

# ROOTS

*by Rabbi Raymond Beyda*

The holiday of Tu B'Shebat - the fifteenth of the month of Shebat - is called the New Year of the Trees because most of the vegetation in the land of Israel begins to bud at this time of year. There are many laws regarding agriculture that are affected by this date. Regarding the young trees, the Torah forbids consumption of the fruit for the first three years, and permits full use of the produce anywhere from the fourth year on. The date that determines the "age" of any tree in Israel is Tu B'Shebat. Additionally, Jews are required to separate Terumot and Maasrot, portions of the produce of the fields, on annual basis. The cutoff date for the "fiscal" agricultural year is Tu B'Shebat.

In order to commemorate the day and to highlight our thanks to G-d for giving us the Land of Milk and Honey, we indulge in consumption of many different types of fruits. There is a special reading called "Peri Es Hadar" which some people read on the night of Tu B'Shebat. It includes portions of Mishnah and Zohar and listings of many fruits for people to enjoy at the table.

The sefer Bne Yissakhar teaches that one should pray on Tu B'Shebat to merit a beautiful and kosher etrog - citron - for the performance of the misvah of the four species on Succot.

There are several lessons one should keep in mind on this day. Firstly, the Torah says, "For the man is the tree of the fields". The sages teach as a tree must be protected from harsh weather and from harmful insects, so too, a man must protect himself from the negative influences of society - the media, philosophies and immorality that bombard a person on a daily basis.

Secondly, one should assess the manner in which one recites berakhot - blessings. One is required to say a blessing before partaking of the pleasures of this world. How often one mumbles the words, is not concentrating on the meaning and rushes through the "formula" required permitting the pleasure to the individual. As we consider the beautiful fruits and say the appropriate blessings, one should evaluate one's blessings and resolve to improve their effectiveness.

Thirdly, one should remember that if a tree has strong roots then it could support many wide branches. However, if a tree has many branches and weak roots then even a light wind can blow the tree over. A person's roots are one's dedication to the study of Torah. Men must dedicate a set time to the daily study of Torah to shore up their knowledge of all aspects of our Holy Book. Women must study all the laws that pertain to the proper conduct of their lives as head of the "bayit neeman" - Torah-true Jewish household. By strengthening our roots each of us will enable our people to survive the hurricane winds of exile and merit the coming of the Mashiah speedily and in our days.

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