Rabbi Hershel Schachter reveals a perhaps-forgotten aspect of Israel’s sanctity

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi with four ways to change your destiny on Shabbat Shira

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Tu BiShvat
CELEBRATING
ERETZ YISRAEL
SPECIAL FEATURE ABOUT THE MITZVOT UNIQUELY CONNECTED TO THE LAND OF ISRAEL PAGES 32–38
I

s there another people on earth who has a deeper relationship with and stronger claim to a tract of land, than the Jewish people’s claim to the Land of Israel? This relationship is a deeply spiritual one and expresses itself in four convincing claims – religious, historical, moral and legal.

All are rooted in a powerful paradigm, in one of the most transformational and revolutionary concepts in all of religious history – בְּרִית, covenant.

Covenant

From a spiritual point of view, the relationship between the Jewish people and the Land is unique in that it is presented in the form of a Divine Covenant. It is quite remarkable that G-d initiates and enters into covenants with his creations. The first such covenant G-d makes with humanity is after the flood – a Divine commitment never to destroy the world again. Then with Avraham Avinu, He makes two covenants, both about granting the Land of Israel to his (and His) children. The first one is known as בְּרִית בֵּין הַבְּתָרִים, the Covenant of the Pieces, which is exclusively about this: “On that day, G-d made a covenant with Abram saying, to your descendants have I given this Land...”1 The second one is the בְּרִית מִילָה, the Covenant of Circumcision, where G-d commits himself to a number of things: to make Abram’s progeny into a great people, to change his name to Avraham, meaning a father of many nations, and then two everlasting pledges – to be a G-d to him and his people and to grant them the Land as an eternal inheritance.2

To understand the meaning of this connection, we need to understand what a covenant is. Let us first distinguish between two similar yet very different types of agreements, a covenant and a contract.

Contract or Covenant

A contract is when both sides enter into an agreement because it is mutually beneficial. When the agendas align to the extent that the agreement can serve both parties, a contract is signed. A covenant goes much deeper. It is not based on interests but on shared values. It is not built on what each party can get but on what each party ought to give. It is not based on personal gain but on a greater good, where the goal is best served by the sum total of the parties entering into the agreement.

A contract is about Me and You, a covenant is about Us and We.

As Rabbi Sacks zt”l defines it:

“Covenant occurs when two individuals or groups, differing perhaps in power, but each acknowledging the integrity and sovereignty of the other, pledge themselves in mutual loyalty to achieve together what neither can achieve alone... A covenant is not a contract. It differs in three respects. It is not limited to specific conditions and circumstances. It is open-ended and long-lasting. And it is not based on the idea of two individuals, otherwise unconnected, pursuing personal advantage. It is about the ‘we’ that gives identity to the ‘I’. There is a place for contracts, but covenants are prior and more fundamental. They form the matrix of mutuality within which contractual relationships can exist.”3

The Religious Claim

It is this type of relationship which G-d created between the Jewish people and the Land. A covenant not dependent on any conditions or circumstances. A covenant unlimited by time and one which is built on a fundamental relationship rooted in the spiritual mission and destiny of the world and of the Jewish people in particular. It is for this reason our Sages have framed the relationship...

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between Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael as a marriage between husband and wife. Indeed, marriage is the one human relationship which most closely resembles a covenant. It is the hope and prayer of bride and groom that their union will not be dependent on conditions and circumstances, it will last forever and that it will be built on a mutual vision and values, in which the me and you become us and we. The core of this relationship is a commitment to the vision of a greater good and a better future together. So too the connection between the Jewish people and its Land.

This covenental relationship between G-d and Am Yisrael has created an extraordinary bond unlike the people-land connection of any other nation. That is why the Jewish claim to Israel is first and foremost a religious one, rooted in our primal spiritual mission and based on an unshakable eternal covenant between us and G-d.

The Historical Claim

Secondly, from a historical point of view, it is clear the Jewish People and Judaism have been tied to the Land since the very dawn of Jewish history. The very first time G-d spoke to the first Jew, Avraham, it was for him to journey with his family to the Land that G-d would show him, Canaan, which would become Eretz Yisrael. This began a now more than 4,000-year connection to the Land unrivalled by any other nation on earth. The only other living people with such a lengthy historical connection to a land are the Chinese. However, the Chinese have never been exiled from their country.

Despite the long, dark exile and persecution over millennia, Jews never forgot their connection to their Land, dreaming to return to it and mentioning it at every wedding, praying about returning to it three times a day and facing towards it in every prayer from all corners of the globe.

The Moral Claim

Jewish suffering and persecution throughout history gives birth to a strong moral claim to the Land. They have even produced new words in the English Language – ghetto, pogrom, inquisition, Holocaust. During the Second World War, immigration restrictions remained in place in British-ruled Palestine and in many other western countries. Borders were locked and ships carrying Jewish refugees were mercilessly sent back to Nazi Germany. Israel, the one country and the one Land Jews have always called their own, is the one place they are safe from discrimination and persecution. It is here and only here, under Jewish sovereignty, that there have never been restrictions on Jewish immigration. All Jews are welcomed with open arms, granted immediate citizenship and absorbed into the country, no matter their age, circumstances and utility to society. There is a strong and just moral imperative for creating a safe haven for arguably the world’s most persecuted people.

The Legal Claim

2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the pivotal San Remo Conference in Italy. In April 1920, the world’s major powers agreed to designate Eretz Yisrael as the place where Jews from around the world could settle. All of Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia were granted to the Arab nations with Palestine/Eretz Yisrael granted to the Jews. So significant was this decision that the English diplomat Lord Curzon called the San Remo Conference “the Magna Carta of the Jewish people,” in terms of the legal recognition of their rights to the Land. This recognition would be enshrined in international law and subsequently reinforced by the League of Nations and again by the United Nations in November 1947.

The Tu BiShvat Connection

Tu BiShvat is a time of appreciation for the remarkable relationship between a people and its Land.

Tu BiShvat is a time to savor the fruits of the Land, which – according to our Sages – are the ultimate sign of this unshakable covenantal bond.5

And Tu BiShvat is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on and commit to our Covenant with Elokei Yisrael.

Tu BiShvat Sameach!

1 Bereishit 15:18.
2 See Bereishit 17:1–14. The root word appears 10 times in these 14 verses. The Covenant of Circumcision has, of course, been accepted throughout the generations and across the Jewish spectrum, regardless of levels of observance.
4 For example, in the sheva berachot recited under the chuppah, the blessing of שִׂשָּׁה בְּרֵאשִׁית juxtaposes the unique connection between the Jewish people and the Land and that between bride and groom. Just as they are unified in a covenant of marriage, so too on a collective level is there such a relationship between the Jewish people and the Land.
5 See for example Sanhedrin 98a, where Rabbi Abba sees this in the verse in Yechezkel 36:8.

Rabbi Doron Perez is Executive Chairman of the Mizrachi World Movement.
My new role as Executive Vice President of RZA–Mizrachi that began two months ago has aroused conflicting emotions: excitement at new beginnings and mourning at a sense of loss.

On the one hand, these past months have seen such a time of renaissance and renewal for our Movement. Rabbi Hart Levine has joined our team, charged with establishing Mizrachi NextGen to engage and inspire a new generation of American Jews to share in the responsibility for the future of Israel and the Jewish nation. Shira Kaplan, our inaugural Chalomot Young Leadership Fellow, is producing our new podcast, Voices of Our Nation, with accompanying videos sent out weekly in our Shabbat B’Shabbato e-newsletter and posted on social media. And Rabbi Aron White, our man on the ground in Yerushalayim, is spearheading the Tzurba M’Rabanan learning program and the rollout of our mizrachi.tv/rza platform that has engaged dozens of communities since its launch on Chanukah.

But these past months have also brought us great loss. Along with the precious individuals the pandemic has taken from us, the whole Jewish community is reeling from the passing of so many of our leading figures, whose guidance and leadership shaped the Jewish world as we know it: Rabbi Norman Lamm זצ”ל, whose brilliant drashot brought Torah messages to every facet of modern life; Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz זצ”ל, whose tremendous scholarship opened the worlds of Gemara and Jewish spirituality to thousands; Rabbi Gedaliah Dov Schwartz זצ”ל, former Rosh Beit HaKavod of RZA–Mizrachi, who was a tower of Torah and halachic leadership; Rabbi Dovid Feinstein זצ”ל, whose halachic authority guided our community, continuing the legacy of his father, Rav Moshe זצ”ל; Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ”ל, who brought Torah to the wider Jewish community and world in an unprecedented and dignified way; Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin זצ”ל, who played such a key role in the flourishing of women’s Torah learning; Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld זצ”ל, who was a pioneer of Orthodox Jewish life in America and an unabashed champion of Religious Zionist values, and more.

And as we were about to go to print, my own community of West Hempstead, NY was shocked by the loss of our Mara D’Atra, Rabbi Yehuda Kelemer זצ”ל, a ‘rabbi’s rabbi’ who was renowned for his acts of chesed.

Celebrating new beginnings and mourning are in conflict, but our tradition teaches us to address both together, in a holistic way. As Jews and as Religious Zionists, we know our Movement has roots that ground us, and branches that grow. We must attend to both: connecting ourselves to the legacy of those who came before, and encouraging those who will bring new growth and life to our community. Our Torah is an Eitz Chaim, a tree of life, with deep roots and new branches – and we must continually learn from those who are no longer with us, and continually energize those who are shaping our Movement today.

Tu BiShvat captures this duality – it is a day that marks the boundary for terumot and ma’asrot, when we focus on gathering the fruits of the past year, and also a day on which we traditionally plant new trees.

Over the coming months, in the USA edition of HaMizrachi, we will be looking at both our past and future. Each edition will feature teaching from our leaders who have passed on and on whose shoulders we stand, along with words from new voices, who will inspire us to advance our Movement toward new vistas of impact and influence.

Rabbi Ari Rockoff is Executive Vice President of RZA–Mizrachi.
The great Ernest Hemingway once wrote that change occurs “gradually, and then suddenly.” For us, this really captures the journey of our aliyah. We began the process almost a year before we actually arrived, and gradually chipped away at everything we had to do. There are so many aspects that have to come together to make aliyah happen – bureaucracy, trying to find a place to live, packing up a lift, saying goodbye to family and friends and so much more. And of course, when COVID-19 hit, everything was delayed by months. But then, after this year-long process, we then made aliyah so suddenly!

We got on the plane, experienced the incredible moment of touching down in our new home, and then special government helpers escorted us off the plane and personally whisked us through the airport. Only three hours after touching down, we were already processed and had arrived in our apartment (the government pays for the taxi from the airport). One disclaimer – we had the somewhat special situation of being the only people on our flight making aliyah, so it doesn’t always go so quick!

In the weeks and months since then, we have been able to get to know Yerushalayim, the city we now merit to call home. Walking the streets really gives new meaning to the words we say three times a day – בונה ירושלים, “who builds Yerushalayim,” which is written in the present. The cranes, diggers and workmen spread throughout the city are living fulfilments of this blessing – we can see Yeruslaylim being built every day, with new parks, light-rail lines and homes being built every day.

In the Talmud, there is a captivating story of Choni, who encounters a man planting a carob tree. Choni asks him how long it takes for the carob to bear fruit, and the man informs him it takes 70 years. Choni is taken aback. Why plant a tree that will not provide fruit for decades?

The man answers that he is planting the fruits for his children, not for himself. Choni then falls asleep for 70 years, and when he wakes up he sees a man gathering carobs from the tree. He asks the man if he is the one who planted the tree, and the man replies that he is the grandson of the man who planted it. Whether the story is literal or not, it conveys a powerful message. One person’s work is often enjoyed by those who come decades later.

Making aliyah in 2020, we feel like that grandchild eating from the tree planted by his grandfather. 70 years ago, Israel was a nascent society, trying to absorb Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees. Many of the cities we know so well, like Beit Shemesh, Efrat and Modiin, didn’t even exist then. The entire Israel had maybe a handful of yeshivot, and at that point, one couldn’t visit the Kotel and the Old City of Yerushalayim. When we arrive in the Land in 2020, we experience a totally different country – a thriving and bustling country of over nine million citizens. Within walking distance from our apartment, we have dozens of shuls, schools, shops and parks. And more is being built all the time. From Torah institutions to start-up companies, there are so many areas in which Israel is expanding every day. This has all been planted over the past seven decades, by Jews from Israel and from around the world, and we are the beneficiaries.

This realization is humbling but inspiring. It is our job to not only enjoy the fruits of their labors but to plant new seeds too. Through our collective efforts, we all are trying to continue to build and support Israel, so our children and grandchildren can enjoy those fruits. As we celebrate the New Year for Trees, we feel blessed to be able to plant ourselves – and trees – in the Land of Israel today.

Rabbi Aron and Miriam White made Aliyah in October 2020. Miriam previously taught at Yeshiva University High School for Girls (Central). Rabbi Aron is completing his semicha from Yeshiva University, and recently began working as the Coordinator for Tzurba Community and Torah Projects for RZA–Mizrachi. They first met at Mizrachi’s Shalhevet educator training program in Jerusalem.
Hi, my name is Michael Cohen.

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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 use 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 – חטש (desire) and חוסר (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: שיר המעלות בשת ה' את ציון יבואו כחלומים (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.
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.

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 שֶׁבָּרָא מְאוֹר הָאֵשׁ (past tense and singular) vs. Beit Hillel who maintain מִבְּרָאָה מְאוֹר 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 (Beitzia 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.”

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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**Retaining the Land**

Tu 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):

“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:

המתחלת ברייתו של עולם לא נתעסק הקב”ה אלא במטע תחלה, הדא הוא דכתיב “ויטע ה’ א־להים גן בעדן”, אף אתם כשנכנסין 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.*

Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon is Rosh Yeshiva of JCT–Machon Lev and Head of Mizrachi’s Educational Advisory Board.

Rabbanit Sharon Rimon teaches Tanach and is Content Editor for the HaTanakh website.
As a kid in North West London Jewish Day School back in the early ’80s, I remember shivering when we planted a tree on Tu BiShvat. I found it surprising that a day celebrating trees and their growth was held during the winter. Surely it would have been better to wait till the spring, when there are seemingly much better conditions for a tree to blossom.

Of course, as we know, the date of 15th Shevat has nothing to do with the weather in London. It’s about Eretz Yisrael. However, my question still stands, as Israel is in the northern hemisphere and Shevat is still in the winter. Why is Tu BiShvat not in Nissan or Iyar – the springtime?

This particular answer relates very powerfully to our current state of lockdown. As we know, so much of Israel’s agriculture is based on rainfall. Most of Israel’s rainy season is over by the 15th of Shevat and therefore this date is considered the New Year for Trees. Rashi explains that by this time, the ground has become saturated with the rains of the new year, causing the sap to start rising in the trees, which means the fruit can begin to bud.

The Talmud Yerushalmi adds that until Tu BiShvat, all trees survive on the water from the previous year. After that date, the trees derive their life source from the water of the new year.

The Meiri gives another answer which explains my ‘freezing Tu BiShvat.’ He explains that the 12 months of the year are divided into four seasons. The winter months are Tevet, Shevat and Adar. The 15th of Shevat is therefore the midpoint of winter. On this day, we are beginning to turn the corner, now closer to the end of winter than the beginning. We can begin to plant and build for the future, despite the seemingly harsh conditions around us.

We are now in the middle of the hardest lockdown. At least in the first lockdown, when schools were closed etc., we were able to enjoy the beautiful weather. Not anymore. However, we can see and hear about the first ‘buds’ of our recovery as the vaccine begins to be rolled out across the country and the world. We can also begin to think more positively about the future, despite the seemingly harsh conditions around us.

Therefore, Tu BiShvat this year comes at a time when we most need to hear the positive message of emergence from winter and a renewal of the world.

Rabbi Andrew Shaw is Chief Executive of Mizrachi UK.
“As the years pass and my knowledge of each vineyard deepens, tending to the vines turns more personal and intimate. I am certain that this roots one of our secrets of success.”

_Golan Flam, Winemaker_
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 (miNeged), but you shall not enter it’ (Devarim 32:52). The poet Rachel uses this story in writing her poem ‘MiNeged.’

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.

The prolonged silence was finally broken by a student who stood up at the end of the hall and declared, ‘Wait, isn’t it something about Moshe Rabbeinu?’

I remember another meeting, at a school in one of the kibbutzim in Emek Yizrael. We read Rachel’s poem ‘Barren.’ It begins with ‘A son, I had’ and continues with ‘I will still bear my indignation like Mother Rachel, I will still pray like Chana at Shilo.’ They had heard about Mother Rachel, but not one of them knew who Chana at Shiloh was, the woman whose prayer for fruit of the womb is one of the most wondrous reflections of a tormented soul in all of world literature.

I thought they should know that.

At the end of the meeting, the Principal said to me: ‘Why did you come? To embarrass and offend them?’ ‘No,’ I said. ‘I didn’t come for that, but to show them the danger of detachment. As heirs of a rich, multi-generational culture, they need to be aware of that. They need to know what they don’t.’

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.
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7:00 pm  Israel time  | **Tu BiShvat Seder**
Join Rabbi Doron Perez and family for a Seder Tu BiShvat, exploring the deeper meaning of the mystical Seder and the seven species of Eretz Yisrael and gaining a greater appreciation of the produce of Israel.

8:00 pm  Israel time  | **Food for Thought**
Celebrity Chef Jamie Geller welcomes World Mizrachi’s Rabbanit Shani Taragin into her kitchen to prepare Tu BiShvat dishes for the body and the soul.

9:00 pm  Israel time  | **A Taste of Israel**
Wine connoisseur David M. Weinberg shares his tasting notes with you from several boutique Israeli wineries, recommending the best wines to drink this Tu BiShvat.

**JANUARY 27–28, 2021**
WATCH AT MIZRACHI.TV AT THE TIMES LISTED ABOVE OR VIEW ON DEMAND AFTERWARDS
Tu BiShvat – the New Year for Trees – is the perfect time to celebrate and be reminded that part of our purpose here is to respect and protect the earth. G-d lends us the earth – and all our possessions – so we can use them correctly and care for them. Our clothing, furniture, cars, homes, the things we buy, are all just a loan.

Since all of these things are just a loan, we are expected to return them the way we found them. One way we do this is by not wasting the precious resources G-d gave us. Bal tashchit, the prohibition of wasting, seems to specifically apply to fruit-bearing trees during times of war. But Sefer HaChinuch says we shouldn’t waste even something as small as a mustard seed. The Rambam says whoever breaks vessels, tears garments, destroys a building, blocks a well or spring of water, or destructively wastes food, transgress the commandment of bal tashchit.

Many of us are not satisfied with what we have on loan. We want more. In pursuit of more stuff, we not only damage the earth we are supposed to be caring for, we damage ourselves.

How so? When we buy, buy, buy, with no intention or purpose, we have a house full of stuff. So much, we can’t find what we need when we need it. So we go out and buy the same items again, and our house becomes even more cluttered and disorganized. It becomes a problem not just of disorganization and spending but also a violation of bal tashchit – what a waste of precious resources!

What people don’t realize is that often having less means having more.

When we have fewer things, we end up spending less time taking care of those things. We spend less time cleaning our home, less time looking for objects we need. We are able to spend more time with the people we love, doing activities we love.

By decluttering, we benefit ourselves and the earth. Here are some ways you can help the earth by organizing and decluttering your home:

- **Donate things you aren’t using!** Help others who might need those items, and reduce pollution and manufacture of new items.
- **Recycle or upcycle.** When you reuse things that have come to the end of their lives, you help reduce pollution caused by waste and help preserve natural resources. For example, recycling old paper to be made into new paper or cutting up a torn shirt to be used as rags instead of paper towels.
- **What you can’t donate or recycle, throw out.** You’ll create space in your home for the things you need, which enables you to find what you need when you need it. You’ll minimize the time you spend searching for the things you are looking for, and you won’t spare yourself from buying an item you already have because you thought you’d lost it.
- **Shop efficiently.** Bring a list with you when you go shopping, and only buy things you need.

When you do these things, you are expressing thanks to the G-d you honor and respect for what He has given you. What better way to celebrate the New Year for Trees than to tell them, ‘I agree to protect you by using what I have to its fullest and pass on what I no longer need to someone who does need it.’

As a personal organizer, I help people let go of their old possessions, thereby curating their best collection of belongings and creating a cleaner, more organized house. If you need help decluttering and organizing, join me for my 36-day pre-Pesach decluttering challenge to make cleaning for Pesach easier and less stressful.

During COVID, we’ve been spending a lot more time in our homes. Let’s declutter so we can enjoy them to the fullest!

Rebekah Saltzman holds a degree in Fashion Design from Parson School of Design, and has been helping people declutter, organize their homes and reduce their waste through her personal organization company Balagan Begone. The website is www.BalaganBeGone.com and can be followed on the Facebook group Organizing in Israel and on Instagram @balaganbegone. Her weekly podcast, Journey to Organization, discusses decluttering and waste reduction. To join the 36-day challenge, go to http://bit.ly/BBG36.
E ach year, the Shabbat following Tu BiShvat is known as Shabbat Shira, because we read Parashat Beshalach, which tells the story of the crossing of the sea.

When the Jews crossed the sea, Chazal calculated 10 special miracles. The water parted into 12 pathways, so that each tribe found its own path, and each tribe crossed separately. The tribes wanted to see each other – so the waters became transparent, clear as glass, and they could see each other without worrying that perhaps others hadn’t passed through the sea.

Likewise, HaKadosh Baruch Hu wanted the walk through the sea to be easy and comfortable, that there should be no distress to any Jew, so their hearts would open and they all could sing Shirat HaYam from the depths of their soul. For this reason, miracles occurred, mainly for the children, that if they would suddenly want a candy, or a pacifier, candies or pacifiers would ‘pop out’ from the sea. Thus everyone would receive everything he wanted on the spot, in such a way that their hearts were open to say Shirat HaYam, bursting forth from a pure soul.1

The women also took part in Shirat HaYam and the Torah specifically records what they sang. Miriam the prophetess took her drum in her hand and all the women went out to “protest,” and wanted to sing like the men. The men told them, ‘You can’t sing, because of kol isha.’ Said Miriam, ‘Let each woman carry a drum, and when you feel that the men are approaching and might hear the sound of our song, bang the drums hard, so the sound of the women’s song won’t be heard.’ Miriam was a prophet before Moshe Rabbeinu, and she told the women, ‘I will sing and you should follow,’ and they began singing “Sing to the L-rd,” like the men sang. The women said to her, ‘Are you trying to make fun of us? These are the same words as Moshe Rabbeinu’s song!’ She said to them, ‘I have come to teach you that we need to accept all the teachings of the Rabbi without exception, and even his song can’t be negated, but let us sing it together, specifically the way he loves.’

Horse and Rider He Hurled Into the Sea

By splitting the sea, G-d also wanted to teach us that the evil Egyptians, who harmed the entire Jewish nation, would receive their punishment – perpetrators and dispatchers, their vehicles and their weapons, all need to be destroyed. We learn this from what was said at Shirat HaYam: “Horse and rider He hurled into the sea.” But what was the horses’ sin? Rather, this is the punishment the wicked deserved, that even the horses received their punishment.

There were different types of wicked people in Egypt: those who were utterly wicked and cruel, the less wicked and those who were somewhat wicked. G-d meted out the appropriate punishment to each group. He sent the utterly wicked into the sea like straw and hay, and the suffering of drowning was terrible – measure for measure. For those who were less wicked, He lessened their suffering and drowned them like stones, which plunge immediately; this is “hurled into the sea.” And those who were somewhat wicked, relatively better, He drowned like lead, so their suffering would be minimal.

1 See Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura on Masechet Avot, 5, who calculates the 10 miracles, and the Gra’s interpretation there.

Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu served as the Rishon LeZion and Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1983 to 1993.
Ostensibly, Tu BiShvat is no more than a means for calculating the laws related to those mitzvot whose fulfillment is connected to the soil of the Land of Israel: tithes, heave-offerings, orla (the “uncircumcised” fruit of a young tree), and, perhaps, the Sabbatical year. However, on an instinctive national level, Tu BiShvat holds an honorary position.

On this day, the heart would become filled with warm feelings of affection and a great longing for the Land of Israel: its commandments and landscape, its fruit and young trees, its past and future. It is possible that in the Diaspora, where we were unable to fulfill the mitzvot of the Land of Israel, there was a need to invest this day with added emotion in place of the commandments we lacked. Yet even in the Land, we are not free from putting our hearts—not just our heads—into this day.

On the contrary. In the Land of Israel, the need for affection is that much greater, for it also gains actual expression in our entire being. Heart and head, affection and obligation, the commandments of the soil and our natural inner bond with the Land of Israel, are one.

Indeed, this is a profound approach. Love for the Land is not merely an appreciation for its landscape and historical sites; not merely the Land’s development and transformation from wasteland to paradise. Love for the Land means a deep inner dialogue with its sanctity, its values and its unique hidden qualities.

This is the Land chosen by G-d, to which He gives special attention and for which He harbors love. He chose to rest His presence here and decreed that certain commandments be performed here. It is not just any piece of land. It is the Holy Land, and its holiness finds expression in concrete ways.

According to the Ramban, all of the commandments in the Torah, even those not dependent upon Israel’s soil, are vitally connected to the Land of Israel. Even the Rambam, who does not share this opinion, tells us that central and fundamental aspects of the Jewish religious experience would collapse, Heaven forbid, without the Land of Israel. For example, the entire Hebrew calendar and holiday cycle is dependent upon the Land of Israel. The seasons of the year in the Land of Israel are what determine the character of the Jewish holidays and significant times and obligate every Jew wherever he or she might be, even if the particular season in the foreign country does not fit the festival. Like Australians celebrating Pesach, the Spring Holiday, in the Fall.

This is quite fitting though, for it teaches such a Jew that he is not in his natural environment. The complete fulfillment of our Torah and our national institutions: law, kingdom, priesthood and prophecy, can only be brought to fruition in the Land of Israel. All of our spiritual aspirations, hopes and desires can only fully bear fruit in this Land. “Whoever lives outside of Israel is comparable to one who has no god.” A person’s spiritual world in Chutz LaAretz, however full and rich, is lacking by definition.

Tu BiShvat – the festival of the reawakening of the trees of the Land of Israel from their wintertime slumber – is also a festival of the reawakening of the Jewish people.

In the past, the blossoming of the trees in the Land of Israel led to the reawakened hopes of the nation to return to become planted once again in its Land. With our actual physical return to our homeland, we have also set about sinking our spiritual roots into its fertile soil. All of the Land-dependent commandments have sprouted and reawakened, and with them, the Torah of the Land of Israel has begun to flower once again. No more detachment from nature, from the earth and from national self-sufficiency, but full and complete life which embraces labor, moral and social duty, the nation, the first inklings of a Kingdom of Israel, and a combination of both physical and spiritual strength.

The New Year of Trees is a New Year for the tree of the nation, for the spread of its roots in the soil of the Land and the rising of its crown to the heavens above.

Rabbi Ya’akov Ariel served as Chief Rabbi of Ramat Gan and is one of the leading rabbis of the Religious Zionist movement.
One Aspect of Kedushat HaAretz

The Sifrei Zuta, in its first gloss to Sefer Bamidbar (5:2), discusses the mitzvah to send the teme‘im outside the Mishkan and the areas surrounding it, by level of sanctity. The mishnayot in Masechet Keilim (1:6-10) similarly list these 10 levels in ascending order of kedusha, starting with Eretz Yisrael and concluding with the Kodesh HaKodashim.

Rav Soloveitchik was fond of discussing the first level of kedusha listed in the Mishnah – that of Eretz Yisrael: “Eretz Yisrael is holier than all other lands. And what constitutes its holiness? That we bring from it the [barley used for the] omer-offering, the [first fruits offered as] bikkurim, and the [wheat used for the] shtei halechem [two loaves on Shavuot], which we do not bring from all other lands.”

It seems strange that of all the dinim that make Eretz Yisrael unique – the metastat haAretz, kedusha, agricultural mitzvot dependent upon the Land (teruma, ma‘aser, shmita, yovel, leket, shichecha, pe`ah, challah) – those three obscure dinim are the ones specifically chosen to express the uniqueness of Eretz Yisrael. Furthermore, one of the Mishnah’s examples of Eretz Yisrael’s kedusha is that the fruits of bikkurim may only come from the produce of Eretz Yisrael, certain versions of the text of the Sifrei Zuta neglect to mention this third example. What accounts for this apparent discrepancy, whether to list the din of bikkurim amongst the dinim that demonstrate Eretz Yisrael’s distinctiveness?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the Sifrei Zuta and Mishnah are not merely outlining the special kedusha of Eretz Yisrael per se. Of course, there exists a concept of kedushat Eretz Yisrael, which gives rise to the long list of mitzvot haAretz. In this context, however, Chazal express the notion that there are 10 levels of kedushat haMikdash. The core of kedushat Beit HaMikdash, its most intense degree, is found in the Kodesh HaKodashim. The kedusha then spills over to the other areas in descending levels, until it fills the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael itself, which possesses the tenth level of kedushat haMikdash. Chazal seek to prove that Eretz Yisrael, apart from its own kedushat haAretz, is endowed with a lower level of kedushat haMikdash. This cannot be demonstrated from the group of mitzvot haAretz, for they are dependent solely upon kedushat haAretz. The two dinim that can demonstrate a kedusha in the form of kedushat haMikdash are those regarding the omer and the shtei halechem. These dinim indicate that there is a requirement for the barley for the omer and the wheat for the shtei halechem to have grown within the “Beit HaMikdash.” The Beit HaMikdash proper, of course, is not used for agricultural purposes; this requirement is fulfilled by using items grown in Eretz Yisrael, which contains, on some level, an element of kedushat Beit HaMikdash.

Another din that reflects the kedushat haMikdash aspect of Eretz Yisrael is that ma‘aser beheima (animal tithes) and bechor beheima tehora (firstborn kosher animals) are not offered as korbanot if they come from outside Eretz Yisrael (according to Rabbi Akiva, Bechorot 53a, Temurah 21b).

Similarly, the Mechilta (Petichta, Parashat Bo; see Kli Chemdah, Parashat Chukat, siman 4) holds that the allowance, during certain periods in history, to offer a korban on a bama (mizbeach outside of the Beit HaMikdash) was likewise only applicable in Eretz Yisrael.

The Mishnah added a third din to demonstrate that Eretz Yisrael contains an element of kedushat haMikdash – that only the fruits of Eretz Yisrael are obligated in bikkurim. The Mishnah must hold that bikkurim is not one of the mitzvot haAretz, but rather part of the avodah of the Beit HaMikdash, and the fruits must therefore grow on land that possesses kedushat Beit HaMikdash. This is the point of dispute between the Mishnah and some versions of the Sifrei Zuta, which do not include the din of bikkurim along with the omer and shtei halechem. The latter maintain that bikkurim is one of the mitzvot haAretz. Therefore, while it is true that the fruits of bikkurim may only come from produce grown in Eretz Yisrael, this din does not prove anything regarding the kedushat haMikdash aspect of Eretz Yisrael. This aspect of the kedusha of Eretz Yisrael can only be proven through the dinim regarding the omer and the shtei halechem.

1 See Nefesh HaRav, pp. 77–78; Eretz HaTzvi, p. 97.

Adapted from “Rav Schachter on the Parsha.”

Rabbi Hershel Schachter is Rosh Yeshiva and Rosh Kollel at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University.
As human beings, we seek to understand, predict and control. Not knowing is a profoundly discomfiting experience. We don’t want to live with uncertainty. We want to know. And when we don’t, that throws our minds into turmoil.

Countless studies demonstrate the causative relationship between intolerance of uncertainty and severe mental health ailments – anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, severe depression.

We crave a sense of control over our lives and our wellbeing. And Covid-19 has whisked that away.

This past year, we have all lived through the most life-changing, unforgettable, historic experience. We have seen everything we know and trust turned on its head. Every certainty, prediction, expectation has been upended. The world has been tilted off its axis. The coronavirus pandemic has changed our world in the most dramatic way, leaving no aspect of our lives untouched.

Uncertainty is everywhere. Uncertainty about our health, our jobs, about when the pandemic will end, or whether life will ever return to normal.

It’s an uncertainty that carries great danger. In a recent webinar discussion I held with the renowned Jewish historian, Rabbi Berel Wein, he noted how the society-wide uncertainty that accompanied the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic led to the rise of Fascism. Unfortunately, we’re certainly seeing polarisation and instability on the rise.

Now, as the ravages of Covid-19 continue to be felt, and the world we knew – the world we were all so certain of – becomes less solid and dependable by the day, we’re looking around for something to hold onto. Something that will give us a sense of stability in a world that is rocking. Something that will soothe our existential angst and give us relief and comfort. Is there such a thing?

I believe there is. And I believe we can find it within our tradition. It is a mitzvah – the only mitzvah – described by the Talmud (Shabbat 10b) as a gift from G-d. It is a mitzvah that helps us deal with our deepest existential questions, enables us to devise a more meaningful lifestyle, and offers us hope for a better future.

That mitzvah is, of course, Shabbat.

Shabbat is the ultimate declaration of faith – a faith we proclaim through the Kiddush we recite on Friday night. With the words of Kiddush, we testify that G-d created the world. There is a great comfort in knowing G-d is in control, especially during times like these. At a time when we’ve all felt so vulnerable, we put our faith and trust in our Creator.

Trusting G-d does not mean we believe everything is going to turn out exactly the way we want; rather, it is an understanding that everything that happens in our lives is part of G-d’s plan, and ultimately for the good; that the world, and our lives, are in His loving hands, and that He is carrying us through this. (Chazon Ish, Emunah uVitachon Ch. 2)

This deep-seated trust in G-d is symbolised by the two challot on our Shabbat table. We know that G-d provided for our people in the desert for 40 years with the manna from heaven. The two challot at each Shabbat meal remind us of the double portion of manna that fell on Friday so the Jewish people wouldn’t have to gather it for Shabbat (Shabbat 117b). They remind us that our own sustenance today is just as miraculous – it comes from Heaven even if it doesn’t fall out of the sky. On Shabbat, like our ancestors in the desert, we put down our burdens and our anxieties, and place our trust in G-d.

We may no longer be wandering the wilderness, but our future is equally unknown and unknowable, and our circumstances just as precarious. Especially now. Throughout the coronavirus crisis, we have felt our vulnerabilities acutely, from a health point of view, from a financial point of view. But each week, Shabbat instils in us the faith to meet an uncertain future with tranquility and trust.

On Shabbat, we remind ourselves that G-d created this world; that He is ultimately in control of it and that He is carrying us. When we gather around a table as a family and say the words of the Kiddush, reaffirming our belief in G-d as the Creator and in our holy mission to fulfil His commandments; when we look at the two challot on the table and remind ourselves that we are in His loving embrace and that He is looking after us and that we can trust Him to do what is ultimately for our own good; when we feel that sense of trust and
clarity, that sense of purpose and peace of mind – we can finally address those deep existential questions.

Shabbat allows us to trust and make peace with our vulnerability, with our not knowing. It soothes our existential fears, helping us find stability amid the uncertainty and coherence in the chaos.

In the final moments of Shabbat, we have a beautiful minhag to sing the words of Psalm 23, composed by King David with a spirit prophecy (Pesachim 117a; Zohar, I 179a), words about trust in G-d: “Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for You are with me” (Tehillim 23:4).

The frightening and traumatic experiences of his life gave King David the right to compose these words, which have given comfort ever since. His profound words belong to Shabbat and all it teaches us about trusting G-d. On Saturday night, as we venture out from the security of Shabbat into the unknowns of the week, we go fortified with the trust in G-d we have learnt from the day. And so Shabbat culminates with the confident declaration of the words of the prophet Isaiah we proclaim as we introduce Havdalah: “I shall trust and not fear – for G-d is my might and my praise” (Yesha-yahu 12:2).

Let 2021 be the year we integrate trust and faith in Hashem into our very beings, as we learn to do every Shabbat.

Now is our chance to seize the gift that is Shabbat.

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1 For example, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7226430/

Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein is the Chief Rabbi of South Africa.
Some commands in the Torah were understood by our Sages to be far more extensive than they seemed at first sight. One striking example refers to the conduct of a siege in the course of war.

The Torah states: “When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees people, that you should besiege them? However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.” (Devarim 20:19-20)

This prohibition against destroying fruit-bearing trees was known as the rule of bal tashchit, “Do not destroy.” On the face of it, it is highly limited in scope. It does no more than forbid a “scorched earth” policy in the conduct of war. It seems to have no peacetime application. However, our Sages understood it very broadly, to include any act of needless destruction. The Rambam states the law thus: “Not only does this apply to trees, but also whoever breaks vessels or tears garments, destroys a building, blocks a wellspring of water or destructively wastes food transgresses the command of bal tashchit.” This is the halachic basis of an ethic of environmental responsibility.

Why did the Oral tradition broaden the scope of this single law? Often, a posek seeking to interpret Divine law in specific cases, will endeavor to do so in a way consistent with the total structure of Biblical teaching. If a text seems to conflict with a basic principle of Jewish law, it will be understood restrictively, at least by some. If it exemplifies such a principle, it will be understood broadly. Law exists not just to regulate but also to educate.

In the case of bal tashchit, there is an obvious fit with much else in Jewish law and thought. The Torah is concerned with what we would nowadays call “sustainability.” This is particularly true of the three commands ordaining periodic rest: Shabbat, the shmittah year and the yovel year. On Shabbat, all agricultural work is forbidden, “so that your ox and your donkey may rest” (Shemot 23:12). It sets a limit to our intervention in nature and the pursuit of economic growth. We become conscious that we are creations, not just creators. The earth is not ours but G-d’s. For six days it is handed over to us, but on the seventh we symbolically abdicate that power. We may perform no ‘work,’ i.e. an act that alters the state of something for human purposes. Shabbat is a weekly reminder of the integrity of nature and the boundaries of human striving.

What Shabbat does for humans and animals, the shmittah and yovel years do for the Land. The earth too is entitled to its periodic rest. The Torah warns that if the Israelites do not respect this, they will suffer exile: “Then shall the Land make up for its sabbath years” (Vayikra 26:34). Behind this are two concerns. One is environmental. As the Rambam points out, land which is overexploited eventually erodes and loses its fertility. The Israelites were therefore commanded to conserve the soil by giving it periodic fallow years, not pursuing short-term gain at the cost of long-term desolation. The second, no less significant, is theological: “The Land,” says G-d, “is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me” (Vayikra 25:23). We are guests on earth.

There is another group of commands which directs us against over-interference with nature. The
Torah forbids crossbreeding livestock, planting a field with mixed seeds, and wearing a garment of mixed wool and linen. These rules are called *chukim* or statutes. The Ramban understood this term to mean laws that respect the integrity of nature. To mix different species, he argued, was to presume to be able to improve on Creation, and is thus an affront to the Creator. Each species has its own internal laws of development and reproduction, and these must not be tampered with: “One who combines two different species thereby changes and defies the work of Creation, as if he believes that the Holy One, Blessed be He, has not completely perfected the world and he now wishes to improve it by adding new kinds of creatures.” Devarim also contains a law forbidding taking a young bird together with its mother. The Ramban sees this as having the same underlying concern, namely of protecting species. Though the Bible permits us to use some animals for food, we must not cull them to extinction.

Samson Raphael Hirsch in the 19th century gave the most forcible interpretation of Biblical law. The statutes relating to environmental protection represent the principle that “the same regard which you show to man you must also demonstrate to every lower creature, to the earth which bears and sustains all, and to the world of plants and animals.” They are a kind of social justice applied to the natural world: “They ask you to regard all living things as G-d’s property. Destroy none; abuse none; waste nothing; employ all things wisely... Look upon all creatures as servants in the household of Creation.”

Hirsch also gave a novel interpretation to the phrase in Bereishit 1, “Let us make man in our image after our own likeness.” The passage is puzzling, for at that stage, prior to the creation of man, G-d was alone. The “us,” says Hirsch, refers to the rest of Creation. Because man alone would develop the capacity to change and possibly endanger the natural world, nature itself was consulted as to whether it approved of such a being. The implied condition is that man may use nature only in such a way as to enhance it, not put it at risk. Anything else is *ultra vires*, outside the remit of our stewardship of the planet.

In this context, a phrase in Bereishit 2 is decisive. Man was set in the Garden of Eden “to work it and take care of it” (Bereishit 2:15). The two Hebrew verbs are significant. The first – leOvda – literally means “to serve it.” Man is not just a master but also a servant of nature. The second – leShomra – means “to guard it.” This is the verb used in later Torah legislation to describe the responsibilities of a guardian of property that does not belong to him. He must exercise vigilance in its protection and is liable for loss through negligence. This is perhaps the best short definition of man’s responsibility for nature as the Tanach conceives it.

Man’s dominion over nature is thus limited by the requirement to serve and conserve. The famous story of Bereishit 2-3 – eating the forbidden fruit and the subsequent exile from Eden – makes just this point. We are not permitted to do everything we can do. Transgress the limits, and disaster follows. All of this is summed up by a simple Midrash: “When G-d made man, He showed him the panoply of Creation and said to him: ‘See all My works, how beautiful they are. All I have made, I have made for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed.”

We know much more than we once did about the dangers of the ceaseless pursuit of economic gain to the earth’s ecology. The guidance of the Oral tradition in interpreting “do not destroy” expansively, not restrictively, should inspire us now. We should expand our horizons of environmental responsibility for the sake of generations not yet born, and for the sake of G-d whose guests on earth we are.


Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks זצ”ל was an international religious leader, philosopher, and award-winning author who served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013.
Four Wonderful Segulot for Shabbat Shira

The Shabbat after Tu BiShvat is called Shabbat Shira, named after Shirat HaYam, which we read in Parashat BeShalach. It is an episode full of potential and capacity for your own personal splitting of the sea – whether in health, in parnassah, or in relationships. Am Yisrael stand at the edge of the Red Sea, surrounded by desert. Behind them – Pharaoh, his army and his horsemen. The Jews cry out and pray. G-d says to Moshe Rabbeinu, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward!”

“When Israel is in distress, it’s not the time for lengthy prayers,” explains Rashi, “it’s the time to do something!”

When you feel stuck in a particular situation, take a step forward. Move! This specific Shabbat, you have the power to change your destiny.

Here’s your “homework” for the week of Parashat BeShalach and for Shabbat Shira:

1. Feeding the birds

A segula for faith and for an abundant livelihood. My favorite explanation for this is from Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, the Imrei Pinchas: in all of Creation, only man and birds sing. Birds rule the air. A tune is created by air passing from the lungs through the larynx, and many instruments generate sounds using the power of air as well. So too, Shirat HaYam is written in columns – words with ‘air’ in between them. Therefore, on Shabbat Shira, we feed the birds, because they can sing, like man. And in the week of the parsha of manna too, we throw food to the birds and look to them who have no worries. The bird knows G-d will provide her food and she sings even before she receives her bread.

Give the birds breadcrumbs or grain before Shabbat. Show them that belief and faith pay off. And if you don’t give them? They’ll be fine. The birds get by. But this segula comes to awaken your faith, that you too have your daily portion of bread saved for you.

2. Challot

An additional segula for blessed livelihood. In Parashat BeShalach, HaKadosh Baruch Hu speaks for the first time about Shabbat, and we hear about lechem mishneh, which can also be interpreted as lechem meshuneh, different in its shape and taste. So, place six small challahs on each side of the table, i.e. 12 in all. Place three in the shape of a the Hebrew vowel, segol (ש) and three more on top of them in the same way. This is a minhag of the Arizal, who promises livelihood for the coming 12 months, because this bread draws so much blessing to you.

3. Say Shirat HaYam

When you read Shirat HaYam, think of the troubles and disturbances in your life. When the Egyptians drown, think, “soon everything will pass. Hashem is organizing my redemption.” At theים נשביעי, be filled with true joy. What happens when we read Shirat HaYam?

The Zohar says that at that very moment, every year, Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, and the whole generation of the Exodus, come down from Gan Eden and sing Shirat HaYam with the Jewish people on Shabbat Shira, and draw blessings down upon the Jews from above.

Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Shapiro, the Rebbe of Piacezna, says: know, that Shirat HaYam is a “decree” (גזרה, also meaning to split). A righteous person decrees and G-d fulfils. When you say Shirat HaYam you are essentially doing as the Jews did at Yam Suf. They sang of the future, of the Beit HaMikdash: “Bring them and plant them...” The Beit HaMikdash would only be built in another few years, but they were already singing about it, and by doing so, building the reality. Have kavanah: “I’m now decreeing that such should happen – to me! ‘Who split apart Yam Suf – His lovingkindness is eternal’” (Tehillim 136:13). I believe that He Who decreed (gazar) then, can do so forever, always, and for me, as well.”

4. Sing!

On Shabbat Shira, sing. Every Shabbat is a song: “A song for the Shabbat day” (Tehillim 92:1). But Shabbat Shira sings with you! The Chidushe HaRim says: “Sometimes, a person feels devotion, as if he became a new being; this is what song is. And this is what makes Shabbat, because the Shabbat itself sings.”

Sit around the table and sing Shabbat zemirot, and prune (in Hebrew, זְמוֹרִים, זמר, sharing the same letters as the word “to sing”) all of the bitterness from your life.

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi is a popular Israeli teacher, speaker and writer.
“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

- Winston Churchill

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Imagine we're taking a stroll in the woods, enjoying the majesty of the tall trees surrounding us. If we listen closely we can almost hear the trees talking to us – their roots, leaves and stature conveying a message for our lives. Indeed, the Torah compares man to the tree of the field; the inspiration in the waving branches is relevant to us not only on Tu BiShvat but the entire year.

Sturdy Roots

Let’s start from the roots, buried deep beneath the soil snaking upward to the forest floor. As we know, they are not there only for stability; they extract the nutrients and moisture from the soil and carry them upward to nourish the foliage and fruit. Rav Aryeh Leib HaKohen Shapira, in Chazon LaMoed, points out that this upward motion is counter to the pull of gravity – usually, things are drawn downward. The symbolism is profound for our lives.

The Netivot Shalom notes that the roots of a tree correspond to a person’s middot, which form his foundation. Just as healthy roots produce a healthy tree, similarly good middot form the foundation of a true eved Hashem. Exercising our middot enables us to counter the gravitational pull of our inclinations and desires.

When our characters are firmly grounded in good middot, we have both the strength and refinement to deal with the many challenges we face constantly. By behaving in ways that run counter to the knee-jerk reaction of blame, anger or frustration, by resisting the gravitational pull of the yetzer hara, we strengthen the beauty of our ‘trees’ and the ‘trees’ around us.

Towerin g Trunks

We can now throw back our heads and peer up at the height of these regal trees. Height is the second lesson Chazon LaMoed learns from the trees that is a direct message to us. Like trees, Jews walk with their heads held high. We’ve been granted special gifts and a mission directly from the King of Kings. As His ambassadors, we can be filled with pride.

The tree’s great height also protects us from inappropriate pride. The tree stretches upward into the sky, making us aware of the vast expanse we must traverse in fulfilling our goals and mission – and instilling humility within us. Instead of the cynical or self-deprecating comments that come so easily to our lips, we can practice a different script – one that both acknowledges the talents and successes of our lives while crediting Hashem for these gifts – and recognize how much more He expects of each of us.

Canopy of Shade

As we continue to gaze at the top of the trees we come to appreciate the beautiful shade they afford us. Chazon LaMoed highlights how a tree can be put into the ground and produce another tree. This is a special gift given to each of us: the ability to produce many others, both physically and spiritually.

As we raise our young, our attitude, explains the Piaseczna Rebbe in Chovat HaTalmidim, should be an agricultural one. A farmer constantly tends his crops, ensuring the wheat be tall and golden, that the vegetables are picked at optimal ripeness. He’ll add fertilizer to the soil, protect his produce from insects or foraging animals and is constantly aware of his crops’ progress. As parents, we have to look to the future. We’re not just raising good children, but future adults. Our fruits, carefully tended, will grow to be the luscious results of the journey from root to fruit.

Mrs. Shira Smiles is a sought-after international lecturer, a popular seminary teacher, and an experienced curriculum developer.
The Morality of Esthetics

And from the ground the L-rd G-d caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad. (Bereishit 2:9)

In a subtle analysis, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch points out that the trees in Gan Eden are described first and foremost as “pleasing to the sight” – they are beautiful, esthetically pleasing, and only afterward are they “good for food” – providing fruits and the need for nourishment. “Here, in this verse, the perception of beauty was justified and sanctified,” he writes. “As far as we know, man is the only creature endowed with the capacity for deriving pleasure from beauty. This is how man’s superior level was revealed.”

The Torah lauds beauty before functionality, and it seems that only human beings notice beauty and enjoy its pleasure. The conclusion: this must be part of the uniqueness of man. When looking at a tree, before we see lunch, we stare in amazement. Wow! How beautiful is this tree!

“The beautiful forms found in Creation and the ability of humans to sense and enjoy them prevent man from deteriorating to the level of animals.”

Indeed, someone who tramples a flower bed without any appreciation for the delicate and the beautiful, is like a beast. This perception, this recognition of beauty and the wish to protect it, protect us from arrogance and haughtiness.

But Rav Hirsch doesn’t stop there. He continues to develop this idea in a way that is quite baffling: “This proves the importance of beauty to man’s moral obligation. The joy in the beauty of nature and plants will bring us to rejoice in moral beauty as well. In a society which does not show compassion toward beauty, man will grow wild.”

If we ascribe importance to beauty, will this advance us morally? How does this work? I find it difficult to avoid mentioning the historical irony: Rav Hirsch lived in Germany (1808–1888). That country, which excelled in valuing and cultivating the culture of esthetics – art, poetry, music – did not turn out to be an example of moral excellence. The words of Natan Alterman’s poem “From All of the Nations” echo in my mind:

With the greatest concern for the sculptures and art / Lest those treasures be bombed in a raid. / But the heads of infants, precious treasures thou-art, / onto walls and roads crushed and sprayed.

Nevertheless, even if this idea did not stand the test of history, what was Rav Hirsch trying to say? What was the meaning of esthetics in his worldview and what could his understanding contribute to our value system?

It seems that Rav Hirsch’s ideas grow out of the classical philosophical belief that beauty stems from order and concord between elements. Harmony, proportion and structure are what create the esthetic experience. This incredible harmony of mathematical composition is found in all of Creation and therefore the entire world, made by G-d, is beautiful.

The French scientist and philosopher Henri Poincaré wrote: “The scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful... meaning, the more intimate beauty which comes from the harmonious order of its parts, and which pure intelligence can grasp.”

Esthetic, physical beauty and moral or spiritual beauty are two different spheres. But the pursuit of order, proportion and harmony characterize both. Perhaps this is how we can understand Rav Hirsch’s conclusion: “Man’s joy of esthetic harmony is similar to his joy in moral harmony; indeed, there is no ‘evil,’ but brokenness and devastation – moral harmony which has been disabled.”

If we train ourselves to notice and be amazed by the harmony of the world, our inclination will be to respect and seek harmony in all our conduct. Perhaps the lesson from the failure of this idea in Germany is that loving and glorifying harmony is not enough; it must be mitigated by yirat shamayim. In the words of Maimonides:

“When one reflects on His wonderful creatures and will understand through them His wonderful, unparalleled and infinite wisdom, he will spontaneously be filled with love, praise and exaltation... then he will be taken aback in a moment, and, stricken with awe, realize that he is an infinitesimal creature, humble... standing with an insignificant knowledge in the presence of the All-Wise” (Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 2:2).
The Shivat HaMinim, the Seven Species, although deeply connected to the Land, are not the only species of Israel. Serving as the bridge between the African Desert and the Mediterranean, Israel has a rich variety of natural resources and is a biodiverse hotspot. According to the Nature Reserves Authority, Israel boasts over 47,000 living species. Here’s a peek at some of Israel’s most celebrated and beloved natural treasures.

--- Plants ---

**Almond Tree** • שָׁקֵד

Although most trees in Israel bloom in the spring, with fruit ripening in the summer, the almond tree blooms while it is still winter, when there are fewer natural resources such as sunshine and pollinating bugs, but when there is no competition over those pollinating bugs with other ripening trees.

Although the almond tree has been farmed in Israel for thousands of years, Baron Rothschild brought about an “almond revolution” after an agricultural disease adversely affected the wine industry in the 1890s. 37,000 almond trees were planted over about 14 years.

**Willow** • עֲרָבָה

The *arava* is a species of willow tree usually found on the banks of rivers and streams, since it requires abundant water to grow. The *arava* is one of the four species of Sukkot, reminding us of the rainwater we pray for in the coming year. The tree is dioecious, meaning each tree is entirely male or female. It blossoms in the spring. Archeological traces of *arava* dating back 5,000 years ago have been found near Yericho.

**Mustard** • חַרְדָּל

Israel is home to seven different species of the mustard plant, which is one of the most prolific plants in the area. After the first rains fall, mustard blooms wildly in fields and by the sides of roads. The Talmud uses the mustard seed to describe a minuscule measurement (Niddah 5b) and tells us that Avraham served his guests beef tongue with mustard (Bava Metzia 86b).

It also mentions that mustard was used for medicinal purposes (Brachot 40a).

**Castor Oil Plant** • קִיקָיוֹן

The castor oil plant (*kikayon*) is native to the Mediterranean region and East Africa and is sought after for its medicinal qualities – it is used to help cure skin problems, induce natural labor in childbirth, and as a laxative.

Raw castor oil beans are toxic – the lethal dose in humans is considered four to eight seeds. The *kikayon* is famously mentioned in Tanach as the plant under which Yonah sat next to the city of Nineveh.
Dove • יונה
Doves are monogamous – they keep the same mate for life. Both parents care for their young, feeding the chicks with a liquid secretion from their throats, called crop milk. In the wild, their lifespan is about five years but captive doves have been known to live 15 years.
In the ancient world, pigeons were used to send mail and even small packages, by being trained to fly to certain destinations. The dove is the only bird that is accepted as a korban. Since the times of Noach, the dove has been a symbol of peace.

Gazelle • צבי
The tzvi is one of the most misidentified animals in the Torah, often mistaken as a deer. A tzvi is in fact a gazelle, which, as the Talmud states, has horns that are not branched, as opposed to the deer’s branched antlers.

Hyrax • שפן סלע
Hyraxes are small, furry animals that resemble rodents but are taxonomically more closely related to elephants! This puts them in the category of subungulates – related to hoofed animals (ungulates). The hyrax is mentioned as one of the three animals which chew its cud but does not have a split hoof. The hyrax native to Israel is called the shafan selah, rock hyrax, because they live in rocky areas, as David HaMelech said: “… the rocks are a refuge for the shefanim” (Tehillim 104:18).

Basalt • בזלת
Basalt is a volcanic rock formed when lava cools quickly. In Israel, there are basalt deposits in the Golan and the Galil and in the Negev’s Machtesh Ramon, formed from ancient volcanic activity.
Basalt stones have been discovered in ancient mikvaot in the Galil – it seems these rocks were heated in ovens and then placed in the cold waters of the mikveh to warm them.

Jerusalem Stone • אבן ירושלמית
Jerusalem stone is the name applied to various types of limestone and dolomite in and around Jerusalem. The Kotel is made of Jerusalem stone. A law dating back to the British Mandate requires that all buildings in Jerusalem be faced with Jerusalem stone. Limestone and dolomite are sedimentary rocks, formed over thousands of years. Because of its solubility, limestone landscapes are often filled with caves, eroded slowly by water. When David fled from Shaul, he hid in a cave in Adullam, an area of limestone hills.
REMEMBERING
Rabbi Yehuda Henkin ז"ל

Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin passed away on the 10th of Tevet this year at the age of 75. Rabbi Henkin made aliya with his wife, Rabbanit Chana Henkin, to Emek Beit She’an, where he served as communal rabbi for a number of years before the family moved to Yerushalayim. He and his wife founded Midreshet Nishmat.

Through his books and initiatives, Rabbi Henkin revolutionized women's roles in Torah learning and religious life.

Rabbi Henkin named his published compilation of halachic responsa Shut Bnei Banim (literally, “sons of sons”), a reference to his relationship with his grandfather Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, a prominent American posek of the previous generation. His rulings were characterized by a combination of his encyclopedic knowledge and loyalty to halacha on one hand and an understanding of the changes and needs of the modern world.

He also wrote a number of other books on topics such as tzniut, gender roles in halacha, and the weekly parasha.

Rav Henkin's halachic rulings were unique. In some areas, he was more stringent than the majority, and in others, more lenient. He ruled what he believed to be the truth. For example:

- Drumming on the table on Shabbat is prohibited (חלק א סימן יב).
- Women can say kaddish in the synagogue from the women's section (חלק ב סימן ז).
- A kosher mechitza must be tied to the ground, and therefore he prohibited using a hanging curtain as a mechitza in the synagogue (חלק ב סימן יב–יג).
- A woman can read from the ketuba at a wedding, in a place where women regularly hold public positions (חלק ג סימן כז).
- Kol isha does not apply over the radio (חלה ל ב סימן ריא וחלק ג סימן קכז).

G-d is Watching

In Parashat Eikev, the Torah contrasts the water supplies of Egypt and Canaan. In Egypt, fields are irrigated by the Nile, but in Canaan, the Land “drinks water from the rain of heaven” (Devarim 11:10). The Ramban explains that agriculture is not easier in the Land of Israel. Quite the contrary. The Nile provides a reliable year-round water supply while in Israel one depends on seasonal rainfall. This, however, forces Israel to observe the commandments, or else G-d will withhold rain!

The Torah continues that Israel is a Land which “G-d cares for ... the eyes of the L-rd your G-d are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (11:12). One can be of two minds about this. There are those who would probably prefer that G-d not be looking over their shoulders, so to speak. In fact, Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (13th century) wrote that sinners should stay away; but as a nation, Israel is the only place for the Jewish people. G-d's special attention to the Land of Israel boils down to this: the destiny of the Jewish people was, is and will be forged by what happens there. No place else on earth can make that claim.

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THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND

Putting the Tu back into Tu BiShvat

The Talmud’s comparison of Moshe and Yehoshua (Bava Batra 75a) is well-known – like the moon is to the sun, so too was Yehoshua to Moshe. What is less known is the Talmud’s strongly negative assessment of this, “What a shame, what an embarrassment!” There are different explanations of this, but I believe the biggest reason for the moon’s “shame” is that its reflection of the sun is almost always partial. Although it appears full for one or two nights a month, it completely reflects the sun only for an instant. Likewise, Yehoshua was generally only able to partially reflect the greatness of Moshe’s Torah.

This may help explain why so many important dates on the Jewish calendar occur during a full moon. To begin with, the two major chagim, Sukkot and Pesach, are on the 15th of the month. (While we are used to speaking about three regalim, Ramban notes that Shavuot is really the end of Pesach just like Shmini Atzeret is the end of Sukkot.) Exactly two months before these holidays, we find Tu B’Av and Tu BiShvat respectively. Before we can explain why this is the case, we need to understand the place of the sun and moon in Judaism. The moon’s association with femininity in Judaism is well known, partly due to the popularization of Rosh Chodesh observances for women. (It is actually an association found in many other cultures as well.) Even the feminine side of G-d – the Shechina – is associated with the moon. The flip side of that association, of course, is that masculinity is associated with the sun.

But there is something else associated with the feminine, and that is the Jewish people. Throughout Tanach – and most famously in Shir HaShirim – G-d is described as the suitor who seeks His beloved bride, Israel. But due to the bride’s lack of complete clarity about her feelings, it is hard for the couple to unite. While she loves him, her ambivalence prevents her from acting with decisiveness. Like the moon, then, she is only in perfect harmony with her suitor for an instant. The rest of the time, she is either in partial harmony or not at all. Hence Pesach and Sukkot are days when the Jewish people are meant to be in complete harmony with G-d. That, in turn, is embodied by the moon’s total reflection of the sun on the 15th.

What about Tu B’Av and Tu BiShvat? While G-d and the Jewish people are compared to a man and a woman, my suggestion here is that such a focus is the point on these two days. On Tu B’Av, matches would be made between Jewish men and women, who would go on to build a home together and have children. It is notably only the harmony of male and female that has the creative power of bringing children into the world.

This productive creativity, however, does not only exist among people; it even exists in plants. That this harmony exists throughout G-d’s creation is noted on Tu BiShvat – the determination of which arbor year a fruit belongs to depends upon its blooming. Marking the productive harmony in nature provides an opening through which to think about – and prepare for – the harmony we are to experience with G-d two months hence.

Therefore, on Tu BiShvat, nature provides a cue for us to reflect on the beautiful productivity that comes from being in harmony with G-d. But like any cue, it only works if we pay attention.

Rabbi Francis Nataf is a Jerusalem based thinker, writer, and educator.
Our Ties to the Land of Israel

After King David brought the Holy Ark to Jerusalem, he commanded the Levites to play their lyres and harps and sing G-d’s praises. He instructed them to thank G-d for His many kindnesses, including the special gift of Eretz Yisrael: 

לְךָ אֶתֵּן אֶת אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן חֶבֶל נַחֲלַתְכֶם.

"[G-d] established it to Ya’akov as a statute, an eternal covenant to Israel, saying: To each of you I give the land of Canaan, the portion of your inheritance" (Tehillim 105:10–11; Divrei HaYamim 16:17–18).

The Hebrew text contains a grammatical difficulty not apparent in the translation. The verse opens with G-d’s promise to give each individual (לְךָ, in the singular) a portion of the Land of Israel. But the verse concludes by referring to the Land of Israel as נַחֲלַתְכֶם, using the plural "you" – your collective inheritance.

Why this switch from singular to plural?

**Two Connections**

Rav Kook explained that we connect to the Land of Israel on two levels. Our first connection is through the ties that connect the Jewish people as a whole to the Land of Israel. This is an eternal bond for all generations.

But there exists an additional layer: the special connection between each individual Jew and the Land of Israel. There is a distinct match between each individual – according to his or her unique talents and soul-qualities – and Eretz Yisrael. This is our special portion in the Land.

In a 1906 letter, Rav Kook discussed the nature of this personal connection to Eretz Yisrael. The special distinction of Jerusalem, the great mitzvah to live there and develop the city, is well known. But if this is the case, why do we find lofty tzadikim who chose to live in other cities in Israel? Why don't they all make their home in Jerusalem?

Rav Kook answered that every location in Israel has its own unique holiness. As an example, Rav Kook noted some of the special spiritual qualities of Jaffa (where he then served as Chief Rabbi): the place where the prophet Jonah visited, and its role in the construction of Solomon’s Temple.

"Jerusalem is highly cherished, its holiness is an overall holiness, and its settlement takes precedence [over other places in the Land of Israel]. Nevertheless, each tzadik perceived in his distinct inner soul that he belonged to the particular holiness associated with a certain location, so he established his residence there.”

Rav Kook added that this was certainly true for the various tribes of Israel. Each tribe was prophetically assigned an area in Eretz Yisrael that corresponded to its own unique spiritual qualities.

Of course, our special ties to the Land of Israel do not have to be expressed geographically. We may find our connection to Eretz Yisrael in a particular sphere of occupation, building up the Land in some material or spiritual fashion.

**Specific Connection and Eternal Ties**

This is the meaning of David’s command. The verse starts with the individual level: “to each of you I give the Land.” It then adds the national level: “the portion of your [collective] inheritance.” Our bonds to the Land of Israel include our own personal connection to the Land as well as the nation’s eternal ties.

This double connection is also reflected in the phrase חֶבֶל נַחֲלַתְכֶם, “the portion of your inheritance.” This phrase appears to be self-contradictory, for chevel means a set, measured area of land, while the word nachala indicates an eternal inheritance for all times. Is our inheritance both measured and boundless?

In fact, our ties to Eretz Yisrael encompass both aspects. We have a specific portion in the Land, our chevel, according to our unique soul-qualities. And we share eternal bonds to the Land, our nachala, as members of the Jewish people, party to G-d’s “eternal covenant with Israel.”

Adapted from Olat Re’iyah vol. I, p. 203.

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1 Igrot HaRe’iyah I, p. 35.

Rabbi Chanan Morrison is the author of several books on Rav Kook’s writings.
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Eliezer Yitzchak Perlman (later Eliezer Ben-Yehuda) was born in Luzhki, Lithuania. He attended a Jewish elementary school where he studied Hebrew and Tanach from the age of three. Ben-Yehuda’s father, a Chabad Chasid, died when Eliezer was five years old. At the age of 13, he was sent to his uncle to attend the yeshiva in Polotsk. The head of the yeshiva, a maskil in secret, introduced him to secular literature. To save him from heresy, his uncle sent him to study in Glubokoye, in the Vilna district, where Ben-Yehuda made the acquaintance of Samuel Naphtali Herz Jonas, also a Chabad Chasid, who was writing for Hebrew periodicals. Jonas persuaded him to prepare for secondary school matriculation, and his eldest daughter, Deborah, taught him Russian. After a year of preparation, he entered the Dvinsk Gymnasium, from which he graduated in 1877.

The Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and the struggle of the Balkan nations for liberation planted in Ben-Yehuda the idea of the revival of the Jewish people on its ancestral soil. He maintained that the Jewish people, like all other peoples, had a historic land and a historic language. What was needed was to actuate a national movement that would restore Israel to its land and to its language. He wrote in the preface to his dictionary: “In those days, it was as if the heavens had suddenly opened, and a clear, incandescent light flashed before my eyes, and a mighty inner voice sounded in my ears: the renascence of Israel on its ancestral soil.” He was determined to settle in Eretz Yisrael, and in 1878 went to Paris to study medicine so that he might have a profession to sustain himself. He discussed his plan for a Jewish national movement with some Hebrew writers but they were not interested.

While in Paris, Ben-Yehuda studied various subjects at the Sorbonne University – including the history and politics of the Middle East. It was in Paris that he met a Jew from Jerusalem, who spoke Hebrew with him. It was this conversation that convinced him that the revival of Hebrew as the language of a nation was feasible.

In 1881, Ben-Yehuda immigrated to Palestine, then under Ottoman rule, and settled in Jerusalem. Upon arrival, he officially adopted the pseudonym Ben-Yehuda, which he had previously used in his literary activities. He found a job teaching at the Alliance Israélite Universelle school. Motivated by the surrounding ideals of renovation and rejection of the diaspora lifestyle, Ben-Yehuda set out to develop a new language that could replace Yiddish and other regional dialects as a means of everyday communication between Jews who moved to Israel from various regions of the world. Ben-Yehuda regarded Hebrew and Zionism as symbiotic: “The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and return it to the fatherland,” he wrote.

To accomplish the task, Ben-Yehuda insisted with the Committee of the Hebrew Language that, “In order to supplement the deficiencies of the Hebrew language, the Committee coins words according to the rules of grammar and linguistic analogy from Semitic roots: Aramaic and especially from Arabic roots.”

Ben-Yehuda raised his son, Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda (the first name meaning “son of Zion”), entirely in Hebrew. He did not allow his son to be exposed to other languages during childhood. He even berated his wife for singing a Russian lullaby. Ben-Zion thus became the first native speaker of modern Hebrew as a mother tongue.

During World War I, when Jamal Pasha, the Turkish commander in Palestine, outlawed Zionism, Ben-Yehuda left for the United States. There he wrote his book עד אימתי דברו עברית (“Until When was Hebrew Spoken?” 1919). He returned to Palestine in 1919. Together with M. Ussishkin, he prevailed upon Herbert Samuel, the British High Commissioner, to declare Hebrew one of the three official languages of the country.

In December 1922, Ben-Yehuda, 64, died of tuberculosis, from which he suffered most of his life. He was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. His funeral was attended by 30,000 people.
The Celebration of Eretz Yisrael

Tu BiShvat marks the cutoff for many mitzvot connected to fruit and the mitzvot hat’luyot ba’Aretz (the agricultural mitzvot particular to Eretz Yisrael). The source of the Tu BiShvat Seder comes from Tzfat, during the time of the Kabbalists. The first mention we have of this is in the book Birkat Eliyahu, in 1728, in which the author tells of Rabbi Moshe Chagiz, who encouraged Jews to eat 15 different types of fruit and to learn 15 chapters of Mishna, and who claims that the Arizal also did this. Over time, the Tu BiShvat Seder was formed by the sages of Tzfat and included eating fruits of Israel, drinking four cups of wine, and reciting verses expressing the connection between Am Yisrael’s return to its Land and the nature and flora of Israel. This was an attempt to highlight the centrality and importance of Eretz Yisrael and instill a love of the Land. This beautiful and meaningful minhag spread throughout Jewish communities all over the world.

Tu BiShvat is also a good time to nurture Diaspora Jewry’s connection – especially the youth – to Israel. The Prophets of Israel saw the Jewish nation returning to its birthplace from the four corners of the earth, but the reality, 72 years after the establishment of Medinat Yisrael, is rather different (although that process has indeed begun of course).

There are many reasons for this. Demographic, social and religious changes have brought about the materialization of outlooks – ideological, cultural and religious – in Israel and the Diaspora. Centuries-old Jewish communities have disappeared or been diminished. On the other hand, new ones have been established and existing ones expanded, and there has been a positive change in the social, economic and political status of Jews in many countries.

Despite aliyah being an option from anywhere in the world, and at any time, half of the Jewish nation still lives outside of Israel, with the vast majority of course in North America. These Jews – at least the affiliated ones – have established flourishing communities, synagogues and schools, and social and communal services. So much so that many Jews do not see themselves as living in exile. They live where they choose and do not feel discriminated against or inferior. Moreover, they can proudly wear their Jewish identity and live a fully Jewish lifestyle.

Perhaps the problem is that they believe Israel is purely the spiritual center of the Jewish people and not a place in which one actually has to live.

In this reality, we must proudly declare: טובָה הָאָרֶץ מְאֹד מְאֹד, “The Land is very good!” Our responsibility is to reinforce the centrality of Israel in the lives of world Jewry and to cultivate the relationship with Medinat Yisrael in three areas:

The first is the emotional-experiential, encouraging identification with Israel through experiential events and activities. The second is the cognitive – deepening knowledge about Israel through multiple perspectives: history, geography, civics, security, economy, etc.

And the third area, the most important in my opinion, is that of values. Educating and raising awareness to the meaning of the Jewish national homeland, the role of the State of Israel, and the fact that Israel is the eternally beating heart of the Jewish people, a Land over which G-d Himself watches, and the place where the destiny of Am Yisrael will be fulfilled.

Rabbi Yechiel Wasserman is Head of the Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora in the World Zionist Organization and one of World Mizrachi’s representatives in the National Institutions.

The World Zionist Organization’s Center for Religious Affairs in the Diaspora is in constant contact with hundreds of rabbis and community leaders and conducts extensive activities to strengthen Jewish identity and cultivate a connection to Israel. Among other things, we produce a range of educational kits and study aids. Ahead of Tu BiShvat, we produced an illustrated Seder Tu BiShvat in 10 different languages. Materials for your school or community can be found at wzo.org.il.
Have you ever noticed that the Jewish people have a national bout of claustrophobia? Our very existence, and our very Land, seem dangerously narrow to us. And for good reason...

It’s even in our language! In Hebrew, troubles are referred to as tzarot – or “narrows.” A person who causes trouble is a “tzar,” like Haman for example. Even the Czar was a “tzar”!

The first time we meet this word is in Egypt, Mitzrayim – “the straits.” And King David wrote in Tehillim: “I called out to You from the narrow place, G-d; answer me from the wide-open spaces, G-d.”

Without having to go to Gibraltar, there are sites in Israel where you can feel the straits. In 1967, we controlled the Straits of Tiran (and – for those who remember – Arik Lavi’s song that went with it). Near Modi’in, there’s the ascent of Ma’alot Bet Horon, which in some places was so narrow, two camels couldn’t even pass each other (see Sanhedrin 32b; we still have some paved roads like that in Israel). If you really want to feel the squeeze, visit the caves and tunnels from the Bar Kochba Revolt.

But in my opinion, the best place to “feel the narrows” is in the southern Golan Heights, at a site known simply as “The Meitzar.” It’s a short segment of road with deep valleys on each side, and it offers gorgeous views in almost all directions. A nearby Jewish village and riverbed share the name.

Many researchers believe that the Meitzar is the site of the battle between Israel’s King Achav, and King Ben-Hadad of Aram (Melachim Aleph, 20). Later, around the time of the Chashmonaim, there was a small fort here. In the 1950s, Syria built bunkers here, and in the early 1960s, Eli Cohen visited a Syrian army base nearby. In the Six-Day War, Syrian soldiers ran away as the IDF came by helicopter to take the site. In 1968, Sergeant Avi Mizrachi was killed during an IDF ambush of infiltrators from Syria on the eastern side of the Meitzar; his memorial stone still stands. In the 1970s, after the Yom Kippur War, the IDF built an emergency fort that still commands the entire Meitzar. In short, this has been a strategic site for literally thousands of years!

Recently, the Golan Regional Council built two lookouts here that allow visitors to take in the great views. There are explanatory signs about the city of Susita (seen directly to the west, along with the Kinneret and Tiberias in the background), and “Breitat HaTachumin” (which mentions villages in Eretz Yisrael – including this immediate area – that observed the agricultural mitzvot of the Land of Israel in Talmudic times).

Since we’re celebrating Tu BiShvat, how can we not mention the trees on the Meitzar? Some “made aliyah” and were planted here, while others are local and natural. The biggest are eucalyptus trees, which – although relatives of the hadas (myrtle) – originate mostly in Australia (and if you’re already asking, then no, Eli Cohen did not suggest to the Syrians they plant eucalyptus trees near their bunkers.

He was an inspiring role model in his own right, without needing imaginary stories to enhance his legacy!

The smaller ones are mostly almond trees. Yes, the classic tree of Tu BiShvat – the only native tree in the country that's blooming at this time of year! The almond (in Hebrew: shaked) is indeed the early bloomer, full of intense energy that propels it to “the top of its class.” Just like a Talmid Chacham, one who takes learning seriously and intensely (in Hebrew: shakdan). As we read in the Talmud: “When Ben-Azzai died, there were no more shakdanim” (Sota 49b). The word is still used in modern Hebrew for a studious learner.

When G-d wanted to show Yirmiyahu that Yerushalayim would be destroyed quickly and intensely, the prophet saw a vision of a staff from an almond tree (Yirmiyahu 1). Needless to say, Aharon’s staff, which bloomed first (Bamidbar 17), was also from an almond tree!

It seems that the Meitzar has seen a lot. Let us hope and pray that with the Golan in peaceful hands, these straits will know more trees than battles. On your next trip to the Golan, stop here and enjoy the views and the trees. For G-d has answered us in the wide-open spaces...

Michael Even-Esh is an outdoor educator, cave explorer and snake catcher. He and his family live in Moshav Nov in the Golan Heights.
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Israel recently announced its fourth election in two years, following three dysfunctional governments in a row. Unlike in the US, if the state budget is not passed within a certain amount of time (it wasn’t), the government falls. This is but one way of several that the government can dissolve itself before its four-year term finishes. Another difference from the US is that here there are not just two major political parties, but many. No party has ever won a majority of the voters. Therefore, coalition governments consisting of numerous parties are the rule. In past decades, either Labor or Likud have usually been the largest party, requiring many disparate parties to join a coalition to achieve a majority of 61 MKs.

Now, after three previous elections in which Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu of Likud became Prime Minister, there is a real possibility the mold will be broken. Bibi has already served as Prime Minister more years than any other, eclipsing David Ben-Gurion for that title. And he is currently on trial with three indictments against him, which – if found guilty – could result in jail.

Consequently, Bibi must divide his time between running the government and defending himself in court. Many people, including me, believe this task is too much, even for an accomplished politician still thought to be the most qualified leader by a plurality of Israeli voters. Consequently, breakaway politicians from various parties are opening up possibilities of a government that excludes Bibi.

Israeli voters are overwhelmingly on the right side of the political spectrum. According to the latest Jerusalem Post poll, the (left) Labor party – which ruled Israel for decades – might fail to win a single seat in the next Knesset. The left could be represented by only 18 seats in the 120-member Knesset, and that would be mostly due to the United Arab List, augmented by the tiny, far-left, Meretz contingent. Another two parties of observant and ultra-orthodox Jews usually join with the right-wing, but might be excluded this time.

This time around, center and right parties, without Likud, may total more than 60 seats, leaving Bibi out of a job and out of the ruling coalition. The latest polls show a former Likud member, Gideon Saar, leading the new, second-largest party behind Likud. There is the possibility that other party members may opt-out of Likud, prompting the remaining members to push Bibi aside to allow Likud to join its ostensible allies on the right, sans Bibi. (However, early polls tend to be inaccurate.)

Bibi Netanyahu has failed to form a successful, functioning government after three serial elections. These were prompted by his decision to prematurely dissolve the previous government two years ago. It’s tempting to believe that Bibi is following a long line of successful heads of state who lingered on past their “sell-by” date, failing to leave office at the top of their game and thereby diminishing their legacies.

However, Bibi is still the politician most Israelis prefer to be Prime Minister. His historic leadership has brought Israel into the 21st century, made Israel one of the world’s most powerful nations, brought the world’s attention to Iran’s nuclear weapons development, secured peace treaties with four (and counting) Arab countries, and led Israel to be foremost among all Western nations in vaccinating its citizens.

Although the election is on March 23, it’s too early to make predictions from inexact polls. (In Israel election campaigns are conducted in months, not years like in the US.) There is only a short time before the various parties must submit their party lists to the election authorities in early February. We expect more tumult on the part of current politicians and political wannabes, the latter including retired IDF generals/chefs of staff. Some of the generals serving as MKs may quit, leave their party for another, or even form their own new parties. Tel Aviv’s incumbent mayor just threw his hat in the ring. Whatever the result of this election, Israelis can only hope for a functioning government to serve its full four-year term. Stay tuned...

An earlier version of this article appeared on israelseen.com.

Steve Kramer grew up in Atlantic City and moved to Israel from Margate, NJ in 1991 with his family. Since making aliyah, he has written more than 1100 articles about Israel and Jews.
I n honor of Tu BiShvat, let us discuss some of the words related to the trees that grow in Eretz Yisrael.

**Tamar and Dekel**

The biblical word for the date palm tree is תמר, tamar (which is also the name of the date fruit it produces). Tamar probably derives from the root ומר, which means “to be tall, high.” A related word is תמרור – “pillar, signpost,” because of its height.

A synonym in Hebrew for palm tree is דקל, although it only appears in post-biblical Hebrew. (The region of Arabia, Diklah – mentioned in Bereishit 10:27 and Divrei HaYamim Aleph 1:21, may be so named because it was rich in date palms.) It only refers to the tree, not the fruit.

The Greek word for date, δακτυλος, was likely borrowed from a relative of דקל in another Semitic language, like Aramaic or Arabic (where it also referred to the fruit). From Greek, it entered Latin, then French, and into English, as “date.”

**Charuv**

The Hebrew word for carob is חרוב, charuv. Some scholars say that it got the name from its sword (כפר) -shaped pods, and others say because it grows in dry (חרום) climates. Interestingly, despite it clearly growing in Eretz Yisrael since antiquity, it doesn’t appear anywhere in the Tanach but first shows up in Tannaitic literature. From Hebrew, it was borrowed into Aramaic, from there to Arabic, and then later into the European languages as “carob.”

Greek, however, had its own word for carob – κερατιον. The carob seeds were used as a measure of weight, and we know it today as “carat,” the unit of mass that indicates how much a diamond weighs, or “karat” – the proportion of fine gold in an alloy. Hebrew also borrowed from the Greek, and that is the origin of קורט – a small amount of powder (like a pinch of salt).

**Botnim**

This might seem to be a strange entry in a list of trees since in modern Hebrew it means “peanuts” – a legume. But peanuts are a New World crop, and the word בוטנימ, botnim appears (once) in the Tanach. In that verse they have a different translation: “Then their father Israel said to them, ‘If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man – some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts [ботנימ] and almonds.” (Bereishit 43:11)

Hebrew has a word for pistachio nuts – פיסטוק, which appears in the Talmud (Gittin 59a) as פיסטוק. So how did botnim come to mean “peanuts?” Apparently, this usage came via French. When the peanuts were brought back to Europe, the French called them pistache de terre – “earth pistachio” (since they grew in the ground). Hebrew speakers did a similar translation, and called them בוטני adama (also “earth pistachios.”) But since some speakers were already using the Arabic פיסטוק for pistachios, the unnecessary adama was dropped, and peanuts were just called botnim.

**Tapuach**

To Hebrew speakers, תפוח, tapuach is clearly “apple.” It appears a few times in the Tanach, mostly in Shir HaShirim. The etymology is debated – some say it comes from תפוח (to blow), because of its pleasant scent. Others say it comes from תפוח (to swell), because of its round shape.

Some scholars identify the biblical tapuach with what we call apples today. Others say that wasn’t likely, since those apples aren’t native to Eretz Yisrael. The fruit they think the tapuach referred to is the apricot, as it fits the biblical descriptions: a tree that provided pleasant shade, with sweet and fragrant fruit.

Non-Hebrew speakers might think the apple also appears at the beginning of Bereishit, in the story of the Garden of Eden. But in Hebrew, the produce of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge is only called פר – the generic term for fruit. Rabbinic tradition has many theories as to which fruit it was – the etrog, grapes, wheat, and figs, among others. But in the end, the fact there are so many possible suggestions reinforces the point that the fruit remains unidentified in the text.

And this actually makes the identification with the apple easier. While today, the apple is the fruit of a tree in the genus Malus, this specificity is relatively new. Until as late as the 17th century, “apple” was a generic term for all fruit. So the translation of פר as “apple” made sense – it just wasn’t a tapuach.
The Gemara in Masechet Kidushin (37a) tells us that there are two types of mitzvot: mitzvot that can be performed anywhere, and mitzvot hatluyot baAretz, mitzvot that can only be performed in the Land of Israel.

Although some of these mitzvot are rabbinically obligatory outside of Israel, the Torah can only truly be kept in its entirety in Eretz Yisrael.

Mitzvot hatluyot baAretz can be divided into three categories: mitzvot that deal with giving things to others (such as teruma and ma’aser), mitzvot that express the special holiness of the agriculture of the Land (such as orla, the prohibition of eating fruit in the first three years after the tree was planted), and mitzvot which express the intrinsic holiness of the Land itself (such as shemita).

Another way of dividing mitzvot hatluyot baAretz is into two categories: mitzvot that can be performed by any individual Jew in Israel, and mitzvot that can only be performed when the entire nation, or at least the majority of Jews, are in their Land.

For example, appointing a king, building the Beit HaMikdash, waging war against Amalek, and bringing bikurim are all mitzvot that can only be performed when the nation of Israel resides in its Land.

Although we cannot observe many of these mitzvot today, we can prepare ourselves for the day we will be able to, B’Ezrat Hashem.

Chazal teach us that by learning about a mitzvah, we receive some of the rewards of the mitzvah itself.

What better day to learn about the mitzvot hatluyot baAretz than Tu BiShvat, with its deep connection to the Land of Israel and its unique halachot.
PATIENCE...
You’ll Get There

"W"hen you shall come to the Land and you shall plant any food tree, you shall treat its fruit as forbidden; for three years they shall be forbidden to you, they shall not be eaten" (Vayikra 19:23).

The Gemara explains that this mitzvah, the mitzvah of orlah, refutes those who require instant gratification in their seeking of worldly pleasures. Here, the Torah is commanding man to wait three years before eating the fruits, and if one wishes to eat them in the fourth year, they must either be redeemed or brought to Yerushalayim to be eaten (neta revai).

Through this mitzvah, the Torah is teaching us to restrain our desires. Even through natural means, when one desires fruits, they are not available for immediate consumption. The tree must first take root, which at times takes as much as 14 days. The early development is performed under the ground, invisible to us. When the plant begins to appear it is new and still weak until finally there is a tree that is capable of producing fruits. After all the time that has elapsed from when the seeds were planted until the fruits are ripe, the Torah tells us to wait an additional three years before partaking of the fruits of the tree. There are even limitations on the way the fruits may be consumed in the fourth year. In the fourth year, the fruit must either be taken to Yerushalayim to be eaten, or redeemed, with the money received to be taken to Yerushalayim.

The Torah is teaching us the quality of patience. The Torah promises us a reward for being patient and observing this mitzvah: “And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, so that it will increase its crop for you” (ibid. 25) – there will be a surplus.

The Gemara tells a story of an old man who was planting a carob tree. Choni HaMe’agel asked him how long it would take for the tree to produce fruits. “70 years,” the man answered. When Choni asked him whether he would live for 70 years, the man answered that when he came into this world there were carob trees. In other words, just as his ancestors planted carob trees so that he may benefit from them, so too he is now planting them for his descendants. Later, the Gemara relates how Choni saw a man picking carobs off the tree. The man told him he was the grandson of the man who had planted the tree. We see from here that one does not see the fruits of one’s labor immediately; one is required to wait.

We can compare the development of a tree to the development of a person. A person is born a small baby. It takes years of time and effort though for him to grow into a talmid chacham.

Some have a custom of not cutting a child’s hair until he is three years old (and often on Lag BaOmer). The custom is derived from the mitzvah of orlah, waiting for three years to eat the fruits of the tree, as described above. When the child reaches the age of three, we begin to teach him the letters of the alef-bet. He slowly learns how to read with vowels, and begins to read the siddur and the chumash. At this point of course, we do not yet anticipate he will become the Gadol HaDor, the Torah giant of his generation. Seeing the fruits of our toil – and his – takes time.

Similarly, the Land of Israel. G-d’s gift to us can only continue to exist through the merit of learning Torah. We received the Land of Israel so there should be a Land for worshipping G-d, learning Torah, and performing mitzvot. And with G-d’s help, may the entire Jewish nation be able to live in its Land and eat the delicious fruits that grow here, both physical and spiritual.

Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl

Rabbi Avigdor Nebenzahl is the former Chief Rabbi of the Old City of Jerusalem and Rabbi of the Ramban Synagogue in the Old City. He is considered by many to be the leading student of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach as well as his chavruta for over forty years.
Mitzvot Hatluyot Baaretz  |  Bikkurim

TU BISHVAT READING

Rabbi Shalom Rosner

GIVING THE BEST

The mitzvah of bikkurim requires one to bring his first fruit to the Mikdash, recite a short review of Jewish history, and then to present those fruits to the kohen. The midrash tells us – בְּרֵאשִׁית בִּשְׁבִיל בִּכּוּרִים שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ רֵאשִׁית: one of the purposes of Creation was to give Jews the opportunity to bring bikkurim.

What is so special about this mitzvah? How does this mitzvah capture the essence of our avodah? The question is compounded by the pomp and circumstance described by the Mishnayot in Masechet Bikkurim (Chapter 3) which accompanied those fulfilling the mitzvah.

“An ox would go in front of them, his horns bedecked with gold and with an olive-crown on its head. The flute would play before them until they would draw close to Jerusalem. When they drew close to Jerusalem they would send messengers in advance, and they would adorn their bikkurim. The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] would go out to greet them, and according to the rank of the entrants, they would go forth. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them saying, “Our brothers, men of such and such a place, we welcome you in peace. The flute would play before them until they reached the Temple Mount. When they reached the Temple Mount even King Agrippas would take the basket and place it on his shoulder and walk as far as the Temple Court. When he got to the Temple Court, the Levites would sing the song: ‘I will extol You, O L-rd, for You have raised me up, and You have not let my enemies rejoice over me.’” (Tehillim 30:2)

Why all the excitement? Why all the fuss? Why do all the local farmers need to stop what they are doing to give them a yashar koach?

The Noam Elimelech teaches us the secret. How do I know which fruit to give as bikkurim? When the first little blossom of the first fruit appears, the owner ties a ribbon on it to remember which one was first. Imagine after all the blood, sweat and tears of months of plowing, watering, praying for rain, worrying about growth, the farmer finally merits to see the fruits of his labor. And what does he do? He gives it away to G-d and His servants.

This is the message of bikkurim: to give the most precious and beloved to G-d. At the moment that naturally we would be focused on our own needs and desires, we instead funnel our assets to G-d.

This also helps us understand the root difference between the korban of Kayin and of Hevel. Kayin, after all, had the idea first, so why was his korban “rejected”? The answer is in the text itself. Kayin brought from the fruit of the land, while Hevel brought from the choicest of his flock. Kayin did not bring his most precious, and that reflected a moral failure in his outlook in his service of G-d.

This is one of the purposes of Creation: to give our most precious, our best, to His service. Be it time, be it effort, be it money, be it resources. There are so many areas in which we can give of ourselves for spiritual and national pursuits. So many of our youth here in Israel give of their most precious years to learning, serving in the army, and dedicating their time to National Service, sherut leumi. We must learn from their sacrifice and commitment to our nation to live a life with the bikkurim value! Let us make sure that this Tu BiShvat, we rededicate ourselves to this end, and focus our attention to giving our very best to the One Above.

1 See the Rambam’s beautiful formulation at the end of Hilchot Issurei Mizbeach.

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With the rainy winter behind them and the summer harvest ahead, Jewish farmers in the time of the Beit HaMikdash would celebrate the year’s bounty by offering their first fruits of the Shivat HaMinim (the seven species), bikkurim, to G-d. They would festively carry their produce to Yerushalayim and ceremonially present them to the Kohanim. At this sacred, joyous moment, the farmer would recite a prayer, one of the few tefillot written in the Torah, recalling the history of the Jewish people from our earliest ancestors:

אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מֵצְרַיְמָה וַיָּגָר שָׁם בִּמְתֵי מְעָט וַיְהִי־שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וָרָב…

"Arami Oved Avi, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there in a small group, and he became there a great, multitudinous, populous nation…" (Devarim 26:5).

The meaning of the opening phrase, arami oved avi is ambiguous and much discussed. The av, forefather, mentioned here is identified with Ya’akov Avinu. Some of the traditional commentators consider oved a verb: “An Aramean wished to destroy my forefather.”

This interpretation, adopted by Rashi, Sa’adia Gaon and the Maharal, has the verse referring to Lavan’s attempts to already stymie the Jewish people’s development at its inception. It is recalled by Jewish farmers living centuries later to celebrate the immortality of the Jewish people, despite the attempts of all those who have tried to destroy us – from Lavan to Pharaoh and all who would follow. We give thanks to G-d for our people’s providential continuity, ensured by the stability of living in our own Land and fulfilling our destiny in part through its sustenance.

Yet there is an alternative interpretation, suggested by Ibn Ezra and others, that oved is an adjective meaning wandering or nomadic, hence rendering the opening phrase as “My forefather was a wandering Aramean.”

According to this reading, the backdrop of the farmer’s recounting of the servitude in Egypt is Ya’akov’s experience of wandering. The instability of Ya’akov’s home, riddled with family strife among his children, becomes the direct cause for the descent to Egypt at the end of Sefer Bereishit, paving the way for the Jewish people’s subjugation under Pharaoh’s rule.

As the farmer recites these words over the bikkurim-basket, what comes to mind is not an image of our enemies from afar, but rather of our own familial conflicts and communal points of tension.

Distrust, breakdowns in communication, resentment towards our fellow Jews – these are the sins that led to the first-ever exile to Egypt and the destruction of the second Beit HaMikdash and its long exile, which perpetuate our continued experience to this day.

Bikkurim, the personal/national celebration of the bounty of the Land, is a celebration of the unity of the Jewish people, and a reminder that our relationship with the Land is contingent upon maintaining that unity.

It is for this reason that the Mishnah (Bikkurim 3:3) describes the leadership and citizens of Yerushalayim warmly greeting the bikkurim-pilgrims as an essential part of the mitzvah itself. G-d has brought us from being a “wandering Aramean” to the promised Land of Israel in order for us to live in harmony; to love and respect every Jew – a challenge we still face today.

The recitation of this paragraph at a time of agricultural plenty and affluence comes to remind us of a very fundamental tenet: our respect for the other is a necessary condition for our physical affluence and for our safety and security in the Land as well as being the foundation necessary for achieving our purpose: being a light unto the nations.

As we celebrate Tu BiShvat this year, let us rejoice in both the goodness of the Land of Israel and accept the responsibility for strengthening the bonds among all Jews, including those who may differ from us, so we may merit G-d’s blessings this and every year.

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Ma’aser – the practice of tithing – first appears in the Torah not as a direct commandment, but as a practice done by the Avot. After Avraham’s military victory over the four kings who attacked Sodom, he gave a tenth of the spoils to Malkitzedek, “priest of G-d” (Bereishit 14:18–20). The Midrash also states that Yitzchak tithed his produce (Midrash Rabbah Toddot 64:6).

But the most well-known source concerns Ya’akov. While fleeing to his uncle Lavan’s home, Ya’akov prayed: “If G-d will be with me, and give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and I return in peace to my father’s house, then from all that you give me I will give a tenth to you” (Bereishit 28:18–22).

The practice of tithing appears again later on in the Torah, after Korach’s rebellion, when the rebels question the institution of the Kehuna. G-d commands Aharon concerning giving teruma (the farmer’s contribution to the Kohanim from crops grown in Eretz Yisrael), and also commands Moshe regarding giving a tenth of the remaining produce to the Levi'im. This tenth is called ma’aser rishon – the “first ma’aser”: “To the Levi'im, I have given all the tithes as an inheritance, in return for the services which they perform” (Bamidbar 18:21). These services included administering the Mishkan and Beit HaMikdash as well as serving as spiritual leaders throughout Israel.

The Levi then separates ma’aser from the ma’aser, i.e. a tenth of what he received, called terumat ma’aser, and gives it to a kohen.

Ma’aser sheni was a second tithe taken from the produce remaining after both teruma and ma’aser rishon were taken. This was taken to Yerushalayim, where it was eaten by the owner and his family while in a state of tahara, ritual purity. It could also be “redeemed” by bringing an equivalent sum of money to Yerushalayim and spending it on food and drink, consumed in a state of ritual purity (Devarim 14:22–29).

In the third and sixth years of the seven-year Shemitah cycle, ma’aser ani for the poor was given instead of ma’aser sheni. In the fourth and seventh years, “biur ma’asrot” would take place; tithes that had not been distributed, eaten or redeemed would be burned or otherwise disposed of so it could not be used in any way (Devarim 14:22–29; 26:12).

In the seventh year of the Shemitah cycle (coming this next Rosh Hashanah!), when fields are declared ownerless, no teruma or ma’aser was given (Sifri on Devarim 14:28).

Ma’aser applies only in the Land of Israel (Kiddushin 36b). There is a dispute as to whether teruma and ma’aser are biblical or rabbinic mitzvot. The consensus is that the mitzvot associated with the Land are biblically required only if the entire nation dwells here (Rambam, Laws of Terumah 1:21; Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 331:2). That miraculous phenomenon, once just a far-away dream, is fast approaching reality – if we are not there already!

There is another type of ma’aser which is applicable to all Jews everywhere: ma’aser kesafim, tithing a portion of our (disposable) income. Most see it as either a rabbinic enactment derived from the mitzvah of tithing crops, or merely a minhag paralleling ma’aser rishon or ma’aser ani. Others see it as part of the general mitzvah of tzedakah (Sheilat Ya’avetz vol. 1 Ch. 3). Rambam writes that the most desirable way of performing the mitzvah of tzedakah is to give a fifth of one’s financial resources (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:5); giving a tenth is an “ordinary” measure; giving less reflects stinginess.

While the details of what may be deducted from one’s income before giving, and where those funds may be directed, are too numerous to be discussed here, the general principle is that we can donate to any charitable cause or Torah institution, but funds may not be used for a mitzvah in which we are already obligated (e.g. buying a mezuzah).

Regarding ma’aser kesafim, the Gemara states: “וְנַשֵּׂר תִּשָּׂר — נַשְּׂר, תִּשָּׂר, תִּשָּׂר, ‘give in order to become wealthy’” (Ta’anit 9a). While it is generally forbidden to test G-d, in this case it is allowed, as it says, “Bring the full tithes into the storehouses... and try me now herewith,” says the L-rd of Hosts, “if I will not open the windows of Heaven to you, and pour out to you a blessing, that shall be more than sufficient” (Ta’anit 9a).

As with all the mitzvot in the Torah, while it may seem we are giving, in reality we are receiving! We are the ones who are the true recipients and beneficiaries of every act of holiness we merit to perform.

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The Torah tells us that when we come to the Land, “for six years we may work the fields and gather the crops, and on the seventh year, a complete rest there shall be for the Land, a Shabbat for G-d” (Vayikra 25:2-5).

What of the produce that grows naturally, on its own, during the seventh shmitta year? Rashi explains that although working the Land is forbidden during this year, we are permitted to eat from the fruits of the Land that grow on their own. However, one may not act as the landowner (of the land that is “his” during the other six years), rather, all should be equal, and have equal rights, to the produce of the seventh year.

The bounty of the Land during the seventh year is ownerless, and belongs to the landowner (who is not the landowner this year) and his workers, to animals, other citizens, paupers, and any who may desire to take from the fruits. In essence, the shmitta year reminds us that there is truly only One Owner, One Master, One Provider, and One Sustainer.

“The land and its fullness are G-d’s; the world and those who dwell therein” (Tehillim 24:1). For six years, man lives with the illusion that he is the owner and provider. Then he comes to the shmitta year – and his illusions are shattered, his pride is diminished, as he abruptly remembers that his land is not really his. For G-d is the Owner and Provider, and now those very fields belong to man, animal, servant, maidservant, rich and poor alike. Isn’t that the message of Matan Torah given to us on Har Sinai?

In the open vastness of the Wilderness of Sinai, at the foothills of one small mountain, on land in no man’s land, G-d betrothed Knesset Yisrael and gave us the Torah. For just as the Land ultimately belongs to all, so too, does the Torah belong to us all.

As we stood there, at the foothills of Har Sinai, on the cusp of spiritual freedom, ready to accept the Torah, G-d charged us with the task to be a holy nation to Him, to be a kingdom of priests, and to always remember that the whole earth is His.

For six days – and for six years – we may work the Land, till and sow the Land, plant and harvest the Land… But on the seventh day, and in the seventh year, we take a step back and remember: None of this is mine – it is all a Shabbat laHashem (Vayikra 25:2,4).

Reuven and Shimon came to Rav Chaim Volozhin (1749-1821) arguing over a piece of property each claimed belonged to them. After listening to both sides present their cases, Rav Chaim said, “Come, let us go to the field. I would like to see for myself the actual property in question to better understand your arguments.”

Reuven and Shimon were puzzled. What would looking at the property help, they wondered. Once there, Rav Chaim said, “Ok, Reuven, let me hear what you have to say.” Reuven re-told his side of the story. Rav Chaim then turned to Shimon and asked him to present his side of the story. After they had both presented their cases, Rav Chaim said, “Now let me hear what the field has to say.” As Reuven and Shimon looked on in astonishment, Rav Chaim Volozhin bent down and put his ear near the ground to listen! When he stood up, Shimon was smiling and asked, “Nu, so what does the ground have to say?”

With a serious look, Rav Chaim replied, “The ground said, ‘This one claims that I belong to him for this reason, and that one claims that I belong to him for that reason. The truth is, in no time at all, they will both belong to me!’”

Lest we forget Who is in charge, it behooves us to step back, and, as the prophet tells us, “Lift your eyes to the heavens and see Who created this” (Yeshayahu 40:26).

For the beloved, unique, and Holy Land that is His, we give thanks; for the cooling, life-giving waters of Torah that is His, we give thanks; and for our very lives, and the bounty within and all around us, for all of this, we give thanks upon thanks.
“G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: ‘At once upon entering the Land to which I am bringing you when you eat from its produce, then you shall offer up a portion to G-d. The first part of your dough, the challah, you shall raise up, just as you raise up a portion from the grain of the threshing floor. The first portion of your kneading you shall raise up to G-d, for all generations’” (Bamidbar 15:17–21).

This section introduces the mitzvah of challah, or “taking the dough.” The Torah presents this mitzvah in the aftermath of the sin of the spies, after Am Yisrael had been condemned to perish in the wilderness and not enter the Promised Land.

The root of the word is probably derived from a stem meaning “first,” for the challah is the first portion of the dough separated before it is baked, and presented to the kohen as a gift. Today, in the absence of a Temple and laws of tahara, the challah is symbolically separated and then disposed of respectfully, to preserve the memory of the original rite. Like the meal offerings and libations the Torah speaks of at the beginning of the chapter (15:1-16), the mitzvah of challah is also contingent upon entering the Land of Israel, indicating that the judgment meted out to the generation of the wilderness would one day be rescinded.

But in contrast to the meal offerings and libations, the mitzvah of challah speaks of an unusual immediacy: “At once upon entering the Land to which I am bringing you when you eat from its produce, then you shall offer up a portion to G-d,” is more direct than “When you enter the land of your dwellings that I am giving to you.” As the Midrash Sifre explains: “Rabbi Yishmael expounded: ‘The text indicates a different form of entry concerning the mitzvah of challah than any other entry-related mitzvah in the Torah. Concerning all the other commandments contingent upon entering the Land, the text says ‘When you enter the Land...’ or ‘It shall come to pass when G-d brings you into the Land...’ Here, however, the text says: ‘At once upon entering the Land’ This indicates that as soon as the people of Israel entered the Land, they were immediately obligated in the mitzvah of challah’” (Sifre Bamidbar Chapter 110).

In other words, Am Yisrael were not obligated to fulfill all the other Land-based agricultural commandments – such as the separation of tithes from their produce or the designation of the first fruits – immediately upon crossing the Jordan and entering Canaan. First, they would have to conquer the Land and settle it, a process that took a number of years. However, they were obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of challah as soon as they partook of the Land’s produce, even though their secure settlement of its soil may have been many years off.

Although the mitzvah of challah is a function of geography because it is contingent upon Am Yisrael entering Canaan, it is not Land-dependent in the narrow halachic sense. Challah stands in contrast to most other agricultural mitzvot, for only produce grown in the Land of Israel must be tithed and only the farmer in Israel must abstain from the planting of diverse seeds, etc. But after we enter the Land, anyone who kneads dough, whether they live in Israel or not, must fulfill the mitzvah of challah. In other words, challah connects us to the Land of Israel even though we are not yet there.

Thus, the mitzvah of challah provided profound solace to Jews throughout history who were separated from their Land. To the generation of the wilderness, the Land may have seemed far off, but challah suggested the Land was relevant even prior to its formal settlement. And for the many generations forced to live exiled from the Land, challah reminded us that one could still be symbolically connected to its holy soil even in the absence of possessing formal deed. In both situations, the point was the same: to gently remind us that living in the Land of Israel was, and remains, the goal.

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Rabbi Yehuda Ben Rabbi Simon said: ‘[The Torah commands us to] follow G-d your L-rd. But how is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to follow G-d? ... Rather, the intention is to teach us that just as G-d, when creating the world, occupied Himself first with planting trees, as it is written: G-d planted a garden in Eden. You, too, when entering the Land of Israel, are to occupy yourselves first with planting trees, as it is written: When you come into the Land, you shall plant trees bearing [edible] fruit’ (Midrash Rabba, Vayikra 25).

This Midrash is surprising. There are many ways to find closeness to G-d, but how is planting trees the ultimate way to follow G-d?

Apparently, this was the first task given to mankind: “And the L-rd G-d took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.” Seemingly, had Adam not sinned, the main role of humanity would have been to work in the Garden of Eden! Is that the purpose of our creation, to be gardeners?

Adam is the only creature who was formed from both Heaven and Earth: “And the L-rd G-d formed man from dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul” (Bereishit 2:7). Adam’s role was to create harmony between Heaven and Earth. While Heaven sends rain down to Earth, the Earth produces trees and plants that grow upwards. Adam represents this harmonization and is supposed to operate the system so as to maintain the harmony in Creation. This system is very sensitive. Each time mankind disconnects one component, the whole system falls apart. The first punishment given to Adam after his sin was the punishment of exile – expelling him from the Garden and disconnecting him from the Earth.

The same contract applies to Am Yisrael, who were chosen to continue the role of Adam and to create the special harmony between the spiritual life and the physical life in the Land of Israel. “If you hearken to My commandments... I will give the rain of your Land at its time, the early rain and the latter rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil... Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods... And the wrath of the L-rd will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the L-rd gives you” (Devarim 11:13-17). These verses, which we recite twice a day during Kriat Shema, reflect Jewish history, our exiles and redemptions. During each exile, the Shechina was exiled with us and Eretz Yisrael was left barren of fruit-bearing trees. According to the Sages, one major indication that our Redemption has begun and that the Shechina is back in Eretz Yisrael is that trees are growing again. The Midrash says: “Rabbi Abba says: ‘You have no more explicit manifestation of the End of Days than the following: But you, mountains of Israel, you shall give your branches, and yield your fruit to My people of Israel, for they will soon be coming’” (Sanhedrin 98a). Rashi adds his commentary: “When Eretz Yisrael yields its produce in abundance, then the end will be near, and no sign of redemption could be clearer.” Our return to our homeland represents the restoration of the harmony between Heaven and Earth.

Tu BiShvat is the festival of Eretz Yisrael. We plant trees and are reminded of our role in this Holy Land, restoring the harmony with nature that we once had in the Garden of Eden. Every festival in the Jewish calendar reminds us of something. Perhaps we could say that Tu BiShvat is a reminder of Gan Eden!

The Eretz Yisrael Festival

Tu BiShvat is the festival of Eretz Yisrael. We plant trees and are reminded of our role in this Holy Land, restoring the harmony with nature that we once had in the Garden of Eden. Every festival in the Jewish calendar reminds us of something. Perhaps we could say that Tu BiShvat is a reminder of Gan Eden!
After listing the seven fruits of Israel, the Torah (Devarim 8:9–10) describes Israel as “a Land where you will eat bread without poverty – you will lack nothing there... And you shall eat and you shall be satisfied and you shall bless the L-rd your G-d for the good Land which He has given you.” From here the Talmud (Berachot 48b) learns that whenever one eats a meal with bread and is sated, one is required to say Grace after Meals. This raises a number of questions.

First, it is understandable for the Infinite G-d, as the source of all blessing, to bless people – but how is it possible for finite people to bless G-d? Thanking and acknowledging seem to be within the capability of humans – but to bless implies filling a void. What could G-d possibly lack?

Second, why does the Grace after Meals apply only to bread? Immediately prior to this verse, the Torah describes the Land in relation to the seven species. Surely they, too, require a blessing of such significance?

Fruits and vegetables are entirely natural and almost wholly dependent on factors external to human control. Their growth and quality are dictated by the nutrients in the ground and the rain from the heavens. In contrast, bread cannot grow on its own. It takes a long process involving “sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading and baking” (Shabbat 74b). One might assume that fruits, created entirely by G-d, are holier than bread. Yet it is the very fact that bread requires human involvement that leads to its elevated sanctity.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Derashot HaRav p. 167) explains that in the process of bread making, where a person plays such a critical role, he or she is essentially re-creating Creation. This is the task of humankind – to partner with G-d as a co-creator, as the Torah (Bereishit 1:28) states, “Fill the earth and master it.” Bread is the symbol of our mission in life – to take that which G-d gives us, whether it is raw wheat or raw talent, and to “master it,” to develop it into much more. It is for this reason that bread, reflecting our partnership with G-d, attains the greatest level of holiness. Through the act of re-creating with that which G-d created, we bless G-d.

So why do we recite Grace after Meals after eating bread and not other foods? While it is obvious that the success of crops is ultimately up to G-d, it can be more difficult to notice G-d’s role in the creation of human-made products. Thus, one may conclude that bread is the product of humanity alone. The same extends to all of our accomplishments. While there may be no atheist in a foxhole, the opposite is also often true; one forgets to acknowledge G-d when things are going well. As the Torah commands: “And you shall remember the L-rd your G-d, for He is the one who gives you strength to make wealth” (Devarim 8:18).

We are therefore required to refocus our minds on G-d as the source of all goodness, and to acknowledge His role. Through the Grace after Meals, said specifically after eating human-made bread, the Torah is reminding us of the ultimate Creator: “Lest you eat and become satisfied and you build good houses and settle... And you shall say in your heart, ‘my strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth’” (Devarim 8:12, 17).

We must realize the power of our involvement in partnering with G-d and the transcendental sanctity that this can create. At the same time, we must never forget the Divine source; our re-creations are based upon the Creator’s creations. Tu BiShvat helps us focus on G-d-given fruits of the Land so we can renew our appreciation that ultimately all comes from G-d. And then we bless, because making blessings on life is our opportunity to transform life into the ultimate blessing.
Throughout the years of the Jewish exile, the day of Tu BiShvat falling in the midst of the winter season served as a heartening reminder of our unbreakable connection to our Land, and eating its fruits confirmed the holiness of Israel: the people and the Land. I remember as a child in the freezing Chicago winters, my parents would insist on my eating a piece of “boksar” – carob – to commemorate Tu BiShvat. The “boksar” was as hard as a rock and as tasteless as wood. Yet I noticed that my parents – Jews of an earlier generation born before there was a State of Israel or a time when free and open worship was allowed at the Western Wall without Arab or government interference – ate their pieces of “boksar” slowly and with great affection. Only later in life did I realize that eating that piece of “boksar” validated their hope and belief that the Land of Israel would yet flourish and grow under Jewish sovereignty and the vineyards and orchards of the Land promised to us by our prophets would become abundant reality.

Every society needs physical symbols to validate its faiths and aspirations. That is why countries have flags and seals. The fruits of the Land of Israel became the flag and seal of the Jewish people vis-a-vis its beloved homeland, even when there was little Jewish population and no Jewish sovereignty present there. The pieces of fruit served to remind Jews of who they were and where they came from and most importantly, where they really were heading.

In 1882, Baron Edmond de Rothschild’s Carmel (East) Wine Company produced its first bottles of wine in Rishon LeTzion. At that time, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) was the rav and head of the famed yeshiva in Volozhin in then Lithuania. He was also the titular chairman of the Chovevei Tzion – The Lovers of Zion – the organization that encouraged Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel and helped support the nascent but growing population of the Yishuv HaYashan – the pre-Zionist settlers in the Land of Israel of the 19th century. His nephew, Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (the author of Torah Temima, a popular commentary to the Torah), lived with his uncle and aunt in their home while being a very young student at the yeshiva. In his writings, he recorded that the Carmel Wine Company sent a bottle of wine from its first production efforts to Rabbi Berlin, in recognition of his efforts on behalf of the Jewish settlers in the Land of Israel. When that bottle of Israeli wine finally reached the small village of Volozhin and was delivered to Rabbi Berlin, the great Rabbi entered his bedroom and changed into his Shabbat garments, in honor of a bottle of wine produced by Jews from the grapes of the Holy Land and upon which all of the agricultural mitzvot of the Torah had been fulfilled.

I have often thought about this vignette when I hear observant Jews say they prefer wines from France, Argentina, Chile, Australia, South Africa, California, etc. over Israeli wines. They just don’t get it. The lesson of the “boksar” of Tu BiShvat has apparently not yet taken hold in their souls and psyches.

So Tu BiShvat is not just a date (no pun intended) in the Jewish calendar. It represents our undying and never-failing attachment to the Land of Israel. It connects us to the 2,000-year-old entry in the Mishna that called the day of 15 Shevat the New Year for Trees in the Land of Israel. The day is a slight holiday in Jewish ritual and synagogue service. I still plan to eat “boksar” this year, even though its taste has likely not improved one iota. Yet I will enjoy every bite and again I will see my parents eating it with me. There will be many other tastier and more delicious Israeli-produced fruits on the table before me. But none carry the emotional message in my heart like the “boksar.”

So to me, the message of Tu BiShvat does not end with the passing of the day. Rather, it serves every day to strengthen our claim to this piece of holy ground and to look forward to the great times – each person under his vine and fig tree in security and happiness – that our prophets promised us.

Rabbi Berel Wein

is Senior Rabbi of Beit Knesset HaNassi in Jerusalem and Director of the Destiny Foundation.
Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok, the Friediker (Previous) Lubavitcher Rebbe, was on a leisurely walk through the forest with his father, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber, when young Yosef Yitzchok absentmindedly plucked a leaf off a tree.

Surprised, the father turned to his son and admonished him for his seemingly harmless action: “The leaf you tore from its branch was created by the Ribbono Shel Olam for a specific purpose! It’s alive, its physical structure is akin to a body, it’s imbued with a Divine life-force, it’s guided by hashgacha pratit (Divine Providence). Every blade of grass, every leaf on every tree is invested with G-d’s own vitality, created intentionally, each with a Divine spark, part of a ‘soul’ that has descended to earth to find its correction and fulfillment. How can you be so callous towards a creation of G-d?”

The Ba’al Shem Tov taught: the all-encompassing Oneness of G-d is the fundamental reality underlying all Creation. Everything is an expression of the singular, Divine whole, the Ein Sof, the Infinite.

Therefore, coming into contact with even one part, one element of Creation, is connecting to the entirety. Far beyond the Transcendentalist thinkers and writers of the 19th century (lehavdil), the Holy Ba’al Shem Tov vividly perceived the interconnectedness of Creation with a supernal ecosystem, where all things share the same root and all pulsate with the same Divine heartbeat. All of Creation are branches of one tree.

The Torah itself is called עץ חיים, “a Tree of Life for all those who grab onto it” (Mishlei 3). When we grab hold of a single leaf at the very edge of the tree, a small twig, flower or fruit, we are “ocheiz bekula,” holding on to the entire tree as well, connected to the whole of Truth and Wisdom.

In the same way that the Rebbe, Reb Sholom Dov Ber, was sensitive to every blade of grass, every petal, so do we need to cherish every word of Torah learned, every letter, every mitzvah. Connecting with just one idea or verse of Torah, uttering a single word of prayer, we are bound to the entirety of the infinite universe of Jewish experience and knowledge.

Part of the Torah is the whole of Torah. Every detail is equally connected to the Source and the same Divine current flows through every nekuda, and every authentic commentary and chidush throughout time.

The Shabbat after Tu BiShvat, Shabbat Shira, features the Song of the Sea at Kriyat Yam Suf, the Splitting of the Sea. In the midst of Az Yashir, the song of praise celebrating the Exodus from Egypt, Moshe has a vision of the End of Days: תְּבִאֵמוֹ וְתִטָּעֵמוֹ בְּהַר נַחֲלָתְךָ, “Bring us to and implant us upon the mount of Your inheritance…” He envisions us “planted” on Har HaBayit, flourishing with Temple consciousness, rooted in the headquarters of Divine space, time and awareness, drawing from the infinite Source of All Life. So may it be!

A meaningful and sweet New Year for the Trees to all who strive to cling to any and every part of it!

Tu BiShvat Sameach!
In 1967, historian Lynn White contended that Biblical theology stood at the root of the ecological crisis. Citing G-d’s command to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule... every living creature that moves on the ground” (Bereishit 1:28), White asserted that this mindset prioritized human needs and encouraged the exploitation of the natural world. Many environmentalists suggested alternative world-views that advocated “biocentrism,” which promoted egalitarian claims to all living organisms – human, animal or plant.

Many Jewish (and Christian) thinkers retorted that the Biblical attitude to the environment, while decidedly anthropocentric, was much more nuanced and accountable. They further asserted that anti-religious claims would only harm the environmental agenda since the Biblical view imposed many caretaking responsibilities for the planet.

The Biblical view of nature assuredly differs greatly from ancient mythologies which, as Umberto Cassuto noted, identified different parts of the universe with various deities. In contrast, the Bible promotes the idea that G-d transcends nature and has dominion over all of its resources. This stature gives G-d the power to grant humans their unique traits as well as entitlements to the world.

Yet as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik argued, a careful read of the Creation story reveals that Biblical theology also sees humans as members of the organic world, bearing important similarities to animals and plants. Humans have unique privileges, but also the responsibilities of stewardship over the Earth, as exemplified by the command to “work and preserve” life within the Garden of Eden (Bereishit 2:15). Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein understood this verse as an imperative to toil the Earth and benefit from its resources, but also to contribute back to its preservation. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch viewed it as a mandate to use natural resources wisely, toward their role in the broader service of G-d performed in the universe. Indeed, a survey of Jewish medieval interpretations of Bereishit by Professor Jeremy Cohen found not a single commentary that displayed a dispensation for the Earth's exploitation or destruction.

Jewish law backs this nuanced theological worldview, with an attempt to help humans understand their duty to till the Earth responsibly and regulate their shared use of its resources. The Bible, for example, ords that agricultural lands lie fallow every seventh year not only to provide rest for workers (Shemot 23:12) but also to remind us that G-d is the Master of the Earth. The Sages ordained several civic decrees intended to preserve the quality of drinking water, the sharing of public space, the proper disposal of waste and plumbing, and the regulation of noise and air pollution.

While these commandments and regulations provide limited assistance in determining 21st-century environmental policies, they teach basic values regarding the necessity of preventing human productivity from becoming destructive.

The most significant Biblical commandment regarding the conservation of natural resources stems from a directive regarding wartime behavior. When laying siege to a city, we are commanded not to destroy fruit-bearing trees: “You must not destroy its trees... Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?” (Devarim 20:19–20). The Sages derived from these verses a general prohibition of wanton destructive behavior, colloquially known as bal tashchit. Jewish law regularly permitted the consumption of resources when it was necessary or beneficial for human needs. Yet it nonetheless provided a serious reminder that even when the consumption of a resource is beneficial, its use must be balanced with the broader value of preserving our resources for the next generations.

Jewish environmental ethics thus seeks to provide an antidote to what conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has deemed the greatest cause of environmental degradation – “the propensity of human beings to take the benefit and to leave the costs to someone else, preferably someone far away in space or time, whose protests can be safely ignored.” It rests upon a mandate from G-d to both work and preserve the Earth while demanding intergenerational responsibilities – between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are yet to be born.

Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Brody is the co-Dean of the Tikvah Online Academy, a columnist at the Jerusalem Post, and the author of the award-winning A Guide to the Complex: Contemporary Halakhic Debates.
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Origins of Tu BiShvat

During Biblical times, Tu BiShvat was a day of importance largely because of its halachic ramifications on an agriculturally – and Beit HaMikdash – oriented society.

Tu BiShvat marked the cut-off date for determining which year fruits belonged to. Fruits that ripened before Tu BiShvat belonged to the previous year in the Shemitah cycle, and fruits that ripened afterward would be considered part of the current year.

Fruit that ripened before Tu BiShvat on a three-year-old tree would be considered prohibited neta revai, while fruit that ripened afterward would be permissible.

Tu BiShvat is first mentioned in the Mishna (written in the 1st–2nd century):

“There are four New Years: On the first of Nissan is the New Year for Kings and Festivals; on the first of Elul is the New Year for the tithe of animals – Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon say; on the first of Tishrei is the New Year for the years, for Sabbatical years, for Jubilee years, for planting and for vegetables; and on the first of Shevat is the New Year for Trees, according to the view of the school of Shammai, but the school of Hillel says on the fifteenth [of Shevat]” (Rosh Hashanah 2b).

Afterward, Tu BiShvat is mentioned in halacha as a quasi-holiday on which it is forbidden to fast or eulogize, and on which the prayer of tachanun is not said.

In Israel and Today

On Tu BiShvat 1892, Ze’ev Yavetz, one of the founders of the Mizrachi Movement, took his students to plant trees in Zichron Ya’akov. This custom was adopted and institutionalized in 1908 by Israel’s Teacher’s Union and then by the Jewish National Fund. In the early 20th century, the JNF devoted the day to help dry the malaria-infested swamps of the Hula Valley by planting eucalyptus trees there.

The inauguration of the Knesset in Yerushalayim took place on Tu BiShvat in 1949. Today, over a million children and adults take part in tree-planting throughout Israel on Tu BiShvat. In modern times, Tu BiShvat has taken on an ecological significance as well. Many individuals and organizations see this day as an opportunity to raise communal awareness of the importance of preserving and protecting our planet.
The Middle Ages

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the 15th century, many Jews immigrated to Tzfat. Among them were prominent rabbis such as Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the Arizal), Rabbi Yosef Karo (author of the Shulchan Aruch), Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, and Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz. Tzfat soon became the center of Torah study, and the 16th century was known as Tzfat’s “golden era.”

It was during this period that many of the Tu BiShvat customs we have today were formed. The Arizal and his students understood that Tu BiShvat had hidden spiritual significance and instituted the Tu BiShvat Seder – prayer and Torah learning centered around a meal with four cups of wine, similar to a Pesach Seder. They established the custom of eating various fruits on Tu BiShvat, especially the Shivat HaMinim of Eretz Yisrael, and wrote the first published version of the Tu BiShvat Seder, called “Pri Eitz Hadar.”

Rabbi Chaim Vital, a student of the Arizal, recorded 30 different fruits to eat on Tu BiShvat – 10 from which to throw away the external peel and eat the internal fruit, 10 from which you eat the external fruit and discard the peel, and 10 of which are eaten whole, internal and external. According to Rabbi Chaim Vital, these three types of fruit correspond to three spiritual worlds (briyah, yetzira, and asiya), which also correspond to different parts of the tree. By eating these fruits on Tu BiShvat, the kabbalists believed they could rectify these worlds and the sin of Adam and Eve.

Inspired by these kabbalists, Jews around the world began to take on these customs. Today, there are various customs regarding the Tu BiShvat Seder. Some Jews like to have 15 different types of fruit, for the 15th day of Shevat. Many Chassidim have the minhag to eat jellied etrog from Sukkot on Tu BiShvat and pray for a beautiful etrog for the coming Sukkot.
Until recently, when parents found that a child was using marijuana, they panicked. Now, more and more countries are legalizing marijuana. It has become socially “kosher.” What should frum parents do? Should we see it as kosher too?

If you are looking for halachic guidance, consult a posek.

I spent over 40 years treating chemical addiction, and I can only give you my opinion.

Drugs such as opiates or cocaine are recognized as being potentially deadly. But inasmuch as there is no sudden death from marijuana, people consider it safe. There are arguments for and against the use of marijuana, but there is one danger in marijuana that is largely unrecognized.

Especially in young people, marijuana can cause amotivational syndrome. It can significantly decrease a person’s motivation or drive for achievement, but this is hardly noticeable. The danger is much like cancer, which may not produce symptoms for years, but when it does, it may be life-threatening.

People who use marijuana may hold a job or go through school, but may not achieve their potential. A person who would not accept his car operating at only 60% of its potential may have to accept that he has not realized his capabilities and is functioning at 60% of his ability.

A man of 38 consulted me. “My father is a prominent physician, head of a department in a major hospital. He is highly respected and sought after as a lecturer. My dream as a kid was that I would grow up to be a somebody. Maybe a doctor like my father, or a scientist, or a mathematician or a historian. I always wanted recognition. I only got a bachelor’s degree and made passing grades, and for me, that is not satisfactory. I used pot frequently, but I was unaware of how it was affecting me. I blew it. I could have become a somebody, but not anymore.”

There are many people who have great potential, but to activate this potential requires drive and effort and they may have to compete against others. While only one of the dangers,* the amotivational syndrome resulting from marijuana may deplete the drive necessary for success.

We cannot control our children. They will make their own decisions. But we can educate them. Parents should thoroughly educate themselves on marijuana use and share their knowledge with their children. Don’t threaten. Just put the cards on the table and hope that they will make the right decision.

Talking to Children about Marijuana

*Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski is a psychiatrist and rabbi, and founder of the Gateway Rehabilitation Center in Pennsylvania.

*Editor’s note: Aside from amotivational syndrome, marijuana use can cause short term memory impairment, difficulty thinking clearly, changes in mood, body movement impairment, and sometimes hallucinations, delusions, or even psychosis, which can lead to dangerous behavior. Marijuana use can also negatively affect long-term brain development and is associated with lower IQ levels when used by teenagers. For more information, see drugabuse.gov.
Being a No-Man

One of the greatest messages the Torah has brought to the world is that not everything that can be done is allowed, not everything that exists is good, and sometimes it’s permitted to forbid. This is what the Eitz HaDa’at, the Tree of Knowledge, teaches us: having a shiny, good-looking, tasty fruit in front of me does not mean I’m allowed to eat it.

Even today, this lesson still contradicts the pagan intuitions of mankind. It opposes three common claims. First of all, the Torah refutes the idea that everything natural is good. This is an assumption that modern ecology worships. For example, look how the food giants assume that we too agree that natural = good, and so they add small bits of what was once fruit to their yogurts and sell it as natural food.

However, the Torah teaches us that – as in most things – good is not always natural, and natural is not always good.

The second claim the Torah refutes is that everything beautiful is good. The Eitz HaDa’at was a “delight to the eyes,” and yet it was prohibited to eat from it. In 1965, Israel’s Minister of Education, Zalman Aran, banned the Beatles from performing in Israel, so as not to corrupt Israeli youth. Shulamit Aloni tried to overturn the evil decree, and asked Aran: “How can people who wrote the song ‘Yesterday’ be so corrupt?” Without relating specifically to the Beatles, she was wrong. Plenty of gifted artists are less than ideal human beings and, regretfully, there is no connection whatsoever between beauty and purity in this world.

And the third claim the Torah refutes is that everything new and groundbreaking is good. The Torah illustrates this in Parshat Noach, when the advanced technology of Migdal Bavel casts disaster upon humanity. Technology can certainly be good. Chazal teach us that G-d gave Adam the gift of fire, which is the basis of our technology. Human beings are called upon to enhance the world through good technology and to avoid bad technology.

As Religious Zionists, we sometimes sneer at the Chareidim’s attempts to curb what they see as harmful technology. They seem like King Cnut the Great, who was so proud he thought he could stop the ocean’s tide, but drowned when the tide refused to be swayed by his decree. Technology is not a steadfast law of nature. It is a human choice. Even if we laugh at the Chareidim whose children snuck over to the neighbors to watch television, the average time a Chareidi child spends watching TV is at least 90 percent lower than his Religious Zionist. It is possible to discuss whether it was necessary to ban this technology, but it’s incorrect to claim it’s impossible.

Steve Jobs said that computers are like bicycles for the brain. The documentary “The Social Dilemma” claims that today’s internet technology has completely disrupted this equation. As opposed to bicycles, the internet responds to you and actively tries to entice you to use it more and more. Sophisticated algorithms remember every action you ever made on the internet and bombard you with tailor-made messages every time you surf the web.

Because of the dominance of internet technology, it’s impossible to reject it completely, as the Chareidim did with television. But it is important to limit it, exactly for this reason. The computer and the internet are excellent servants if you control them, but they are cruel masters if they control you.

“The Social Dilemma” ends with a call for governments to intervene and restrict internet companies. This is a disappointing conclusion. It is not the government that eagerly turns on your iPhone in the morning. We are responsible for ourselves, and we are responsible for our children. Since our children don’t need this sophisticated tool for vocational purposes, and since they have a lesser ability to resist its temptations, the first step is to push off their entry into the world of the internet. Their teachers too need to wean themselves off communicating with students via WhatsApp.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt showed that people in our generation who receive a smartphone in middle school are more likely to suffer from an extreme increase in depression and anxiety and a steep decline in healthy social relationships. Some smart people have asked me how I can forbid my child from having a smartphone when I use one myself? But we also have driving licenses and our children don’t.

We love the Torah that tells us to say “yes” to good and to life, and we are grateful it teaches us to sometimes say “no.”
The Blessing of Growth

Birkat HaShanim, the ninth blessing in the Shemoneh Esrei, reads as follows:

Bless for us, Hashem our G-d, the coming year,
And all kinds of its produce for good.
And grant (dew and rain as) a blessing to the face of the earth,
and satisfy us with Your goodness,
and bless our year like the good years.
Blessed are You... who blesses the years.

The word “year” in this beracha is striking for the simple reason we would not normally have chosen a unit of time as the object of blessing. This is reflected by the standard rabbinic name for this beracha – Birkat HaShanim, the blessing of the years. This demands explanation.

A second difficulty centers on the verb of this beracha. One action is repeated three times – blessing. There is nothing inappropriate about this until we realize that all blessings are about blessing. We could just as easily have asked G-d to bless us with knowledge, with forgiveness and with health.

For some reason, this beracha is about blessing per se. This is all the more striking since there is no clear indication just what sort of blessing we are asking for. Were it not for the reference to “the earth” in the third line, the beracha would sound like a general request for anything good. Since it is clear that material prosperity is the object of this request, we have to ask ourselves why this sort of good is described simply and generically as “blessing.” These two questions come together when we examine the conclusion – the G-d to whom we address this request is He who “blesses the years.”

What is Blessing?
To understand this better, we must remember that beracha, blessing, means the power of growth and reproduction. The first beracha in the Torah was p'ru ur'vu, be fruitful and multiply. G-d gave this after Creation. Everything created is created according to a plan, bound by its limits. Every created object is equal to itself and can contain no more than what was accorded it by creation. G-d blessed the animal world with the blessing of p'ru ur'vu, meaning He gave it the power to create more, to be more than the given, more than what is there from the start.

The power of G-d Himself, expressed in creation ex nihilo, is carried over and granted to created things, to continue their living growth and development.

The power of G-d Himself, expressed in creation ex nihilo, is carried over and granted to created things, to continue their living growth and development.

For without time, there can be no growth. A stationary, non-living thing can exist outside of time, or without relating to time.

If I were only asking for a piece of bread, the response would not relate specifically to time, but if I am asking for the presence of G-d within to be expressed in growth and development, I am asking for the blessing of time.

I am asking to be part of a process, to become part of that value which can exist only within time – the value of growth. This then is mevarech haShanim, I appeal to G-d who blesses the years, for that is the source and the substance of prosperity. G-d’s presence within time is what humans need and yearn for, and this blessing will express itself in the land.
How Do You Know She’s The Right One?

I got a call from a fellow who said, “Rebbe, you have to help me.” “Sure, sure. What’s up?” I replied. “Well, I was set up with this girl, and I think I’m going to fall for her.” “That’s great. So what’s the problem?” “What’s the problem? That’s the problem. She’s not what I’m looking for! I want a girl who...” and he went on to list the “Miss Potato Head” qualities that he needed to be truly happy.

It took me almost an hour to help him see what he was doing. He had a clear image of the kind of girl he was going to marry, and this young woman did not fit that picture. But that was the problem – he wasn’t looking for his bashert. He was out looking for his choice – the woman he fashioned in the image he formed – and he was convinced that nothing but that would bring him lasting happiness. He wasn’t focused on the fact that it’s Hashem’s job to create people. And it’s Hashem’s job to find matches for those people.

The proper way to go out is to forget all the criteria, skip the laundry lists, drop all the “I needs” and “I wants,” and ask only one question: how do I feel about this person? Not, is she the best girl I can get? Not even, is she the best one for me? Or, do I see myself in 20 years from now being happy with her?

The Other Side of the Fence

This doesn’t only apply to men. A woman might be going out with someone, and she’ll say, “It’s going well, but...” And there’s something blocking her from moving forward but she can’t quite put her finger on it.

It may well be that he isn’t the right person for her. However, there are many times she’s stopping herself from feeling it’s a good fit because (and now fill in the blank):

That’s when she needs help sorting out her feelings, and she should speak to someone older and wiser for direction.

Most often, that guidance is to help you sort out what’s realistic, what you should be looking for, and more than anything, what you are feeling. At the end of the day, the decision is yours. Hashem gave you an inner guidance system: the superb set of emotions, understandings and intuitions we call your heart. Sometimes, however, you need help sorting through exactly what you’re feeling. And that’s where it’s invaluable to have someone older and wiser to guide you.

But the guidance isn’t to make the decision for you. It’s to help you focus on how you feel. Your heart may know, but cutting through the static and asking yourself, “What do I honestly feel?”

Rabbi Ben Zion Shafier

is a veteran educator and noted relationships expert who served as a high school rebbe for 15 years before creating TheShmuz.com.
When my children were young, they would race down from our home in the Old City of Tzfat to the Nachal Amud valley below. Their record was 28 minutes. That was our backyard – the sloping descent of the mountain, the streams and the springs, the trees, stones and all the great hiding spots.

As I drank my morning cup of coffee and studied the sun’s rays reflecting on the mountain, I would discern yet another hidden golden path that would be our Friday morning excursion through the valley up to Har Meiron. My children have all married and left home now, but when I look out of our window, and when I hike down to the valley, it brings back some very sweet memories.

I’ve hiked through Nachal Amud thousands of times. Sometimes I lead groups or go with my wife, my children and grandchildren; other times, I go alone. I see G-d in the nature around me, and the quiet serenity allows me to open my heart to Him.

But one time, it was anything but quiet serenity.

Five years ago, I was leading a group of American students and tourists on a three-day hike from the Mediterranean to the Kinneret.

I should have known something was wrong.

I’d been diagnosed with diabetes some years earlier. One can suffer from either high blood sugar – hyperglycemia, or low blood sugar – hypoglycemia. Either one can be life-threatening. That day, I wasn’t feeling well, so I stopped to rest, had a bite to eat, and felt a bit better. I was suffering from low blood sugar. I should have recognized the signs.

One of the participants was also not feeling well, so we stopped again at a path that led up to where the bus was. I stayed back to make sure she got there alright while the rest of the group continued with another guide.

But when I got up to continue walking, I felt my leg freeze. I knew immediately. I was suffering from diabetic shock.

I was alone among the trees.

I had my phone with me, but there was no service. I tried to walk but very soon I couldn’t walk at all.

My head began to spin, and I knew if I didn’t manage to raise my blood sugar soon, I would lose consciousness.

But what could I do? I couldn’t move.

There would be nobody to save me, nobody to find me. I sunk down onto a stone. My mind began to fill with thoughts of death and despair...

Until I did what every Jew does when they are in need of help – I turned my eyes toward the Heavens.

And as I looked up, I saw a branch right above my head. I was sitting under a carob tree. Hanging there, just within reach, were three large, fresh carobs, not the dry kind you sometimes find, but high in natural sugar. I quickly picked one, gnawing its chewy flesh as fast as I could. I picked the next one, and then the third until I finally felt my leg return to normal and I could catch up with the group.

I collected some dried carobs from around the tree and brought them home as a reminder of my personal miracle.

I like to tell this story to my grandchildren, to guests at my Shabbat table, and to the groups I lead down to the valley. I tell them it’s not really the tree that saved me. It’s the One Who created the tree that bore the fruit that saved my life; the One Who answered me when I turned my eyes in prayer to the Heavens.

When life pulls you down, I tell them, look up.

Aharon Botzer is founder and CEO of Livnot U’Lehibanot.
HaMizrachi

Family Page

Tu BiShvat Quiz

Which Bracha is it?

1. What bracha should I say on cranberries?
2. What bracha should I say on pineapple?
3. What bracha should I say on pecans?
4. What bracha should I say on persimmon?
5. On Chaim’s Tu BiShvat plate are an almond, an apple, a date, a fig, a grape, and a raisin. On which fruit should Chaim make the bracha, and why?
6. Chaim didn’t know the halacha and accidentally said the bracha on the apple. Now he wants to eat the fruit he should have made the bracha on. Does he have to repeat “HaEitz”? 
7. Shira has one slice of wheat bread and a whole loaf of spelt bread. Which should she make the bracha “HaMotzi” on?

Answers

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