

THE NEW YEAR FOR TREES

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

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Tu B'Shvat, The New Year for Trees

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The first Mishna in the tractate of Rosh HaShanah tells us that there are four "new years." One of these is the new year for trees. The Mishna tells us that the school of Shammai said that the new year for trees is on the first day of the month of Sh'vat, while the school of Hillel said that it is on the 15th day of Sh'vat. We follow the opinion of the school of Hillel, and we therefore celebrate the new year for trees on the 15th of Sh'vat, which this year is February 5. The holiday is called Tu B'Shvat because "Tu" is the pronunciation of the numeral 15 when spelled out (the letter "tes" and the letter "vav."). Hence, Tu B'Shvat means the 15th of Sh'vat.

What significance does a new year have for trees? For what purposes does the year start on the 15th of Sh'vat for trees? The new year for trees can be analogized to the beginning of a fiscal year. There are a series of commandments relating to crops, produce, and harvests that are only practiced in the land of Israel. (Nowadays, when the Temple is not in existence, we observe some of these commandments differently than that which will be described here. However, the observance of these commandments is still mandatory.) After grains and fruit are gathered, there is a mandatory gift called "Terumah" that must be given to any person who is a Kohain, a "priest." After this gift is given, there are then a series of gifts that can be generalized under the term "Ma'aser," meaning "a tenth." The first of these gifts is called "Ma'aser Rishon" - The First Tenth. This gift, consisting of 1/10th of the harvest, is given by the farmer to any member of the tribe of Levi after the "Terumah" has been taken. After this gift has been given to the Levi, there are two other Ma'aser gifts, only one of which is taken in any particular year. (There is a system that dictates which Ma'aser is given in which year). The first of these "gifts" is called "Ma'aser Sheni" - The Second Tenth. This "gift" consists of 1/10 of the remaining crops, and it is to be taken by the owner of the field to Jerusalem to be eaten there. The other "Ma'aser" is "Ma'aser Ani" - The Tenth of the Poor. This "gift" consists of 1/10th of the

remaining crops, and it is to be given to poor people.

We have taken for granted that when these gifts are given, they consist of wholly formed, ripened, and harvested produce. We all know that the agricultural seasons for planting and harvesting do not usually coincide with the beginning and end of our calendar. As these gifts are gifts of produce which depend on a yearly cycle (as each "year's" harvest is subject to these gifts, in addition to the fact that the gift may differ from year to year, as mentioned above), a definition of a "year" is needed so we know the cut-off point for inclusion of the produce in a specific year, and hence subject to a specific year's gift requirement. The beginning of the agricultural year for trees as far as these gifts go is the 15th of Sh'vat - the New Year for Trees. For example: The present Jewish year is 5756. If a fruit was formed on the tree before the 15th of Sh'vat 5756, it is included with all fruits that were formed from the 15 Sh'vat 5755 until 15 Sh'vat 5756. If the fruit was formed after Sh'vat 15, 5756, it is included with the fruits formed from 15 Sh'vat 5756 until 15 Sh'vat 5757 for purposes of determining to which year's gift it will be subject. This is the significance of the New Year for Trees.

Another question still remains: Why is this new year in the month of Sh'vat? The Gemora in the tractate of Rosh HaShanah tells us that by this point in the year, the majority of the rainfall to come during the year has already arrived. Therefore, the trees have already started to grow, and this is the time when fruits begin forming on the trees. Because the fruits begin to grow at this time, it is fitting that we start the New Year for trees (which has significance to the fruits produced and the gifts the fruit are subject to) at this time.

In Shulchan Aruch Orech Chayim 131, which discusses the days on which we do not say Tachanun (a special prayer of supplications which is not recited on joyous days), we find that Tu B'Shvat is one of those festive days on which we do not recite the Tachanun prayer. Commenting on this law, the Magen Avraham writes that "The custom in Ashkenaz is to increase the consumption of different types of fruits on this day," in honor of the significance of the day to trees and their fruits. This is a custom which many people keep nowadays, using fruits which the Torah mentions in conjunction with the land of Israel: grapes, figs, pomegranates, and dates.

The B'nai Yesaschar writes of another custom which is alluded to in the Mishna which tells us about the New Year for Trees. The Mishna calls the new year "Rosh HaShana L'Ilan," The New Year for a Tree. Why did the Mishna refer to "tree" in the singular rather than in the plural? Why wasn't the new year called "Rosh HaShana L'Ilanot," The New Year for Trees? The answer, the B'nai Yesaschar writes, stems from something our sages have told us: On Tu B'Shvat, we should pray that come next Sukkot, we are able to acquire a beautiful and kosher Esrog, so we can fulfill the commandment of taking that one on the Four Species to the fullest. (For more information on the taking of the Four Species on Sukkos, see Vol. I, # 47). This is alluded to by the Mishna's use of the word "tree" in the singular: THE tree that we need in order to fulfill a commandment begins its new year, and in order

to assure that we can obtain the fruit of THAT tree, we should pray for it on this day.

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