

PLANTING THE SEEDS OF ETERNITY

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

YomTov, Vol. V, # 16

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Tu B'Shvat, the beginning of the new year for trees, occurs this year on January 22, 2000.

The Talmud (Ta'anis 23b) relates an interesting incident about the sage Choni HaM'agel (who once prayed for rain during a drought and refused to move from within a circle until the rain came - which it did). "R' Yochanan said: This righteous man [Choni] was throughout his whole life troubled about the meaning of the verse (Psalms 126), A Song of Ascents, When Hashem will return the captivity of Zion, we will be like dreamers.' Is it possible for a man to dream continuously for seventy years? One day he was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

Choni sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree? The man replied: I am his grandson. Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years."

The commentator the Maharsha explains what exactly troubled Choni, and how his troubles were allayed. The exile to which the Psalmist was referring to in the passage that troubled Choni was that which occurred after the destruction of the first Temple, the exile of Bavel. This exile lasted a period of 70 years. The Psalmist, in Choni's understanding, was saying that those 70 years when the nation of Israel was in exile were like a dream, a fleeting, relatively insignificant period of time. This troubled Choni because of the significance of the 70 year time period. We find else where in Psalms (90) that

"The days of our years among them are seventy years." The span of a person's life on earth is typified as lasting 70 years. Choni was asking "Is it possible that a person's life could be considered like a dream, of no significance and no substance?"

Choni then came across the man planting the carob tree. Choni saw an individual toiling, engaged in a task which did not produce immediate results nor satisfaction. The tree would not bear fruit for seventy years, at which time the planter would not be around to enjoy the literal fruits of his labor. Choni saw that although a tree could appear to be valueless and insignificant for such an extended period of time, it, in the long run, had value and was productive. Choni realized that people may toil and labor throughout their entire lives. This time may be like a dream, fleeting and insignificant for what results occur during that time period. However, upon arriving at the next world, the World To Come, we can reap our reward and realize how productive our lives were.

Furthermore, although a tree may not give direct benefit to the individual that planted it, the individual's children, his successors, will enjoy the product of his effort. When a person toils in This World, by following the dictates of G-d and His commandments, the person is not merely placing himself in a situation where he is deserving of reward, whether it come in this world or the next. He is also directly benefiting his children. He is setting forth a lesson. As the planter said "as my forefathers' planted for me, so too I plant for my children." He is directing his children's path for the future. He is establishing benefit for his children. Hashem rewards the children of those that love Him as well. Choni vividly saw this lesson, as when he woke up after 70 years, he saw the grandchild of the planter eating the fruits of his grandfather's labor. Clearly, the toil in a short and fleeting life, seemingly insignificant, could be nothing farther from that.

Choni learned that one's accomplishments are not necessarily valued for what they produce in the here and now. The days of the life of man, as it says in Iyov (20:8), indeed "shall fly away like a dream." It is what remains afterwards that is the judge of accomplishment and success. Did you plant during your life? If not, nothing remains when you are gone, and therefore your life does not have lasting significance. However, if we all plant, by learning Torah, by adhering to the commandments of G-d, by acting morally and compassionately, and by teaching our children to do the same, fruits will be borne. We may not see these fruits during our life. We may not get to enjoy them in this world. But we can rest assured, (unlike Choni, who slept for 70 years to learn this lesson,) knowing that we indeed will be harvesting our bounty in the World To Come, and our children will thrive because of our efforts.

Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for Trees, comes during a dry spell for holidays. The spiritual high of the High Holidays has waned, and the feverish preparations for Pesach will not begin (for most people, anyway) for some time. It is a perfect time to concentrate on the lesson of the tree, and to remember that now is not just time for physical planting, but the time to sow some spiritual seeds as well.

Check out all of the posts on Tu B'Shvat. Head over to <http://www.torah.org/learning/yomtov/> to access the YomTov Page. Then click on the icon for the holiday of your choice.

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