



In Bishwat

SOURCE BOOK



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TU BISHVAT

The first Mishna in Tractate Rosh Hashanah teaches us that the calendar date of Tu Bishvat (the fifteenth day of the Jewish month Shvat) is the Rosh Hashanah (New Year) for the trees. This relates primarily to the laws of tithing produce. The tithes vary during the seven year agricultural cycle in Israel, and the cut-off date that determines the year of the fruit is based on whether the fruit developed before or after Tu Bishvat. So, for example, if the fruit blossomed during the second agricultural year before Tu Bishvat, then we apply the tithing laws of the second year, which is to bring one tenth of the crop up to Jerusalem and eat it there. If it blossomed after Tu Bishvat, then we treat it as third-year produce and the tithes of that year apply, in which one tenth of the crop is given to the poor.

Even though these are agricultural laws and apply only in the land of Israel, there are still many valuable lessons that can be learned from this holiday. Let's go through some of the themes and ideas of Tu Bishvat and then we'll examine some thoughts about the wonderful fruits we have a custom to eat on this holiday.

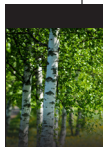
MAN IS LIKE THE TREE OF THE FIELD

“When you lay siege around a city for many days to wage war against it, to capture it, you may not destroy its trees, to wield an axe against them, for from it you shall eat and you may not cut it down, for is a tree of the field like man, that it must enter into the siege before you?”

(Deuteronomy 20:19)

דברים פרק כ פסוק יט
כִּי־תָצוּר אֶל־עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֶם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְסָּהּ לֹא־תִשְׁחִית אֶת־עֵצָהּ
לְנֹחַת עָלֶיהָ גֵרְוֶנָּה כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאַתָּה לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָא
מִפְנֵיהֶן בַּמָּצוֹד:

This verse teaches us the prohibition of cutting down a fruit tree. The Torah is speaking about war, and says that when an army





lays siege around a city, the soldiers are not allowed to cut down nearby fruit trees. Says the Torah, is the tree like a man, that it must suffer the travails of war? Many of the commentators take the phrase “For man is like the tree of the field”, to imply that there are indeed ways in which mankind is compared to the trees. Here are several similarities:

RENEWAL As autumn turns to winter, trees lose their leaves and become dormant. No fruits are produced. It is right around the time of Tu Bishvat when most of the rains have already fallen, that the inner sap within the tree begins to flow again and the tree comes back to life. People are the same way. They have their spiritual highs and lows. When we hit a low, we must remember that there can always be a renewal. Even when we appear stagnant, we always have the potential to produce beautiful fruit.

INDEPENDENCE Each tree grows on its own, getting its nourishment from its roots, not from the tree standing next to it. So too, we ask G-d to grant us sustenance without ever needing to ask others for help. May it be He alone who grants us what we need.

HUMILITY The roots of a tree are hidden. We don't see them. But even though they aren't visible, we all know that a tree with strong roots will produce good fruit. When a tree's roots become exposed it is detrimental to the health of the tree. A person is the same. We have our skills and our strengths. They make us who we are. There is no need to flaunt these talents, whether they are spiritual or material, and blazon them to all those around us. It is important to be humble and to keep these strengths well covered. It is when these roots are obscured from public view that we will bear good fruit.

CHANGE When a young sapling tree is small, it is relatively easy to straighten out its bends. We can shape it however we want. But once it grows big and tall, it becomes set, and is very difficult to straighten. People too, are most pliable when they are young. Once we get used to bad habits and a decadent lifestyle, it becomes exponentially harder to change.



RECTIFYING THE PAST

Soon after Adam and Eve were created, they sinned by eating the forbidden fruit. On Tu Bishvat, we try to fix this mistake of the past. Instead of eating fruit in a sinful manner, we consume it for the sake of the mitzvah. There are varied opinions as to which kind of tree “the Tree of Knowledge” was. Some say that it was a grape vine. Others say that it was a fig tree. There is an opinion that it was an Etrog tree and some go so far as to say that it was a tree that produced bread that was ready for human consumption.

Originally, when man was first created, he was only allowed to eat the produce of the Earth. Eating meat was prohibited until after the Flood, when Hashem told Noah that he could now eat meat. But Adam was told,

“From all the trees of the garden you may eat, but from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat.”

(Genesis 2:16-17)

בראשית פרק ב

(טז) וַיֵּצֵא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵהָאָדָם לְאֹמֶר מִכָּל עֵץ־הַגֶּן אָכֹל תֹּאכַל
(יז) וּמִעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אָכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת׃

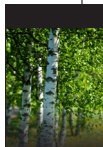
Life on Earth was supposed to be a simple existence. Effortless: just reap the fruit of the land, eat and live. This would give man the opportunity to devote himself fully to spiritual pursuits. After the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam was cursed. G-d tells him,

“By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.”

בראשית פרק ג פסוק יט

בְּזֵיעַת אֲפִיךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם

Now man must till the soil, plow the land, and work hard in order to eat. This is a curse! Life wasn't originally supposed to be this way.





Reflection We spend so much of our time preoccupied with the curse of “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread”. Our days are centered around our careers and occupations. Our time is predominantly spent making money. What would our lives look like without this curse? What would happen if we didn’t need to work? What then would be meaningful in our lives? What would our days look like? How would we spend the hours of our life?

THE SEVEN SPECIES OF ISRAEL

“A Land of wheat and barley, grapes, figs, and pomegranates, a Land of olive oil and date honey.”

(Deuteronomy 8:8)

דברים פרק ח פסוק ח
אֶרֶץ חֹטֶה וְשִׁעוּרָה וְגִפְן וְתַאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ-זֵית וְדִבְשִׁי:

The Torah praises the Land of Israel through seven of the species that it produces. Even today, when one walks through the streets of Jerusalem, or the valleys between the hills in the open wilderness of Israel, one will notice the abundance of fruit trees. Olives litter the sidewalks. You must take care not to get a sticky fig stuck to the bottom of your shoe. There are pomegranate trees on street corners. When driving along the Dead Sea, in the Jordan Valley, there are date orchards for as far as the eye can see. It is a blessed land, crowned by these seven species, of which we try to eat on Tu Bishvat.

WHEAT & BARLEY

Wheat and barley are the paramount grains from among the five grains, which also include: oats, rye, and spelt. It is from these five grains that we get our primary sustenance. This is the reason why foods made from these grains are given the blessing (ברכה) of Mezonos, which means that Hashem provides for our sustenance. If bread is made from any of these five grains then the bread is given the most prominent of all the blessings: Hamotzie. Bread is referred to by scripture as the “staff of life”.





Reflection Man is basically capable of surviving on just bread and water, yet Hashem created so many other foods in this world for us to enjoy! G-d wants us to enjoy this world. As a matter of fact, the Jerusalem Talmud teaches that every person will one day stand before G-d and will be asked, “Did you enjoy My world?”

Think of some of the things that we enjoy; those extra things that make life so pleasant, and let’s make sure that we don’t take them for granted!

GRAPES/ WINE

The fruit of the vine has always played an important role in Jewish life. Special significance is given to the grape, as it has the unique ability to be transformed into wine. Wine reflects the human condition in that humans can choose to elevate themselves or debase themselves depending upon how they use alcohol. Wine can be used to uplift. We can take something mundane and make it spiritual. On Shabbos, we take a cup of wine and make Kiddush over it, thus, sanctifying the Shabbos. When a new baby has a bris and enters into the covenant of Abraham, we recite a blessing over a cup of wine. When a man and woman join together in marriage, we recite the seven blessings over a cup of wine. When used correctly, wine can bring us happiness. As King David writes in the Book of Psalms:

“And wine will gladden the heart of man.”

(Psalms 104:15)

תהלים פרק קד
(טו) וַיֵּן יִשְׁמַח לִבִּבְּאֵנוֹשׁ לְהִצְדִּיל פָּנִים מִשָּׁמֶן וְלֶחֶם לִבִּבְּאֵנוֹשׁ יִסְעֶד:

If used incorrectly, wine can be the source of sorrow, sin, and destruction. When abused, it can destroy the marriage for which it was originally used to sanctify.

Reflection Jews don’t believe in abstaining from worldly pleasures. We take the pleasures of this world and elevate them, whether through food or marriage or a breathtaking view! Let’s





think of one area in our lives in which we have the ability to infuse with sanctity and really make it something special.

OLIVES

Olives are used primarily for their oil. That is why the verse, in describing olives, mentions olive oil. In Judaism, it was with the oil of olives that we anointed kings and high priests. There is a verse in Psalms which compares our offspring, that which essentially symbolizes the continuity of the Jewish people, to olives:

“Your children will be like olive saplings surrounding your table.”
(Psalms 128:3)

תהלים פרק קכח פסוק ג
אֶשְׁתָּךְ כִּנְקָן פְּרִיָּהּ בִּירֻכְתִּי בְּיֶתֶךְ בְּנֶיךָ כְּשִׁתְּלִי זֵיתִים טָבִיב לְשִׁלְחָנְךָ:

There are several reasons why we are compared to olives:
(Yalkut Shimoni Isaiah)

- ◆ Olive oil doesn't mix together with other liquids. It will always float to the top. The same is true with the Jewish people. One of the secrets to our endurance has been the fact that we remain, in many areas of life, separate and different from all the other nations in the world. Thus, we continue to float at the top.
- ◆ Oil is the source for bringing light into the world. Before electricity and the light bulb, it was by the illumination of oil that people were able to see at night. The Jews have also been a light unto the nations of the world. The world looks to the Jews as the moral and ethical compass of humanity.
- ◆ In order to get the oil from an olive, it is necessary to squeeze it. Only under pressure will it give forth its best oil. Throughout history, throughout some of the most difficult times of persecution, our nation has produced many of its finest accomplishments. It sometimes takes a situation of pressure or discomfort for a person to turn to and acknowledge his or her Creator.



Reflection The oil of olives gives light. What can we do as Jews to bring light to the world and to bring light to our people in the eyes of the world? Many people look to see darkness in the Jews, but what can we do to show them light?

DATES

The date palm is used to symbolize the righteous people, the Tzaddikim. As King David wrote in the book of Psalms:

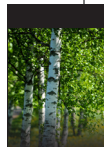
“The righteous one will blossom like a palm tree.”
(Psalms 92:13)

תהלים פרק צב
(יג) צדיק כתמר יפרח כארז בלבנון ישגה:

◆ The palm tree is a tall and upright tree that points straight up to heaven. The righteous person is also one who has his heart and head focused on and aligned with his G-d in heaven.

◆ This tree is one which is somewhat impervious to the blowing winds. It may bend a bit, but will always revert back to its original position. So too have the righteous Jews remained faithful to their G-d, unwavering in their devotion throughout the ages. They haven't been uprooted by the changing winds of the societies around them.

◆ When most trees are cut down, one can take a branch from the tree and replant it. It is likely to regrow without too much difficulty. The date tree is different. Once cut down, it is extremely difficult to replant one of its branches. And if that branch will regrow, it will only happen after a long time and by means of great effort and exertion. The same is true with the Tzaddik. When one is lost from this world, he is incredibly difficult to replace, and can be done only after much time and great effort.





FIGS

In the book of Proverbs, King Solomon compares the Torah to figs:

“The protector of a fig tree will eat its fruit.” (Proverbs 27:18)

משלי פרק כז פסוק יח
נֹצֵר תִּאֲנָה יֹאכֵל פְּרִיָּהּ וְשֹׁמֵר אֲדָנָיו יִכְבֵּד:

The Midrash, in Bamidbar Rabbah, gives two explanations for this parallel:

◆ The fruits of most trees are harvested all at once. Figs, however, are harvested one at a time. They each ripen at a different pace, and can therefore only be picked individually. The same is true with the Torah. To succeed in Torah study, one must learn some today and some more tomorrow. The knowledge of Torah is so vast and infinite, that to make strides in its study, one must harvest a little bit each day.

◆ Most fruits have some inedible element. The olive, date, and grape have pits inside of them which cannot be eaten. The pomegranate has an exterior shell which is inedible. Only the fig can be consumed in its entirety. The same applies to the Torah. It is a body of knowledge in which each part has something to offer. There are no “inedible” parts to the Torah.

POMEGRANATE

The pomegranate has a tremendous amount of seeds inside of it. There is a verse in Song Of Songs, which compares these seeds to mitzvos:

“As many as a pomegranate’s seeds are the merits of your unworthiest.”
(Song Of Songs 4:3)

שיר השירים פרק ד פסוק ג
כְּחֹשׁ הַשֶּׁנִּי שִׁפְתֵיךָ וּמִדְבָּרֶיךָ נֶאֱמָה כִּפְלַח הָרִמּוֹן רִקְתָּךְ מִבְּעַד לְעִמְתָּךְ:





The Talmud in Tractate Brachot (57) understands this verse to mean that even the empty ones among the Jewish people have performed as many mitzvot as the seeds of the pomegranate.

There are some Jews who feel that they haven't done all that many "Jewish" things in their lives. The Talmud teaches us the contrary. We are often not even aware of when we are doing a mitzvah, and even when we are consciously performing a mitzvah, we don't comprehend the depth of its greatness. The following story illustrates this point:

A wicked man once came to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. He said, "Didn't G-d say that He would punish sinners? I am wicked, but still have wealth, health, and lack for nothing." Rabbi Levi Yitzchak replied, "How do you know that Hashem punishes the wicked? Because you read it in the Shema. You should know that the mitzvah of reading the Shema just once is so great, that even if you had ten times the wealth that you now have, it would not be adequate reward for that one mitzvah."

Reflection Sometimes in our relationship with Hashem, we feel unworthy of being close to Him. We get stuck on some of the infractions that we may have committed, and we feel so far away and incapable of coming close. From the pomegranate, we learn that every Jew has a stockpile of mitzvot, making him worthy of sharing a bond with his Creator!

SUMMATION *On Tu Bishvat we are meant to enjoy all the wonderful fruits in G-d's world. We must appreciate the source of our enjoyment. But the great variety of fruits in this world are not only here for our pleasure. They are here for us to think about, learn from and to ultimately bring us closer to our Creator. There are many valuable lessons that can be acquired from examining these spectacular fruits.*





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