

CHAGIM U ZEMANIM: TU BESHVAT

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

On the Fifteenth day of Shevat we do not say 'tachanun' as it is Rosh Hashanah for the Trees. It is not clear at all why this should be the case. After all, the day only commemorates facts of nature; the time when most of the rains have fallen, the sap in the trees has risen and the fruit has started to bud. There is no sanctification involved, no mitzvah incurred and no miracle occurred for the Jewish nation. Regarding Tu Be-Av on which we also refrain from 'tachanun', at least our Sages adduced a number of factors relating to Israel [for example, the peace between the tribe of Binyamin and the other tribes after Pilegish Bagivah]. We have therefore to try and understand what teaching lies beyond the natural occurrence of Tu Be'shevat.

'As the rain and the snow fall from the Heavens and do not return there until they have watered the Earth and caused it to give birth and to bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My Word be that goes out of My mouth; it shall not return to Me void but it shall accomplish that for which I sent it' (Isaiah, 55:10). Here the prophet compares the spiritual words of Hashem to the fructifying rainfall. The essence of the trees is their role as the force connecting the fruit to the nourishing earth; a hint of the spirituality contained in their materialism- gematria for 'etz' is 91, corresponding to the two Holy Names, Jehovah and Lord in their Hebrew form, that connect Heaven and Earth. Furthermore, fruit has the power to nourish Man spiritually; The Arie z'l, in commentating on the verse (Devarim, 8:3), 'Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of Hashem', teaches that the word of Hashem contained in the bread nourishes Man spiritually. [The Admor of Kotsk taught that in saying the beracha on bread we should intend to remove its earthiness from it].

So Man is compared to the trees (Devarim, 20:19) in that he links Heaven to Earth, being as he has neshama from on high and the material body that houses that neshama. Furthermore, Chazal saw the reason for the 'eglah arufah', in the victim's not having future fruits; fruits understood as mitzvot (Sotah, 46a). Therefore, Man with his practical and physical performance of the mitzvot that come from on High, constitutes a melding of the material earthy things to those of the elevated spiritual heavenly ones. Just as the rain that the prophet compared to the word of Hashem, waters and fructifies the trees, so does the Divine light in the hearts of people cause them to create their fruits, mitzvot. The amount of rain and its subsequent harvest of fruit depend on the spiritual behaviour of people as we learn (Rosh Hashanah, 17b), that when the people were evil, Hashem allocated rainfall out of the required seasons; in effect making it insufficient. So too, the spiritual presence that one is granted is dependent on the avoda and torah of the person; where they are

deficient and muddled by materialism, the presence is disturbed and bothered so that it is wasted and ineffectual.

By the first trimester of the year most of the rains have fallen and the fruits begin to bud. In that same period, by virtue of the instant decree for the righteous on Rosh Hashanah and the chesed of Yom Kippur and the first day of Sukkot that enables even those undeserving ones to draw closer to Hashem, the spiritual presence in Man is heightened, there is increased ecstasy and an outpouring of the soul.

With the advent of Tu Beshvat, Rosh Hashanah Leilanot, that marks the beginning of the second third of the natural year, starts the actual forming of the fruit from the buds and the full use of the sap of the trees; a preparation for the actual harvests. Man too, enters the second trimester in which the spiritual presence, the increased ecstasy and the soul's outpouring brought about by tekufat Tishrei and its chagim, comes to fruition. The Midrash (Parshat Shmot) tells us that the heart is in the upper third of the human body, so that by this time, just as the sap has risen in the trees, Man's heart has already reached completion and is filled with spiritual wonder and awe. Man can now enter the elevation of the Arba parshiot, Purim, Pesach, Sefirat Haomer and Shavuot. Even those who have been remiss in their avodah, by virtue of the soaring of their hearts and the expansion of the Divine Presence brought to fruition by tekufat Tishrei, enter a new period.

In this way we can understand the difference in opinion between Bet Shammai and Bet Hillel concerning the date of Rosh Hashanah Le Ilanot. Bet Shammai, according to their viewpoint of Midat Hadin, claim that just as tzaddikim are inscribed immediately on Rosh Hashanah regarding their prosperity, rainfall and health, that is, on the first of Tishrei, so too the rain and the sap of the trees and the fruits are judged on the first of Shevat. However, Bet Hillel whose whole philosophy is that of chesed, fixed the judgement day of the trees on Tu B'Shevat. This corresponds to the chesed that Mankind has in judgement, by virtue of the first day of Sukkot that is the fifteenth day of Tishrei.

There is thus no tachnun on Tu B'Shevat, for it is truly a day of rejoicing for Israel, who desire to serve Hashem with the heart and not mechanically and out of habit. They can do so through the service of tekufat Yishrei and the elevation of the trimester starting with Shevat.

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