



# THE ERETZ YISRAEL FESTIVAL

“**R**abbi 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? “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth... no tree was yet growing on the earth, neither did any herb yet grow, because the L-rd G-d had not brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil” (Bereishit 2:4-5). It seems as if G-d had plans for the perfect garden with trees and herbs, and a big reservoir of water in Heaven, but was missing mankind to operate the system.

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!

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