

TU BESHEVAT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

By whatever comes out of the mouth of God does man live." (Devarim 8:2-3)

Many people believe that humans are a combination of body and soul. What they might not think about is how different the body and soul are, and how each one pulls in the opposite direction of the other. By all rights, they should separate from each other and go their own different ways. However, though that might benefit the soul, which is eternal, the body, of course, would die because it is dependent on the soul for life.

So, what keeps them together?

According to tradition, something called holy sparks. Holy sparks are individually packaged portions of Divine light that act like some kind of spiritual glue to hold the body and soul together. We're born with holy sparks, but they have to be constantly replenished throughout life for a person to survive, and not just survive, but to be healthy.

The health of the body depends upon its connection to the soul. The closer the body is to the soul, the more light the soul can give to the body, keeping it alive. Likewise, the weaker the connection is between the body and the soul, the less light the body can receive and the more it will deteriorate. We call that illness.

Hence, the light of the soul is the life force for the body, and therefore, the more soul light the body receives, the healthier it is and remains. The question is, how does one replenish or add to his amount of holy sparks?

There are a few ways that we do this, but one of the main ways is by eating. Food also contains holy sparks, and the more holy sparks food contains, the healthier it will be. In fact, to be really accurate, the nutritional facts that we find on the side of products should really report how many holy sparks the food contains. In essence this is what they are doing by reporting the healthy ingredients, since what makes something healthy is the amount of holy sparks it contains.

So, when a person eats food and their bodily systems break the food down, sending the nutrients to different parts of the body to do whatever they must to keep the body working, it is really the holy sparks inside the nutrients that are doing the trick, or rather, the miracle of keeping a person alive and healthy by allowing the soul to remain attached to the body, and perhaps coming ever closer to it than it was before.

But clearly food is not enough of a source of holy sparks, because there is only so much food a person can eat, and therefore, only so many holy sparks he can derive from his food. Health can fluctuate even with healthy eating, so it would seem that we need more sparks than food can give to us. So, from where else can we get holy sparks?

The clue to the answer is actually in the Torah itself, just after the sea crossing and the miracle of the water in a place called Marah.

As the Torah reports, the Jewish people had arrived in Marah after crossing the sea in order to escape the pursuing Egyptian army, only to find the water there bitter. Thirsty, they complained to Moshe, who then turned to God, Who gave Moshe instructions about how to miraculously make the water sweet. It worked, and the Jewish people quenched their thirst.

After that episode, God told the satiated Jewish nation:

"If you will diligently listen to the voice of God, your God, and do what is right in His eyes, listen to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will not inflict you with any of the diseases with which I inflicted Egypt, for I am God who heals you." (Shemos 15:26)

What do learning Torah and performing commandments have to do with health? Obviously, if God wants to punish a person for disobedience, taking away his health could be such a way. But, the Torah seems to imply a direct correlation between the performance of commandments and health, and there is a good reason why: Learning Torah and performing commandments are extremely effective ways to receive additional holy sparks.

Hence, elsewhere in the Torah it says this regarding the manna the Jewish people ate in the desert for 40 years:

"He afflicted you, and caused you to go hungry, and gave you manna to eat which you did not recognize, nor did your ancestors experience it—so that He could teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but by whatever comes out of the mouth of God does man live." (Devarim 8:2-3)

What comes out of the mouth of God? Bread? Meat? Soft ice cream? None of the above. Rather, it is holy sparks that come out of the mouth of God, so-to-speak, and learning Torah and performing commandments puts us in a direct line to receive them. In fact, so effective is Torah a means for acquiring holy sparks that Moshe was able to remain on top of Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights without eating or drinking, and didn't look any worse for wear once he came back down again.

How did he not only stay alive, but healthy?

The entire 40 days and nights that Moshe learned Torah from the mouth of God, he received his holy sparks directly from God, without food having to act as the vehicle to bring them to him. He didn't have to go to the bother of eating to feed the connection between his body and soul, and this is the way he remained the rest of his life. The commentators say that he only ate in the company of

others, to make them feel comfortable.

That's a very high spiritual level to attain. Fortunately, for the rest of us, it is enough that we eat healthy, learn Torah, perform commandments, and live meaningful lives. Doing this will give us our daily supplement of holy sparks, keep our bodies and souls happily together, and give us a much better shot at living truly healthier lives.

This is one level of the message; Tu B'Shevat takes this discussion to a whole new level.

Yes, Tu B'Shevat is a celebration of the fruits of Eretz Yisroel, and the cut-off point for the rainy season in the Holy Land, but that is only Pshat. On a deeper level, as the Pri Tzaddik explains, it is really the Rosh Hashanah of one particular tree, the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah, giving us a chance to rectify it on some level.

Ironically, the first test of man was also an eating issue. Adam HaRishon was told that he could eat from all the trees in the garden, except for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which Kabbalah explains would have become permissible on Shabbos, after it transformed into the Aitz HaChaim. However, the First Man didn't wait, committing what the Pri Tzaddik calls an achilah sh'lo b'kedushah — an unholy eating. Eating from the tree on Shabbos would have had just the opposite effect.

Thus, this has been the ongoing challenge of mankind throughout history, not just to eat, not just to eat healthy, but to eat holy as well. Hence, the emphasis on fruits of Eretz Yisroel on Tu B'Shevat: fruits grown from holy land are intrinsically holy, as it says:

The fruits of the Land of Israel stem from holiness. Therefore, the very same spirituality that was enveloped by the manna is en clothed by the fruits of Israel. That is why no manna fell in the Land of Israel. That is also why the after-blessing for fruits of the seven species in the Land of Israel concludes, "upon her fruits," as opposed to "upon the fruits." This indicates that the holiness of the land resides in her fruits alone and not the fruits that grow outside the Land of Israel. (Tuv HaAretz)

Fascinating that the fruits of Eretz Yisroel should be connected to the manna, which was given to the Jewish people to remind them that man does not survive by bread alone, but by what comes out of the mouth of God. More importantly, the manna was given to the Jewish people to make the point that their existence is supernatural, which is important, because it is the only way to really survive in Eretz Yisroel — especially today, when surrounded by over 360 million enemies. Apparently, the fruits of Eretz Yisroel make the same point.

This makes it clearer why there are so many agricultural laws, from the tithing of fruits and vegetables to the keeping of the Sh'mittah year to the leaving behind of forgotten sheaves for the poor. It is not just about being charitable. It is about making sure that our eating is holy. For, as the Torah states:

God told Moshe, "Speak to the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and tell them, 'Be holy, for I, your God, am holy.' " (Vayikra 19:1-2)

This is how to maximize the amount of holy sparks you consume through eating: The holier the eating experience, the more sparks one consumes. This, too, is part of the Tu B'Shevat message.

However, once the topic of the manna comes up, and the connection to the fruits of Eretz Yisroel is made, then it is important to convey what is perhaps the most important part of the manna's message:

The children of Israel collected [manna], some a lot, and some a little. However, when they portioned out an omer, the one who had gathered a lot was without extra, and the one who gathered a little was not missing any; they had collected according to what each person ate. (Shemos 16:17-18)

How did this work? If someone picked up more than an omer, the surplus rotted. If someone picked up less than an omer, then miraculously it became an omer. Everyone got an omer of manna, and only an omer. No matter how hard someone tried to cheat the system, the only one they cheated in the end was themselves, having wasted time and effort to go against the will of God.

Hence, the rabbis say:

Who is a wealthy person? One who is happy with his portion. (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

"Of course, I'll be happy with MY portion," a person make think to himself, "as soon as I get MY portion! In the meantime," he may mistakenly assume, "I seem to have someone else's portion, because it is far less than I seem to need ..."

I grew up with the expression, "Your eyes are bigger than your stomach!" which means that I wanted to eat more than my body was built to digest at one time. Apparently, appetite does not take into account stomach capacity, and on many occasions, I walked away from a meal stuffed to the gills, as they say, and often with a stomach ache.

The expression can be applied to other matters, besides food, as is evident by the amount of personal and national debt that is destabilizing countries around the world. People always seem to want more than they are meant to have, and often risk a lot, and sometimes too much, to get it. The fact that they don't have something, they assume, does not mean that it is not meant for them. So they go off devising various different means to get what they lack, some legal, some not-so-legal.

Here is another interesting point that people tend not to think about, or even know about: Just because you get what you want does not mean that you are meant to have it. Sometimes, when God sees how badly someone wants something, and refuses to accept no for an answer, He'll give it to the person.

However, there is a catch. Something that is meant for me will come to me in a reasonable way, perhaps even with minimal cost and effort. If God feels we deserve something, He'll make a point of letting us know it by how and when we receive it.

If what we get does not belong to us, this will not be the case. Rather, it will come at a cost, and often one that will make us wonder what we were thinking about when we sought the item in the first place. Or, it may simply be subtracted from our eternal reward after death, at a time that we will be able to fully regret the silliness of such past desires, but will be powerless to do anything about.

How can a person know if what he wants is meant for him, and that if he receives it, it won't be at some unreasonable cost, whether in terms of money, time, energy, or eternal reward?

The manna answers that question, as do the fruits of Eretz Yisroel. They remind us that God is the Shopkeeper, the Ultimate Merchant; everyone else is just a middle-man. He knows all that goes on, every person by name, face, and deeds, and has absolute power to give or take away at will. He is just, generous, and merciful, and depending upon the person, that can result in receiving the thing of our dreams, or not getting it.

Ultimately, He knows better than we do what is good for us, and what is not. If we become holy consumers, consuming whatever it is that we are consuming in holy ways, then we can be sure that we will always get our omer, no matter what, and the sense of contentment that comes along with it.

Happy Tu B'Shevat

Text

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