



Trees in Eretz Yisrael

In 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 תָּמָר, *tamar* (which is also the name of the date fruit it produces). *Tamar* probably derives from the root תָּמַר, which means “to be tall, high.” A related word is *tamrur* – “pillar, signpost,” because of its height.

A synonym in Hebrew for palm tree is *dekel*, 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, *dactylos*, was likely borrowed from a relative of *dekel* 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 חָרוֹב, *charuv*. Some scholars say that it got the name from its sword (*cherev*)-shaped pods, and others say because it grows in dry (*charav*) 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 – *keration*. 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 *koret* – 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 בֹּטְנִים, *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 [*botnim*] and almonds.” (Bereishit 43:11)

Hebrew has a word for pistachio nuts – *fistuk*, which appears in the Talmud (Gittin 59a) as *fistak*. 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 *botnei adama* (also “earth pistachios.”) But since some speakers were already using the Arabic *fistuk* for pistachios, the unnecessary *adama* was dropped, and peanuts were just called *botnim*.

Tapuach

To Hebrew speakers, תַּפּוּחַ, *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 נָפַח (to blow), because of its pleasant scent. Others say it comes from תָּפַח (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 *pri* – 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 *pri* as “apple” made sense – it just wasn't a *tapuach*.

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