

SPRING TO LIFE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Tu BeShvat

Spring to Life

By Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

When we speak of Tu B'Shvat (the 15th of Shvat), the New Year for trees, thoughts of joyous tunes, tree planting ceremonies and the consumption of fruit come to mind. Certainly it is a day that we all look forward to. But what exactly is Tu B'Shvat, in terms of its legal status? It isn't a festival, as neither the Torah nor the Talmud make any mention of celebrating or observing this day. No commandments are recorded. Nor are any special prayers inserted within the liturgy. The only things that we find regarding Tu B'Shvat pertain to things that we should not do. These include not reciting special supplications in our prayers, not eulogizing a lost one, and not fasting - all three due to the joyous nature of the day. So if Tu B'Shvat isn't a festival, what is it?

Looking exclusively at the Torah it would seem that the significance of Tu B'Shvat is entirely limited to the realm of agriculture.

When you come to the Land and you plant any food tree, you shall surely block its fruit [from use]; it shall be blocked from you [from use] for three years, not to be eaten. In the fourth year, all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to G-d. In the fifth year, you may eat its fruit; [do this, in order] to increase its produce for you. I am G-d, your G-d. (Leviticus 19:23-25)

These three verses form the basis of two commandments. The first is that of orlah literally "blocked" or "closed" fruit. We are commanded not to derive any benefit from fruit that grows in the land of Israel during the first three years of a tree's growth (or for the first three years after a tree is replanted). The second commandment is that of neta revai. All fruit from the tree's fourth year can be eaten, however it may only be consumed by its owner in Jerusalem (unless it is redeemed - see Leviticus 27:34). From the fifth year and beyond the fruit can be eaten completely at the owner's discretion, whenever and wherever he wishes.

What is the reasoning behind the commandment of neta revai? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

comments that when a person sits in Jerusalem eating the fruit of his labor, he comes to appreciate the true synthesis between the spiritual realm, as illustrated by Jerusalem and its Bais HaMikdash, and his physical reality, symbolized by the fruit.

G-d instructs us to take something that is otherwise mundane (chulin) and infuse it with a spiritual dimension (kedusha). The word chulin is closely related to the word challal, meaning empty or dead. It lacks any spiritual vitality. Kedusha, on the other hand, means a complete surrender to a higher purpose (see Hirsch to Deuteronomy 23:18). We surrender our actions, our possessions, even the very food that we eat, to G-d. Until now it was a piece of fruit; now it's an item through which we can serve Him. Through His word, the physical becomes a manifestation of the spiritual.

Once Tu B'Shvat arrives in the fourth year, the fruits of this tree are infused with the status of neta revai. Why is it that we look specifically to Tu B'Shvat as the cut off date? Our question becomes stronger when we realize that the month of Shvat actually marks winter's mid-point. How is it that we can identify a date in the heart of the winter in connection to commandments that are so intimately associated with harvesting?

The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 14a) offers the following explanation as to why Bais Shammai (who argue with Bais Hillel by stating that the new year for trees is actually the first of Shvat) maintain their particular view. Although (once the first of Shvat arrives) the greater part of the winter cycle is still to come, yet since the greater part of the year's rain has fallen (and the trees now begin to blossom), therefore we celebrate the new year for trees on the first of Shvat.

When we look to identify a date as the cut off point between one agricultural year and the next, we have to focus on the date by which the tree normally begins to blossom. Once it blossoms, its fruit belong to the new year. It marks a new process of growth. Though there is still much time left in the winter season, the beginnings of a spring can already be perceived today. Such beginnings are enough to call this day the New Year for trees.

There is a deeper message here as well. As we analyze the yearly cycle, we notice that the seasons in many ways parallel our own lives. Concepts of growth and development, and, eventually, stagnation and decay, appear in both the vegetative and human realms. The Torah itself alludes to this when it compares us to trees (Deuteronomy 20:19).

Of all of the yearly seasons, there is perhaps no greater disparity than the one that exists between the seasons of winter and spring. Winter represents stagnation and unrealized potential, when all signs of growth lie hidden inside of the trees. There are no external signs of development, no expressions of vitality. All we see is an empty tree trunk; the fruit and leaves of last season have long since fallen away.

Spring, on the other hand, symbolizes burgeoning vitality. 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 contrast is true in human life as well. Circumstances sometimes force us into our own personal "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.

But the message goes one step further. Not only are we charged to maintain a continuously upbeat attitude regardless of our personal circumstances, we must also realize that those very circumstances are the ones that form the basis of our eventual success. Though we might not have noticed it, most of the "rain" necessary for growth has already fallen. The basis for our success, namely the trials and challenges that we have had to overcome, is already in place. The only difference is that this foundation still lives in the realm of potential, hidden from the outside world. It takes the warmth of spring, literally and in our own lives, to allow that potential to blossom into its eventual reality (see Ramban's commentary to Genesis 22:1).

Interestingly, the Hebrew word for winter itself, choref, illustrates this exact point. Rav Hirsch notes that choref is related to the word charfi, a word which means dormant vigor. *As I was in the days of my winter (i.e. dormant vigor) (Job 29:4).* Winter here alludes to the days of a persons youth, a time in which his vast talents are waiting to emerge. It is a persons "spring" that helps to bring those latent talents to the forefront.

Our discussion began with an attempt to understand the true function of Tu B'Shvat. We noted how Tu B'Shvat played a significant role in determining the legal status of produce, by identifying the year to which it "belonged." We also showed that Tu B'Shvat provides us with many essential, real-life lessons. We celebrate Tu B'Shvat knowing that we will continue to weather the storm of life, no matter what that particular "season" has in store. This is because G-d, the Source of all blessing, is behind us, providing us with the means to succeed.

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