Four Fruitful Thoughts

1 An Israeli teacher once told us that in her opinion there are four words that characterize this period in history: me, here, now, everything. Therefore, Tu BiShvat carries added significance, as its messages strike a strong contrast to these four words.

We don’t celebrate the Holiday of the Trees in the spring but in the winter. Not at a time when everything is already flowering and ripe, but at a time when we can’t see results yet. We don’t receive everything here and now, at the click of a mouse. We wait.

Right now we need to just plant, water, invest, believe, pray and hope. This flow of nature reminds us that there are slow, gradual and hidden processes in life. Things develop underneath the surface, so we don’t see everything immediately. Hence we need to continue to cultivate and be patient. This is of course true not only in growing plants but in educating children, in relationships, in studies and in any significant field.

In a generation that cannot even wait to see the two blue checks on WhatsApp, Tu BiShvat reminds us once a year of the most important applications: patience, persistence, hard work, investment and dedication.

2 In previous generations, people would be overjoyed to receive an orange from Eretz Yisrael. Today, we enjoy an abundance of fruits and vegetables in the renewed country of Israel. Specifically, in a generation returning to its Land, we can attribute even greater significance to this day, to the privilege of eating fruits in Eretz Yisrael.

The kabbalists tell us that this day has the capability to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon, who sinned with the fruit of the tree. How do we do this? By making brachot with kavanah.

As it says in the Sefer HaToda’a: “When Jews eat from the fruits of the Land and enjoy their goodness, they say a bracha before and after eating them to He Who bestowed upon them this cherished Land.”

The Ben Ish Chai writes that “through [saying] a bracha, one causes abundance to descend from Above.”

And Rav Shimshon Pinkus says: “We want to live with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and the means of communication with Him is through brachot.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was once asked what Judaism has to say about mindfulness. He answered that if we say a bracha slowly, aloud and with concentration, we experience a moment of attention, of focus, of mindfulness.

Stop for a moment and think how wonderful this sentence is: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.”

3 Tu BiShvat is also the anniversary of the death of Chaim Guri, one of the poets of the 1948 generation, a member of the Palmach. Outwardly, he represented secular Zionism. But in many interviews in his later years, he spoke of his fear that the revolution had been too great. He regretted the detachment from our spiritual treasures:

“HaKadosh Baruch Hu raises Moshe Rabbeinu, the first prophet, the leader of the nation, to Har Nevo on the opposite side of the Jordan and tells him: ‘You may view the land from a distance (miNged), but you shall not enter it’ (Devarim 32:52). The poet Rachel uses this story in writing her poem ‘MiNged.’ She is a lonely and
hopeful woman, and she knows that ‘in every expectation, there is the sadness of Nevo.’ This is one of the most beautiful lines of poetry in the world, for all generations.

I told my students that if I would be a Nobel Prize judge for poetry, I would give two prizes to two lines in this wonderful, troubled poem. The poem ends with a line engraved on the author’s tombstone by the Kinneret: ‘Each man and his Nevo, upon the great land,’ meaning, each person and his unachievable.

I once recited this poem by heart to my students, and I felt they weren’t with me. I personally feel chills every time I read it, but they didn’t understand at all what it was about, so they couldn’t be moved by it. I call this the ‘associative disconnect.’ Our Hebrew has been accumulated from all the generations of Jews, Tanach and Midrash, liturgy and prayer.

This kind of disconnect is a very dangerous thing.

At that point, I placed the book in my bag, looked at the clock and told my students, ‘It was nice to meet you. Today at 11:15, in this school, Hebrew poetry died.’

They were silent.

4 Tu BiShvat is also the birthday of the Israeli Knesset. In 1949, after the first elections, the first Knesset of the State of Israel began to serve the country. In a festive ceremony on February 14th, 1949, the first ceremonial session opened, and Dr. Chaim Weizman, then interim President, conducted the event with emotion.

Current Israeli politics has not been a big source of festive celebration. Most of the time we are either before or after elections. Four election campaigns in two years is a big challenge. Our son once asked, ‘Ima, I know we’re the only democracy in the Middle East, but aren’t we exaggerating with this democracy thing?’

Indeed, Tu BiShvat this year is perhaps a day of cheshbon nefesh – introspection – about the state of Israeli politics. How can it be that the Jewish nation has returned to its Land, built a magnificent country, Arab countries are standing in line to sign peace deals with us, and yet we have failed to create any sort of political stability? How can we succeed and fail at the same time? How is it that during a pandemic of these proportions we have not learned to unite?

This is not a column of political analysis, but it is a platform to request your prayers. We invite you to add stability and unity in Israel to your prayers. And may we all live to see the fruits of our efforts!

Happy Tu BiShvat!

Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir are popular Israeli media personalities and World Mizrachi’s Scholars-in-Residence.