



# Retaining the Land

**T**u BiShvat is the New Year for Trees (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1, according to Beit Hillel). Halachically, Tu BiShvat is a time that affects all the laws regarding *orla*, *teruma* and *ma'aser*, *bikkurim* and *shemitta*. The Kabbalists instituted eating fruits, specifically the fruits of Israel, on this day. On Tu BiShvat in 5750 (1890), Ze'ev Yavetz (a teacher and historian, and a member of the First Aliyah), went with his students to plant trees on Tu BiShvat. Thus began the Israeli custom of planting trees on Tu BiShvat. Of course there is no obligation or halachic custom of planting, but it's a beautiful act in itself, and appropriate for deepening our roots and strengthening the Land of Israel on Tu BiShvat.

## Planting and the Redemption

There is a surprising Midrash in Avot DeRabbi Natan:

“Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai received from Hillel and Shammai. He would say... if a sapling was in your hand, and you were told, ‘Behold,

*Mashiach* is coming!’ – go and plant the sapling, and afterward go out to greet him.” (Nuscha Bet, chapter 31)

A man stands with a sapling in his hand, and suddenly he is told that *Mashiach* is coming. Every one of us would say, “drop the sapling and go greet *Mashiach*.” But Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai says that one must first plant the sapling and only then go and greet *Mashiach*.

To understand the Midrash, let us read from the prophecy of Amos (9:13-15):

הנה ימים באים נאם ה' ונגש חורש בקצר ודרך ענבים במלשך הזרע והטיפו ההרים עסיס וכל הגבעות תתמוגגנה. ושבתי את שבות עמי ישׂאל ובנו ערים נשמות וישבו ונטעו כרמים ושתו את יינם ועשו גנות ואכלו את פריהם. ונטעתים על אדמתם ולא ינתשו עוד מעל אדמתם אשר נתתי להם אמר ה' אלהיה.

“A time is coming – declares the L-rd – when the plowman shall meet the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who holds the [bag of] seed; when the mountains shall drip wine and all the hills shall wave [with grain]. I will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. They shall till gardens and eat their fruits. And I will plant them upon their soil, nevermore will they be uprooted from their Land which I have given them – said the L-rd your G-d.”

Amos describes the blessing of the *yovel* in the Land as part of the process of redemption. Beyond this, he compares *Am Yisrael's* return to its Land to planting: “and I will plant them upon their soil.” This comparison highlights *Am Yisrael's* strong foundations in *Eretz Yisrael*, so much so that “nevermore will they be uprooted from their Land.”

Our forefathers read these verses for thousands of years but did not merit to see their fruition. We merit to read these verses in *Eretz Yisrael*, as we experience the process of redemption for ourselves – the Land is producing a wealth of fruit and *Am Yisrael* is solidifying its roots in the Land. *Chazal's* words in the Midrash fit in with this idea: planting itself is part of the redemption and hence is no less important – perhaps even greater than – greeting *Mashiach*, because it itself is a harbinger of the *Mashiach's* arrival.

### Holding on to the Land

An additional meaning to planting is retaining the Land. The Torah determines that one who planted a vineyard and had not yet consecrated it does not go to war (Devarim 20:6, Mishnah Sotah 8:7). The Gemara clarifies that this is referring to planting any fruit tree in Israel. Planting a tree is a significant act of holding on to the Land, so much so that it exempts one from going out to war. We can see this in the words of the Midrash which stress the importance of planting in Israel:

מתחלת ברייתו של עולם לא נתעסק הקב"ה אלא במטע תחלה, הדא הוא דכתיב "ויטע ה' א-להים גן בעדן", אף אתם כשונכנסין לארץ לא תתעסקו אלא במטע תחלה, הדא הוא דכתיב "כי תבאו אל הארץ ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל".

"In the beginning of the Creation, G-d did not involve Himself at first with anything but planting, as it says, 'And the L-rd G-d planted in the Garden of Eden...' Thus you, too, when you enter the Land, should not involve yourself in anything but planting, as it says, 'When you come to the Land, and plant fruit trees...'" (Vayikra Rabbah, Vilna 25)

The Gemara (Bava Batra 14b) says Rabbi Yannai planted 400 vineyards in Israel. The Rashba says he did this for the purpose of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*, settling the Land of Israel.

These ideas have halachic implications too. The Shulchan Aruch (Choshen Mishpat, 168:1) rules that if a person planted olive trees in his field in Israel, and a river burst its banks and uprooted them, sweeping them away into his neighbor's garden, the neighbor does not need to return the trees to their owner. Instead, he can pay for them and keep them.

The Gemara (Bava Kama 101a) explains that the reason for this is because of the *mitzvah* of *Yishuv Eretz Yisrael*. The *sefer* Meirat Einayim explains that the original owner of the olive trees will certainly plant new trees, since he obviously needs olives, but the man into whose garden the trees were swept would probably not plant olive trees if the trees were taken away, and therefore the trees are left by him. This is a surprising *halacha* and proves how important planting in Israel is, so much so that the normal *halachic* ruling with regards to monetary law is changed.

### Summary

The custom of planting trees in Israel, developed by the pioneers upon the return to Israel, is a very meaningful and literally a deeply-rooted act of faith. Today, when most people are not farmers and do not plant trees, Tu BiShvat is the only day that practically symbolizes the idea of planting in Israel, and its great significance.

Planting trees in Israel does not only represent *Am Yisrael* holding onto and becoming rooted in *Eretz Yisrael*. It also allows for the continued existence of the world and its fertilization – just as G-d planted in Gan Eden, planting connects man to the earth.

We will end with a story about Rav Kook (which we heard from Rav Chaim Druckman, who says many things in praise of planting in the Land of Israel). When Rav Kook was in Magdiel, he attended a tree-planting celebration. He was given a hoe to plant a sapling but refused it. He got down on his knees and planted the sapling by hand, filled with emotion. When he was asked why he did that, he replied that through planting trees in Israel, one clings to G-d, and so he wanted a direct connection, through his own two hands.

**How blessed we are that we live in a generation of redemption! How blessed we are to return to Israel and see it blossoming with trees, agriculture and myriad branches of technology, medicine and business.** We can truly see G-d's gracious hand and *b'ezrat Hashem* we will merit to see Israel's complete redemption.

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