

RE-CONNECTING TO NATURE

by Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz

One of the striking phenomena of modern Orthodox life is how distant we are from nature. In the ancient world, both among Jews and among the other nations of the world, people were very connected and sensitive to the cycles of the sun, moon, and the stars and the planets. Today, even navigation is no longer done by the stars, but by machine.

I remember when I was *eretz yisrael* and looked up at the sky: thousands and thousands of stars! This is what our forefathers saw every evening when they looked up at the night sky. It is easy to forget our natural connection to the world, and how much we rely on the natural cycles and natural resources Hashem has given to us. All of our holidays and the cycles of Judaism are based on the natural cycles of the world.

Of course, Pesach is about *yetzias mitzraim*, the exodus from Egypt, and Shavuot celebrates *matan torah*, the giving of the Torah. Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres commemorate our wandering in the desert. But, it is also true that Pesach is the beginning of the spring when the barley was harvested. Shavuot was also the time of the harvesting of the wheat, and Sukkos is the ingathering of the produce and the fruit.

Last year, we had two months of Adar in the Jewish year. Why do we have Jewish leap years in which we add an additional month of Adar? Because the Torah says that Pesach must occur during the spring. So, when Pesach gets a little too early in the solar calendar, we have to put in an extra month to push Pesach back into its proper alignment.

Why is it so important that Pesach be in the spring? The gemara says there's an intimate bridge between the physical structure of the universe and the spiritual universe. What happens on this earth models the "spiritual vibe" that God is putting into the earth at that time. For example, take freedom. That will be manifested by the fact that the earth itself becomes liberated after a long cold winter, after it was dormant, to begin with productivity and growth. Pesach occurs in spring because that's the time of freedom.

We judge the nature of the physical and spiritual "vibe" by the season in the land of Israel. When it is spring there, Hashem puts freedom into the world, and it spreads from there to places like Australia or South Africa, where it is not spring at that season. In *eretz yisrael*, however, it must be springtime during Pesach, because what happens in nature is a mirror is a reflection of some deeper spiritual

truth.

Shavu'os, the time of harvest, is also the time of the matan torah, giving of the Torah, when we can harvest the knowledge that Hashem has made available to us. Sukkos is the time of ingathering; so, too, after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are able to internalize that knowledge into our emotions and behavior, ingathering into ourselves.

This is also true in our prayers. If you look at our tefillos, you will notice that the zman (time) of our tefillos are based on various transition points in the day. When the night turns into the morning, when the sun rises, is when you are supposed to say the shema. Although the mishna says you can say the shema as late as three hours into the day, because kings used to get up late, the best way of praying is when you are moved by the grandeur of the universe as it switches from night into morning. Mincha is to be prayed as the sun is setting, and maariv when the stars come out. These transitions are supposed to inspire us. When we pray in the morning, it is as the sun rises and inspires us; as the sun sets we have the fear and trepidation in which we ask God to protect us in time of danger. When we pray in total darkness, we are affirming our faith in God even at times of despair and this gives us the courage to persevere even through the night.

Today, we come into our shul with the lights on. Shacharis is the same, mincha is the same, maariv is the same. But if one is truly connected to the earth, one understands that even the emotional meaning of shacharis is different from that of mincha, and different from that of maariv. That's why chazal teach us to pray three times of day, because each tefillah is supposed to elicit a different view.

The assumption of the Torah is not that you're going to be a lawyer or a doctor or a CPA. The assumption of the Torah would be that you would have your farm, your vineyard and your fig tree, and you would bring bikkurim, first fruits to the Kohen. That is the picture that the Torah paints. Yet how far we are from this!

Tu b'Shevat, the new year of the trees, is a holiday that helps us focus on the natural world. In Israel, it is the recognized time when the sap begins running in the trees, the first early mark of the coming of spring. We can use this physical change as a spiritual time to focus on the earth and the importance of protecting it.

This year on Tu b'Shevat, let's take a few moments to appreciate our connections to the physical world, to appreciate Hashem's marvelous creation, and to protect the natural resources Hashem has granted us.

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