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The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Field

By Reena Evans

Long before the first Arbor Day was celebrated in Nebraska City on April 10, 1872, Jews have been learning lessons from trees. The Torah itself compares man to a tree in the famous *passuk* of "כי האדם עץ השדה" in *Devarim* 20:19. Similarly, the Torah is likened to water in *Bava Kamma* 17a: "אין מים אלא תורה". R' Hirsch expounds, "...We ourselves are the tree that can and should develop in never ceasing progress and self-refinement. The Law is the fountain of living waters near and through which we mature and flourish" (*Collected Writings*, vol. 3, pg. 186).

We see one of our people's first introductions to these "living waters" in this week's *parshah*, *Parshas Beshalach*. After *kriyas yam suf*, "וילכו שלשת ימים במדבר", "They went three days in the desert and they did not find water" (*Shemos* 59:66). On the third day, they came to *Marah*, where the water was

bitter and undrinkable. They complained to Moshe, and Hashem made a miracle that Moshe threw a tree into the water and it became sweet. The *Mechilta* says that water in this episode refers to Torah, which is compared to water. Near rebellion and disaster befell the Jewish people because they neglected Torah study for three days, "לפי שפרשו מדברי תורה שלשת ימים לכך מרדו". The *Mechilta* continues and states that because of this need for regular Torah study, the Sages instituted that the Torah be publicly read on Shabbos, Monday, and Thursday. This way, three days would not go by without Torah, and the Jewish people should never again degenerate to such a condition.

With the giving of the Torah at Sinai still to come, Hashem gave *Bnei Yisrael* a few sections of the Torah at *Marah* so they would have some Torah to occupy themselves with. The *passuk* says, "שם שם לו חק ומשפט" "There He established for [the nation] decree and ordinance." Rashi tells us that these sections are the *parshiyos* of *Shabbos*, *Parah Adumah*, and *Dinim* (civil law). R' Hirsch explains that these *mitzvos* build the pre-requisite traits and principles necessary to train *Bnei Yisrael* for their impending acceptance of the Torah. *Parah Adumah* is known as the ultimate *chok*. Learning to subordinate our own desires and intellect to G-d's Will is "the symbolic proclamation of the basic Jewish principle of free will, of טהרה." *Dinim*, *mishpat*, civil law, are "the basic principle of social rights," the instructions on how to live together in a G-dly society. Shabbos testifies to and imprints upon the Jew the "basis for the whole moral and social giving of the Torah", that Hashem is the Creator and Master of the world. As soon as *Bnei Yisrael* engaged in the study of the foundations of Torah as encapsulated in these three *mitzvos*, they left *Marah*, the place of bitter

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water, for *Elim*, which had plentiful, sweet water, twelve springs, and seventy date palms. Thus, we see *Bnei Yisrael* begin to thrive once they are planted by the sweet waters of the Torah.

It certainly is not an accident that it is a tree that sweetened the bitter waters of *Marah* where the Jewish people learned that their national well-being depends on learning Torah. Torah literature is replete with the symbolism of trees as a metaphor for man and his goals in life. The *passuk* in *Devarim* (20:19) expresses “כי האדם עץ השדה”, “for man is a tree of the field.” The Maharal describes how the word עפר מן, man, relates to אדמה, the word for earth, man’s body was created “האדמה”, “dust from the earth” (*Bereishis* 2:7). Within each אדם is planted a holy *neshamah*, just like a seed. The holy seed then germinates and sprouts, saturated by these “living waters” of Torah. Just as a seed is all potential, so too, the *neshamah*, the special and unique Divine soul, must bring its holiness and purity from potential to actuality. Like the seed, a person’s mission in life is to grow and to sprout branches, leaves, and fruit. The tool *Hashem* gives him to complete this is the Torah, which brings *shleimus*. If man doesn’t learn Torah and do *mitzvos*, which purify his earthly body, the awesome power of the *neshamah* remains in potential (*Tiferes Yisrael*, perek 3).

Pirkei Avos (7:66) provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the perfect “tree” man. One whose wisdom exceeds his deeds is likened “לאילן שענפיו”, “to a tree whose branches are many and whose roots are few,” and any gust of wind that comes along will uproot him. However, one who learns and then practices what he has learned, who puts his learning into action, is an אילן, “a tree whose branches are few and his roots are many,” and even all the winds in the world cannot uproot him. He is, indeed, planted by the living waters of the Torah, as it says of a *tzaddik* in *Tehillim* 92, “צדיק כפתור יפרח”, “a *tzaddik* will blossom like a date palm, like a cedar in the Lebanon he will flourish,” for he is “בְּחִצְרוֹת אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִפְרִיחוּ”, “planted in the House of *Hashem*, in the courtyards of *Hashem* he will blossom.” A *neshamah* planted in an earthly body must push its branches, its Torah learning, upwards, and its roots, its dedication to *mitzvah* observance, even deeper.

Tu B'Shevat is thus the sweet beginning. Just as the tree-like potential of *Bnei Yisrael* begins to blossom by the sweet waters of Torah in this *parashah*, when they are implanting Torah into their lives after the episode of *Marah*, *Tu B'Shevat* is also the “birthday of blossoms in the middle of winter.” “Under this torn, dark, cold bark, new, fresh life pulsates” (R’ Hirsch, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, pg. 332). The sap begins to stir, to reawaken the natural beauty of the spring. It begins the growth of new foliage of Torah study, furthers the roots of *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim*, and ultimately yields the precious fruits of which *Chazal* say “אוכל פירותיהן בעולם הזה, והקרן”, “their fruits are eaten in this world, yet the principle is preserved for the world to come.” *Tu B'Shevat* is a time to rededicate ourselves to Torah and *mitzvos*, to take a fresh start, and to strengthen the growth of our roots and our branches. The Torah states, “כי האדם עץ השדה”, we are all “trees of the field” capable of growth even if there has been a period of stagnation or decay, just as the trees on *Tu B'Shevat* “celebrate today their silent inner rebirth in defiance of nature’s onslaughts.” Now, at the beginning of the semester, is an ideal time to receive this message. As we adjust to our new schedules, maybe we could fit in a *chavrusa* or learn a *sefer* nightly. Maybe we could take better advantage of the opportunities for learning already incorporated in our lives, such as *divrei Torah* we already receive, or our Judaic Studies classes. May we all merit to blossom by the sweet waters of Torah this *Tu B'Shevat*.

Heralding the Joy of *Avodas Hashem*

By Rachel Laury

Which day in the middle of the cold, bleak winter signifies the imminent arrival of spring, with all of its associated warmth, growth, and happiness?

If you would ask me, I would say the first day of winter vacation. What better way to presage the promise of verdant fields, a warm sun, and blooming azaleas, than to announce the end of term papers and exams? Honestly, the two just go hand in hand.

Perhaps my rejoinder is somewhat circumscribed by my position as a college student. Thinking beyond those borders, as the Torah always does, we are told that the fifteenth of *Shevat* is in fact the indication of Spring's impending entrance and is the *Rosh Hashanah* for the trees. This, too, doesn't seem so clear at first glance. What is vernal and delightful about the middle of February, when the week-old slush still muddies the streets and the journey to school every day is dangerously frigorific? There still remain many, many weeks of cold before any tree even *thinks* about budding. Why does the New Year for the trees start when they are bare and shivering?

The trick is to peer below surface-level. If one had a specialized arboreal ultrasonic sensing device, they would find the xylem and phloem sap stirring within the veins of the trees, beneath the bark. The temperature fluctuations are in fact necessary to start the sap flow, and it all starts on *Tu B'Shevat*. This day determines the new year for fruits, affecting the *ma'aser* year, the end of the calculation of *orlah*, and the status of *neta revai*. This specific day was chosen as the cutoff because by this time, most of the year's rain will have fallen; thus, fruits that grow after the fifteenth are considered to be produce of a new year. Furthermore, the fact that the heavy winter rain has already mostly soaked the soil means that trees planted after this date will certainly take firm root and produce fruit (Eliyahu Kitov, *The Book of our Heritage*, p. 774). The joy of a landowner should know no bounds when *Tu B'Shevat* arrives, and with it the economic assurance of bounteous crops come spring.

In contrast, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (*Collected Writings*, Vol. II, p. 757) notes that to the outside observer, the Jews do not seem to be a rather cheerful and outgoing people. We have been persecuted and ostracized for millennia, forced to retreat into our

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modest homes to contemplate religious and philosophical matters. Rabbi Hirsch describes in refreshing detail the enthusiasm and happiness of “the Jewish spirit where it can unfold itself freely,” living outside of the constraints of the exile and within the simplicity and peace of nature under G-d’s protection and blessing (Hirsch, p. 318). He lauds *halachah* as enabling us to connect to nature, using our fruits and grains in accordance with G-d’s word. The Jewish farmer is taught with every seed of apple and every grain of barley he reaps to “achieve [a] spiritual end with human means,” submitting his hard work to G-d Who commands self-control, love, and humanity by requiring the different tithes to be given to the poor, widowed, and orphaned.

We are reminded of the full import and joy of these duties in every step of the process, from ripening to harvest to table, with the respective commandments of bringing *bikkurim*, taking *terumah*, and separating *challah*. These three responsibilities enjoin us to dedicate our first fully developed produce to G-d, the Source of all blessing. We are thus compelled to think of our spirit before thinking about our body and partaking of the physical fruits of our labor.

Yet *ma’aser sheini*, the main tithe, was meant to be consumed by ourselves in Jerusalem, amidst gladness and joy. Is this not inherently egocentric and gastronomic in nature?

In fact, this *mitzvah* sheds light upon the core of what Judaism is all about. The highest level of spirituality is not reached through pain and misery, nor through frivolity; rather, “its holiest goal is serenity, gladness and joy” (Hirsch, p. 320). *Halachah* teaches us to live a happy and serene life here on earth. In contrast to religions and cults which encourage and even order abstemiousness or self-inflicted pain, Judaism asks its adherents to elevate the material property they are given by eating and taking pleasure for the sake of Hashem. Rav Hirsch asserts that we are not a sad nation, rather a happy one. These laws of the land are meant to bring a landowner joy. Precisely at this time, where a man can feel that he has conquered nature and will now enjoy his own possessions, does Hashem step in and institute a way to elevate us spiritually. Rav Hirsch says that the ultimate moral perfection of man is the ability “to abide in the sphere of G-d even with his physical satisfaction and enjoyments” (p. 321).

The happiness that is so tangible during the season of spring, as portended to on *Tu B'Shevat*, thus results from our service of Hashem in the form of *terumah*, *ma’aser* and *bikkurim*. When we ally our love of Hashem with our fear of Him, when we grasp the beauty and inspiration of the practice of *tzedakah*, that realization will bring the *geulah*.

What better day to remind us of the joy of *avodas* Hashem than *Tu B'Shevat*, when the sap flowing deep within the trees promises us a green and happy spring, bringing us ever closer to the season of redemption?

On a Patch of Rocky Soil

By Kaylah Levy-Weller

On a patch of rocky soil just outside Jerusalem grows an ancient fruit-bearing olive tree. During its 1,200-year life, the tree has witnessed disaster and destiny, tragedy and triumph. Numerous wildfires. Seemingly endless droughts. Wars. Invasions. Exiles. It has witnessed the near extinction of the Jewish people many times over. And each time, it has witnessed the Jews bloom once again. Because like the Jewish people, the olive tree does not thrive despite adversity; it thrives because of it.

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Like the Jew, the olive tree evolves from strong roots—both literally and figuratively—that hold on tight to impoverished soil. The tree easily resists drought, diseases, and even fire; miraculously, the roots regenerate even after the ground is destroyed. The olive tree lives many, many years. And the older it gets, the more interesting its appearance: as the bark grows gnarled, smooth and variegated in color, the branches spread further outward to a glorious slivery canopy. It becomes more stately, and almost sacred in its solidity

Soon, this olive tree, like trees all over Israel, will celebrate its “birthday.” The celebration will take place on the evening of February 10 on the holiday of *Tu B'Shevat* -- literally, the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat. *Tu B'Shevat* has its roots in ancient Jewish agricultural law. This “birthday” is necessary to determine at what point the fruit of a tree could be eaten (not until three years following planting). Also, the fruits that ripened from *Tu B'Shevat* on are counted for the following year as tithes if the tree was not in a Sabbatical year.

But just as so much of a tree grows below ground in a tangle of twisting and turning roots, so can the history of the Jewish people be similarly traced. With each turn, we have prayed to God for the best. We've given thanks for our blessings. We've mourned our losses. But now, as *Tu B'Shevat* approaches, we are ready to celebrate. And we are celebrating more than an agricultural event; we are celebrating our character as Jews. We are the resilient ones who stand tall, sway in the wind, make do with just a little water, and with some help from above, we bend but do not break. Like the 1,200-year-old olive tree, we may take some beating year after year, but we still continue to blossom, and our fruit ripens and is gathered in over-brimming bushels, wagons and trucks.

On a patch of rocky soil just outside of Jerusalem, the celebration has gone on for centuries. Long may it continue there, and long may we Jews continue to celebrate the blessing through which G-d has enabled us to determinedly thrive and flourish throughout the world. Happy *Tu B'Shevat*.

~Touro Torah~

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