



MORE THAN JUST A DATE

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.

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