

OF SEEDS AND GROWTH

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Tu BeShvat

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The Talmud (Shabbos 31a) records a famous incident involving the Sages Hillel and Shammai. A gentile approached Shammai and made the following request: "Convert me to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one leg." Shammai did not approve of this request and chased the man away. The gentile then approached Hillel with the same request. Hillel responded that he would do so, and encapsulated the Torah into one statement: What is hateful to you do not do to your friend.

This exchange is a bit odd. The initial request was puzzling: What was the gentile looking for? Why did Hillel and Shammai have differing responses? How was Hillel's response the entire Torah?

To better understand this episode, we need to look at the Jewish nation's study of the Torah. The Talmud (Niddah 30b) tells us that when a child is in the womb, the child is taught the entire Torah. However, as the child is born, an angel strikes the baby which causes the child to forget all learnt. The reason for this exercise is that the study of Torah is not an easy prospect. If it was not for the fact that we were first given all of the contents of the Torah explicitly, on a silver platter, learning it later would be next to impossible. G-d plants a seed within us so that we have the ability to learn Torah. However, the knowledge must remain a seed within us at the moment of birth. We cannot enter this world as full-blown Torah scholars. Our job on Earth is to toil in the study of Torah. We can only acquire Torah, our Sages have repeatedly told us, through effort and diligent study. Because this task is difficult enough, G-d, out of His love for us, gave us the innate ability to accomplish it, by allowing us to learn the Torah before birth. In this way, we struggle to refresh our memories, not starting from scratch.

Torah study rests on these two principles: that G-d gave us a background in the Torah, a seed of knowledge that needs nurturing; and that without diligence and toil, our background in Torah will

not help us grow into the People of the Book we must be. We need to strive to learn the Torah properly, so that we bring our purpose on this Earth to fruition. The first principle, or "leg" of Torah study, signifies G-d's love of those who study His Torah. G-d gave us background, a headstart, to ease our studies. The second "leg" signifies strength, for when we build up our drive to learn more and more, we are building our vast storehouse of knowledge with our great efforts. Hence, we "grow" stronger and stronger, in fortitude and knowledge.

The gentile came to Shammai wanting just knowledge. He merely wanted to know the information contained in the Torah. He did not realize that the information alone is not retained. The Torah is there for us to study and, just as importantly, practice. He asked for the Torah on one leg - for the knowledge without the toil that must accompany it in order for there to be any lasting effect. Shammai knew that this was impossible and drove him away. Hillel took another approach. "Would you want to be given an impossible task?" he asked. "No, you would not like that. You want to know the Torah, but not learn it? No, you would not like that." G-d knew that we would not like that. G-d knew that the Jewish people would find learning Torah impossible unless He aided them, so that is what He did. If you find it unpleasant, don't wish it on anyone else. Hillel knew that he could not teach this person the entire Torah "on one leg." So, he explained why: You need to treat others the way you want to be treated, and you would not want to be subjected to the impossible. Once the gentile understood what Torah study entailed, he realized that he could not learn Torah on one leg.

The astrological sign for the month of Shevat is Aquarius, the water bearer, or as it is called in Hebrew, "D'li," "the pail." The pail draws water from its source, and brings the water to where it is used. We find the comparison between water and Torah often in the writings of our Sages. In Shevat, we are supposed to recognize that our task is to act as the "Torah bearer" and to draw from the Torah so that the Torah is properly used. The fact the New Year for Trees falls under this sign is of course no coincidence. Most obviously, trees need water for their survival, and the needed delivery of water to the trees so that fruit forms is a focus on the New Year for Trees. The deeper significance arises from the comparison made in the Torah (Devarim 20:19) of "for the trees of the field are like man." Man, like trees, needs "water" for sustenance. Just as physical water enables a tree to bring forth fruit, so too does the Torah, spiritual water, enable man to bring forth fruit. As we mentioned before, this requires work and toil. So that we remember that we have help in our task, we celebrate the New Year for Trees on the 15th day of the month. Until the 15th day, the moon has been growing in light. The 15th day is typically the day of the full moon. It signifies the completeness and fullness that we have right when we are born - we have been taught the entire Torah. We start our toil realizing that G-d was there to help us, to plant a seed within us.

The 15th day of Shevat is a day on which we pray that growth should begin. Trees should get the water they sorely need so that they bear fruit. Man should properly immerse himself in Torah so that he reaches his full potential. The 15th day of Shevat is a day on which we recognize that G-d is there to help us with our endeavors. He provides us with what we need to be successful, although our

success depends on our efforts as well. Tu B'Shvat should be the start of a truly fruitful year for all of us.

(Based on Sefer B'nai Yesaschar)

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