



The Deeper Meaning of Planting Trees

Chazal teach us that tree planting is how we best imitate and draw close to G-d (Vayikra Rabbah 25:3, Tanchuma Kedoshim 8). Just as Hashem planted trees when He created the world, we too are commanded to do so upon entering *Eretz Yisrael*. This idea was expressed by the emphasis early Zionists placed on tree planting in general and specifically on Tu BiShvat. Why is planting trees so important?

It is easy for man to take advantage of the world available for his use¹ without feeling responsible to contribute towards developing it. When the Torah tells us of Hashem's placement of Adam in Gan Eden, it tells us he was placed there to work and protect it (Bereishit 2:15). In fact, the beginning of the second chapter tells how Hashem delayed the growth of trees and vegetation until He created man who would work the fields (Bereishit 2:5). It is critical that man see himself as responsible to maintain and develop the world G-d created for him.

Most plants are planted on a seasonal basis. They provide us with food after minimal months of investment. Trees, however, require years of nurturing before they provide fruit. On the other hand, they are a critical part of the ecosystem and they reward the work invested in them with an abundance of fruit over many years. Investing in tree planting requires patience and long-term vision and expresses a recognition of our responsibility to develop the world.

When describing the planting of trees, Rav Kook (Meged Yerachim, Chodesh Shevat) addresses the relationship between two different Hebrew words

that describe human motivation – *חֶשֶׁק* (desire) and *רְפוּץ* (will).² The interest to plant may initially be motivated by the desire to eat. That emotion needs to be channeled and elevated to a higher form – the will to create and contribute.

In emphasizing the importance of tree planting, Avot DeRebbi Natan (Nuscha Bet, 31) asserts that one who hears of Mashiach's arrival while planting should first finish planting and only then greet Mashiach.

The association of planting with redemption appears in Masechet Ta'anit as well. The Gemara tells of Choni HaMeagel's question about the famous *pasuk* that describes our redemption – *שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת- שִׁיר שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הֲיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים* (Song of steps: when Hashem returns us to Zion, we were like dreamers). Choni wondered whether it is possible for a person to sleep and dream for 70 years (the length of the first exile).

One day Choni met a man planting a carob tree (which takes 70 years to produce fruit). He asked the man why he was planting a tree he would probably never eat from. The man answered that just as he found and enjoyed trees planted by earlier generations, he too was planting for future ones. After this discussion, Choni fell asleep for 70 years. Upon awakening, Choni met the man's grandson who was enjoying the fruits of his grandfather's labor.

I believe there is a profound connection between the two parts of the story. Choni wondered about sleeping for 70 years and the connection to redemption. Tree planting is part of the answer. Redemption comes when people can see beyond themselves and

work on behalf of their people's future. We finish planting before greeting Mashiach because the belief expressed by planting trees is part of what brings him.

Knowing the temporary nature of their presence in each place, Jews in exile lacked the motivation to invest in trees and other infrastructure. When we enter *Eretz Yisrael*, we need to realize we are now home – in a place that is our own and one that *im yirtzeh Hashem* our descendants will continue living in. We express this appreciation by planting trees.

Rav Kook saw this story as a model for the ideal form of tree planting and for what Tu BiShvat symbolizes: "The desire to plant trees should flow from the interest to help future generations, which is symbolized perfectly by the carob tree" (Meged Yerachim, Chodesh Shevat).

On Tu BiShvat we celebrate trees and what planting them says about us – in general and specifically – in terms of our relationship with the Land of Israel to which Hashem has returned us.

¹ See Mesilat Yesharim 1.

² On this topic, see also Bereishit 34:8 versus 34:9 and Devarim 21:11 versus 21:14 and 25:8 (the frame for Parshat Ki Teitzei).



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Tu BiShvat and 2020 Hindsight: Moonfulness and Mindfulness

Twenty-twenty (20/20) clear vision, knowledge and understanding, is colloquially reserved for those who reflect upon events in hindsight, for only then may we appreciate lessons learned.

As man is compared to a “tree in the field” (Devarim 20:19), Tu BiShvat 5781 is a most opportune time for us to be more mindful of our growth over the past few months and anticipate imminent blossoming for the future.

Chazal teach us powerful messages of reflection through the debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai regarding the date of the New Year for Trees in Shevat (Rosh HaShanah 1:1). Beit Shammai maintains that this new year is just like the other three *roshei shana* – all of which begin on the first of the month.¹ Beit Hillel states that the New Year for Trees should be celebrated on the 15th of Shevat, just as we commemorate the agriculturally and historically oriented holidays of Pesach and Sukkot on the 15th of their respective months of Nissan and Tishrei.

This debate may be understood through another well-known *machloket* between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai regarding the number of candles lit each day of Chanukah. Beit Shammai maintains that we light eight candles on the first night and descend in number each subsequent day, whereas Beit Hillel teaches to light one candle on the first night and ascend to eight candles by the final night (Shabbat 21b).

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk (Beit Yosef, Tur, OC 670) explains that already on the first day of lighting, the oil contained the potential for the ensuing seven days of miraculous light! Beit Shammai’s

position is predicated on the potential miracle of the oil, and therefore as each day progresses, the power of potential wanes. According to Beit Hillel, we celebrate the miracle manifest each day, augmented as the days progress.

Similarly, Rav Shlomo Zevin (LeOr HaHalacha, pp. 395–455) explains another dispute between the schools of Hillel and Shammai relating to the fire/light of Havdalah (Berachot 51b). Beit Shammai teaches that one should recite the *beracha* of שְׁבִרָא מְאוּרֵי הָאֵשׁ (past tense and singular) vs. Beit Hillel who maintain בּוֹרְאֵי מְאוּרֵי הָאֵשׁ (present tense and plural). Beit Shammai blesses for the potential of fire created through one source during the six days of Creation, whereas Beit Hillel blesses for the overt manifestations of light provided by the many hues of fire observed in the present.

Now we may appreciate the moon/light debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel regarding the celebration of Tu BiShvat. Beit Shammai maintains that we celebrate at the time of the New Moon – awaiting the potential process for waxing, growth and blossoming. Beit Hillel states that the new year should be celebrated on the 15th of the month, at the time of the Full Moon. We should be mindful of the light fully manifest (as for Chanukah and Havdalah)!

Beit Shammai focuses on the potential for the future – future miracles, future fire, future moonlight, just as he lives every day of the week for the upcoming Shabbat, putting aside every delicacy in anticipation of the highlight of the week (Beitza 16a). Beit Hillel teaches us to focus more on the moment – “*Baruch Hashem Yom Yom*” – every action, every

day, should be meaningful in the present! If you find a delicacy on Wednesday, then bless Hashem and eat it on Wednesday, appreciating the goodness manifest daily.

Our Sages have taught us to adopt the halachic teachings of Beit Hillel’s mindfulness while appreciating Beit Shammai’s perspective of future-minded-potential. Tu BiShvat is a time to be mindful of the present, the beautiful moonlight manifest in so many aspects of our lives. It clarifies our vision and outlook and helps us acknowledge the many blessings amidst the challenges of the past months.

As we celebrate the new trees in nature, planting afresh, and as we move to a post-Covid reality (speedily in our days), we recognize that the past few months have helped us see “the extraordinary in the ordinary... the present. Being mindful of nature can be viewed as a holy activity in itself. It can be a way to connect to the Divine.”²

May the “moonfulness” on Tu BiShvat provide us with 20/20 hindsight to be more mindful and appreciative of the daily miracles of health and nature.

“Yesterday is the past, tomorrow is the future, but today is a gift. That’s why it’s called the present.” (Bill Keane). May we be *zocheh* to celebrate our G-d-given present.

1 Rosh Hashanah 14a: most of the rains have come and now the fruit may blossom.

2 Dr. Jonathan Feiner, *Mindfulness: A Jewish Approach*, p. 100.

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