

WHAT GOES DOWN

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness... it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us." (Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities)

In the crazy, trouble filled world in which we live, it appears that we have finally hit bottom. Really. Consider all of the muck that has been brought to light over the past few months:

- Subprime mortgage crisis and the ensuing financial collapse
- Revelation of the largest (Madoff) Ponzi scheme in history
- Disclosure of the true inner workings and excesses of the automobile industry
- Admission of the misguided nature of the war in Iraq
- Acknowledgment of energy and ecological abuses
- Unearthing of politicians' affairs, payoffs, and bribes

Of course, this is not to imply that the ripple effects of all of these monumental challenges have been fully felt. Nor does it mean that there is no more additional bad news in store for us. Still, we seem to finally have gained a greater grasp of the challenges which confront us, and the ways in which we got ourselves into this mess. The long, painful healing process can now begin in earnest. Perhaps we can glean some additional insight into this process of decline and restoration from Tu B'Shvat, the traditional New Year for trees.

Tu B'Shvat (15 Shvat, celebrated this year on February 8) draws our collective attention to nature's inherent cycles of deterioration and growth. The botanical realm follows a steady, predictable pattern of budding and development, and, eventually, stagnation and decay, only to be followed again by a new period of advance and vitality.

History has shown that this cycle also applies to the human condition. On both a personal and national level, life is full of highs and lows, gains and losses, successes and failures. The Torah itself alludes to this symmetry between man and botany when it compares us to trees (Deuteronomy 20:19).

However, while this cyclical aspect of nature is apparent throughout the year, it is most perceptible when one observes the extreme disparity between the seasons of winter and spring. Winter represents stagnation and unrealized potential, when all signs of growth lie hidden from sight. There are no external signs of development, no expressions of vitality.

Spring, on the other hand, symbolizes burgeoning vigor. Everything is new and exciting. Trees that have remained dormant for the past few months start to show new signs of life. Buds begin to sprout, flowers start to open. Nature once again reveals its true beauty.

For, behold, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing bird has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. (Song of Songs 2:11-12)

This same contrast applies to human life. Circumstances sometimes force us into our own personal or collective "winter", when struggles and challenges strip us of our innate vitality. There are other times in which we seemingly experience only joy and excitement in our lives. Everything points towards growth and accomplishment.

We must realize, however, that there are two distinct ways for a person to approach the winter-like situations in his own life. The aforementioned contrast between winter and spring is only true if one views winter as the death-knell of summer. The beauty of the seasonal cycle, however, is that one can alternatively view winter as ushering in the upcoming spring. No matter what challenges a person faces, there are always better days awaiting him. Such a person knows no limitations, no dormancy. Life is a continuous cycle pointed in the direction of growth.

This is the message of Tu B'Shvat. In the middle of the winter, when everything around us seems so cold and bleak, think of spring. Eat fruit. Sing joyous tunes. Plant new trees. Always look for the good.

If Tu B'Shvat and human history are to serve as any indications, we can take comfort in the knowledge that we will once again rise above our current malaise and experience collective joy and prosperity. But, to paraphrase our new president at his inauguration address, it will not be quick, and it will not be easy. In the end, we will see better days, and use the important lessons learned from our past follies and indiscretions to build a better tomorrow for ourselves and the world around us.

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