

CAN A PERSON SLEEP FOR SEVENTY YEARS?

by Rabbi Label Lam

How odd it feels to look out at a frozen landscape of trees standing as skeleton-like statues, knowing that it is time to celebrate the "New Year for Trees"- Tu B'Shevat. It may make us wonder aloud as we crunch on carobs and down some dates, "What's wrong with this picture?"

The appointed season for the "New Year for Trees" is, on a practical level, a fiscal cut off point to determine which fruits belong to which year. It occurs at that time when the trees are ready to blossom as winter's water graduates to become syrup through the xylem and phylum.

The Talmud relates a famous incident regarding Choni Hamagel. He was troubled by a verse we are all familiar with: "Shir Hamaalos...When Hashem returns the captivity of Tzion, we will have been like dreamers." Since the time of the exile between the first Beis HaMikdash to the second was seventy years, Choni Hamagel wondered, "Can a person sleep for seventy years?"

Choni Hamagel met a young man on the road planting a carob tree. He inquired how long it would take for that tree to bear fruit. The man told him, "Seventy years." Choni Hamagel asked him if he thought he would be around to reap the benefits of his labor. The man informed him, "When I came into this world, I found a carob tree that others had planted for me. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I plant this tree for my descendants."

Shortly after that brief encounter, Choni Hamagel fell into a deep slumber. Remarkably, he awoke seventy years later to find the grandchild of that farmer picking carobs from the same tree. Choni Hamagel revisited his own community where he had been presumed dead for many years. He heard his Torah being quoted in the Beis Medrash. He even encountered his very own

grandchildren, but nobody believed him to be the real Choni Hamagel. He was in a world not his own, so he prayed to be taken from that world and, once again, his wish was granted. (Taanis 23A) We imagine that this should have been a dream come true. In fact, it was an intolerable nightmare. Why?

The first part of the story is perhaps the key to explain the second. The man planting the tree lived with the accepted reality that we are here in this world to plant. "Those who sow with tears, reap in joy!" In this world of action, we perform tasks whose results are beyond our imagination. Just as we enjoy the benefits and the bounty of sacrifices made by previous generations, we too are receiving and passing on dreams to future worlds. It is not our purpose in this place to reap the results of our investments. We are granted just enough nachas to encourage us to keep on moving and doing. To

be a mere spectator in life without an active purpose is an exercise in futility and likely yields a lethal dose of frustration.

It is told that Rabbi Shlomo Hyman, zt"l, the first Rosh HaYeshiva at Torah V'Daas, was once giving a shiur on a snowy day. Although there were only two students present, he gave the lesson with the same thunderous enthusiasm as if the room was filled with many more. One of the students told the Rebbe, "There are only two of us here!" Rabbi Hyman answered, "I'm teaching you, your children and all your talmidim. I see thousands here." One of the students was inspired at that moment to begin a dedicated career of education. There were thousands in the room that day.

On Tu B' Shevat, we honor the vision, the process, and the endless possibility for productive living. Since, as King David says, (Psalms 90:10) "The days of our years are seventy" (25,550 days to be exact), we might appreciate that question differently, "Can a person sleep for seventy years?" Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.