1997], 423). Other New World plants that have raised questions include papayas (*Carica papaya*)<sup>10</sup> and cocoa beans (chocolate).<sup>11</sup>

The sabra plant is a botanical anomaly. It survives from year-to-year and does not produce fruit within the first

year, both of which are characteristics of trees.<sup>12</sup> However, since the "leaves" harden and become extensions of the trunk, the first leaves grow out of the roots, making the sabra plant similar to shrubs and bushes. Only after those leaves harden do the subsequent leaves grow from the "trunk." Because of these quirks, halachic authorities have debated whether the sabra plant is actually a tree.


The *Kaf HaChaim* (202:6) quotes the eighteenth-century Jerusalem sage Rav Meyuchas ben Shmuel,<sup>13</sup> who was probably the earliest rabbinic source to discuss the question. He describes a fruit with the following characteristics: it grows in abundance in Jerusalem; it is called "the fig of Adom"; in Arabic it is called sabra; its peel and leaves are covered with thorns, and the plant is used to make fences around gardens and orchards. He then describes some of the botanical anomalies, but rules that because the plant produces fruit year after year, it is a tree. Therefore, the *berachah* is *Haeitz*, and *orlah* applies.<sup>14</sup> In explaining his reasoning, he observes that according to the Geonim, if the fruit of a plant grows on branches, the plant is considered a tree, and according to Rabbeinu Yonah, if the plant need not be replanted annually, it is a tree. The sabra plant meets both requirements. The Chida (*Birchei Yosef*, OC 202:1) similarly ruled that the *berachah* on the sabra is *Haeitz*. Despite this ruling, debate about the appropriate *berachah* continued into the twentieth century in Morocco, Yemen, Israel and Europe.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, Rav Ovadiah Yosef (*Yechave Da'at* 2:21) wrote a typically comprehensive responsum on the subject. As an introduction, he quotes the Talmudic rule (*Berachot* 40a) that if the branches remain to produce fruit annually (as is the case with the sabra plant), the *berachah* on the fruit is *Haeitz*. He then discusses two potential challenges to this position: The *Yerushalmi* (*Kilayim*, ch. 5),<sup>16</sup> which rules that on the fruit of a "thornbush" (*atad: aleph tet daled*), one recites

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

*Ha'adamah*,<sup>17</sup> and the *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 203:4), which states that on fruit that grows from a “barren tree,” one recites *Shehakol*. In conclusion, he quotes Maharil Diskin, who rules that one should say *Haeitz* on the sabra, which seems to be the accepted practice today. However, as recently as 1970 Rav Moshe Malkah, chief rabbi of Petach Tikvah, wrote a responsum<sup>18</sup> in which he asserts that the *berachah* on a sabra is *Ha'adamah*.

Because sabras are treated as trees by most authorities, *orlah* applies.<sup>19</sup> However, only trees planted for their fruit are governed by the rules of *orlah*. And sabra plants are often planted to serve as natural fences. A fruit tree planted as a fence is not subject to *orlah*,<sup>20</sup> and the fruit of such trees may be eaten in the first three years. If, however, the intention of planting a sabra plant is that it provide fruit *and* serve as a fence, *orlah* would apply.<sup>21</sup> This *halachah* is taken to its halachic extreme: If sabra plants are sown around the perimeter of one's property with the intent that the outer side serve as a fence to keep out intruders, and there is no intent to consume the fruits, then while the “inner” fruit would be subject to *orlah*, the “outer” fruit would not and may be eaten during the first three years.<sup>22</sup>

The thorns of the sabra plant, which enable it to be used as a fence, contributed to the sabra's identification with the native-born Israeli. Recently, there have been successful attempts to selectively breed the sabra plant to produce a subspecies with no prickles. Might this be an indication that one day the Israeli will shed his abrasive exterior but retain his inner tenderness? One can always hope! 

## Notes

1. *Tzabar* was originally the sabra's Arabic name, but it has been incorporated into Hebrew as well. In modern Arabic, it is also called *kuz*, after Tammuz, the month in which it ripens.

2. Nissim Krispil, *Yalkut Hatzmachim* 4 (5747 [1987]), 1109.

3. *Sha'arei Yerushalayim* (Warsaw,

5632 [1872]), 29a.

4. *Shitin* is more likely an inferior form of fig (*Ficus carica*).

5. *Tevivot Ha'aretz* (1979), 382.

6. *Iggerot HaR'ayah* 2 (5722), letter 468, pp. 102-104.

7. See Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, trans. Haim Watzman (California, 2000). The widespread use of the term began in the 1930s. Interestingly, this was not the first agricultural metaphor used to describe early modern Israelis. The first “natives,” children of parents who came to Israel in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (during the First Aliyah), referred to themselves as *etrogim* (see D. Almagor, “The Sabra is Put in Question Marks” [Hebrew], *Yediot Ahronot*, 30 Dec 1977, A1). In time sabra became the appellation of choice and changed from a derogatory term to one of endearment. The emphasis shifted from the sharp spines to the sweet pulp of the fruit.

The one who turned sabra into a generic term was most likely journalist Uri Kesari in his 18 April 1931 essay in *Do'ar Ha-Yom* called “We are the Leaves of the Sabra!” (He takes credit for it in his *Memoirs for Tomorrow* [Hebrew] [Tel Aviv, 1975], 133-134.) Within a year of the appearance of that essay, the use of the term sabra had penetrated many areas of society, as documented by Almagor (ibid.; quoted in Almog, 4-5).

8. See *Even-Shoshan Dictionary* (2003), 5:1567.

9. See *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 1:528-531 and Professor Mordechai Kislev, “The Scientific and Halachic Definition of Vegetables and Trees” [Hebrew], *Techumin* 18 (5758): 384-399.

10. See *Shu"t Rav Pa'alim* 2, OC:30, cited in Rav Simcha Levi and Rav Shaul Reichenberg, *Mishpatei Eretz: Orlah Lehalachah Ulema'aseh* (5757), 221-226. See also *Kaf HaChaim* 203:13; *Yechave Da'at* 4:52; Rav Mordechai Eliyahu, “Papaya: Tree or Vegetable?” [Hebrew], *Techumin* 7 (5747): 88-93, and Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum, *Vezot Haberachah* (5761), 375-6.

11. See *Minchat Shlomo* 1:91:2;

*Mekor Haberachah*, 52-61; *Iggerot Moshe* OC 3:31; Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, introduction to *Mekor Haberachah*; *Shevet Halevi* 7:27; *Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 1:187; *Shu"t Ohr LeTzion* 2:14:5 and Nathan Kamenetsky, *Making of a Godol*, (Jerusalem, 2002), 139.

12. Radbaz 3:531 ruled that if a plant produces fruit in the first year, it is not a tree.

13. *Pri Adamah* 1, *Hilchot Berachot*, sec. 4, p. 24.

14. Because the fruit is seasonal, one can also recite *Shebecheyanu*.

15. Avraham Ophir Shemesh, “Eiduyot Historiot ...,” *Mechkarei Yehuda V'Shomron* 10, p. 221.

16. See *Beit Yosef*, OC 203.

17. Mandelbaum (p. 376, note 67) also says to see *Mishnah Berurah* 203:5 who writes that the custom is to recite *Haeitz* on the *agras* (also called *kaster beren*) even though it grows on a thornbush. Some of the recent editions of the *Mishnah Berurah* have erroneously identified the *agras* as *agas habar*, a wild pear—very similar to the English for sabra, a prickly pear. However, *agras* and *kaster beren* are readily identifiable as the gooseberry. It thus appears to me that the *Mishnah Berurah* does not directly discuss the *berachah* on sabras. And he probably never saw a sabra in Europe, unlike the *Kaf HaChaim* who spent his last thirty-five years in Israel. It is interesting to note that the *Mishnah Berurah* does not offer a rationale for reciting *Haeitz* on the fruit of a thornbush, but merely states that that is the custom.

18. *Shu"t Mikveh Hamayim* 3 (5741), OC 47:3, p. 91.

19. An article in the Israeli *Yated Ne'eman*, 9 Elul 5764, p. 2, addressed current *orlah* issues and cautioned that as many as 10 percent of sabras on the market may be *orlah*. On whether *orlah* applies to the pad, see *Kerem Tzion*, 14-15, notes.

20. *Mishnah Orlah* 1:1; *Shulchan Aruch*, YD 294:23.

21. Chazon Ish, *Hilchot Orlah* 1:1-4.

22. Rav Levi and Rav Reichenberg, *Mishpatei Eretz: Orlah*, 67.