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Trees, Torah, and Caring for the Earth

By Dr. Akiva Wolff and Rabbi Yonatan Nerilⁱ

Tu b'Shevat, “the New Year of the Trees,”ⁱⁱ has become known as a day for raising Jewish-environmental awareness. That Tu B'Shvat has come to be associated with sensitivity to and appreciation of the natural environment is not by chance. Trees occupy a special place in Jewish thought. Their symbolic and practical importance is woven throughout traditional Jewish sources, helping us understand – and hopefully, improve – our relationship to G-d’s creation: our world.

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“When G-d created the first man He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him ‘See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world - for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

This Midrash singles out the *trees* of the Garden of Eden - rather than the Garden of Eden itself - to represent the natural world, the work of the Creator. Why should trees be singled out in G-d telling people not to destroy creation? An exploration of this topic will help us understand the deep importance of trees in our tradition, and the lessons they can offer us regarding the serious environmental challenges we face today.

Sustainability: Planting For the Long-Term

Trees are also singled out as symbols of a good environment for human beings. During the creation of the world and the entrance of the Jewish people into the land of Israel, the Midrash stresses the importance of first preparing the necessary life-support system, expressed again as trees:

“It is said, ‘follow the Lord, your G-d’ ((Deuteronomy 12:5). This means follow His example. When He created the world, His first action was to plant trees, as it written, ‘and G-d planted a garden [of trees] in Eden’ (Genesis 2:8). So you, too, when you will enter the land of Israel, planting trees should be your first involvement.”^{iv}

There are, of course, numerous other essential elements for human beings in a healthy environment. Clean water, healthy soil, and fresh air are just a few. Yet the Midrash identifies trees as emblematic. One reason planting trees is primary may be that trees last for a long time on the land once they are planted. Trees also take a long time to bear fruit, which is why we plant them first.

The Talmud teaches the following story: *One day as [a man named] Honi was walking along he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him “how many years will it take until it will bear fruit?” The man replied “not for seventy years”. Honi asked him, “do you really believe you’ll live another seventy years?” The man answered, “I found this world provided with carob trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants.”*^v

Planting trees is a long-term investment which may not bear fruit immediately. Thus, the instruction to plant trees is an instruction to think beyond the present moment to the needs of the future. When one is settling a new land, one might have other, more pressing needs than “planting trees!” But the Midrash teaches us that planting

– preparing for the long-term – is key to our responsibility, essential to our long-term success – and a way that we emulate G-d.

By encouraging us to think for the long-term needs of our children and future generations, trees thus represent the ecological principle of sustainability.

Letting Planted Fruit Trees Live

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you. However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.” (Deuteronomy 20:19-20)^{vi}

The Torah teaches us that we are not to cut down fruit trees in wartime. This message, beginning with trees, is so fundamental that it has become the basis of the teaching of “bal tashchit” – the overall prohibition against needless destruction.

An ambiguity lies at the heart of this critical source about trees. Does the source say that the tree of the field IS human, or ask the question, is the tree of the field human?^{vii} These two potential meanings yield lessons about the importance of trees which can illuminate our understanding today.

Rabbeinu Bachya (1255-1340 C.E, Spain) writes:

“The commentators [in the Midrash^{viii}] explain that the life of man and his food is [from] a tree of the field...and it is not the way of a wise and understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy, and therefore you should not cut down a tree of the field, rather you should protect it from destruction and damage, and take benefit from it.”^{ix}

Rabbeinu Bachya (based on the Midrash^x) sees the text as reading that the tree of the field represents a human. His explanation is that trees are so important to human life that it is as if they are human life. Destroying those trees destroys human life, because it may destroy the lives that depend on them.

A second view helps us develop a sense of compassion and respect for living creatures. Rashi explains: *“Behold, the word ki here serves in the sense of “perhaps”: Perhaps the tree of the field is a man, taking refuge from you within the besieged city that it should suffer the afflictions of hunger and thirst, like the people of the city? (And seeing that this is not the case - supercommentators on Rashi), why should you destroy it?”*

Rashi understands this verse to mean that, since the tree is not an enemy, we have no right to destroy it or make it suffer.

In each possible interpretation, trees may stand as a symbol for the abundant resources of the natural world. Because we depend upon them for our life, we must protect and preserve them. Because they are innocent, we should not take out our aggression on them. Being aware of interdependence and having compassion are key traits we can learn from this teaching for how to relate to the natural world.

Settling the Land

The mitzvah of yishuv ha'aretz (settling the land) requires developing the natural world to provide for our needs, including a suitable place to live, work, learn and serve the Creator, as well as appropriate systems for the supply of food, energy, water and transportation needs. This development must be properly done in balance with other considerations, including the ecological integrity of the land.

“[The earth] was not created to be desolate [uninhabited by Man], but rather was created to be settled.”^{xi}

Planting and maintaining trees is a key part of the mitzvah of settling the land of Israel. This is indicated by the great importance that the Sages put on trees in relationship to this mitzvah. For example, according to Jewish law, someone selling land in the land of Israel must give first consideration to any neighbor whose land abuts the parcel of land being sold. If, however, the neighbor wants to use the land for a purpose which will contribute less to yishuv ha'aretz than other buyers will, then he loses this privilege and the land can be sold to another buyer. How do we judge which purpose will contribute more or less to yishuv ha'aretz? According to the Shulchan Aruch:

If someone wants to buy a parcel of land to build houses, and the ben maitzra [neighbor with land abutting the land being sold] wants to buy the same parcel of land to plant crops, the buyer [who wants to build houses] has first right because of 'yishuv ha'aretz', and the rule of 'ben hamaitzar' doesn't apply. Some say, if the ben maitzra wants to plant trees, he takes precedence over the other buyer [even if the buyer wants to build houses - since trees contribute at least as much to yishuv ha'aretz].^{xii}

On this, the Sm'ah (R. Yehoshua Volk, 1555-1614, Poland) writes:

That which is more permanent on the land better fulfills [the mitzvah of] yishuv ha'aretz. Houses are more permanent than crops, and trees are more permanent and rooted in the land than houses.^{xiii}

The protection of fruit-producing trees was given even greater status in yishuv ha'aretz than non fruit-producing trees. For example, if an olive tree washes away in a flood, the owner is prohibited from uprooting it from its new location (in a neighbor's field) and replanting it in his field.^{xiv} The Rabbis - demonstrating their keen grasp of human nature - understood that the original owner, upon losing his tree, would be likely to plant another tree on his land to replace the one that was washed away.^{xv} This would strengthen the settlement of the land. In addition, the Mishna teaches: "It is forbidden to bring wood from olive trees or grape vines [and some say also, wood from fig trees and date palms] to the [Temple] altar because of [the mitzvah of] yishuv Eretz Yisrael."^{xvi}

The commentator Mefarsh explains:

"What is the meaning of 'because of the settlement of the land of Israel'? Since if they would burn the olive trees and grapevines, there would not be found wine to drink or oil to anoint with, and the land of Israel would be destroyed."^{xvii}

These sources indicate the great importance of trees—and especially fruit trees—in the Land of Israel, and the numerous ways in which Jewish law protects them.

Finally, lest we think that yishuv ha'aretz only has relevance to the settlement of the Land of Israel, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888, Germany) writes that the settlement of the Jewish people in the land of Israel was (and perhaps is) meant to be a model for the rest of the world.

"...the Land of Israel was also to be a Garden of Eden for the people of the Creator's law. It was meant to show the world, a second time, by its prosperity and its progress, what an abundance of blessing and happiness would be attained here on earth when the will of the Creator is taken as the sole measure for arranging all phases of human life."^{xviii}

Use Them Wisely

In ancient Israel and still today, trees are an important source of wood fiber.^{xix} For homes, furniture, paper, and numerous other purposes, trees are an essential resource. Being human means taking resources from the land for our own purposes, and Jewish tradition recognizes that this is so. But Jewish tradition gives us a model to help us understand how we should use our resources. Once again, trees are a model which can be understood to teach us about our relationship to creation as a whole.

When building the Tabernacle (Mishkan), the Jews were instructed to use acacia wood. Where did this acacia wood come from? The Midrash^{xx} teaches:

When Jacob went down to Egypt, he received a prophecy that his descendants would be redeemed from there and be commanded to build a Mishkan (Sanctuary) in the desert. Jacob instructed his children to plant acacia trees in Egypt. Over the hundreds of years of slavery, those saplings grew into large, mature trees. Before the Exodus, the Israelites cut down those trees and brought them with them through the Sea of Reeds into the desert.^{xxi} When the Israelites built the Sanctuary out of these trees, the trees sang jubilantly before God, as it says in Psalms, “then all the trees of the forest will sing with joy before Hashem.”^{xxii}

These trees, cut down for the holy purpose of building the Tabernacle, sang with joy despite the fact that they were cut down. Under many circumstances, we are taught not to cut down trees, but in this situation it was not only permitted, but was a source of joy. Perhaps from this teaching, we can learn what Jewish thought considers to be an appropriate use of our resources, a kind of “Jewish litmus test” for ethical resource use.

In the building of the Mishkan, we can find the ultimate example of use of trees for a higher goal. According to the Jewish Sages^{xxiii}, these trees and those that preceded them were in relationship with people for thousands of years, from the Garden of Eden to the moment they were cut for the Sanctuary. They were to become the pillars of the Sanctuary of God, which the Torah describes as the dwelling place of the Shechina (Divine Presence) amidst the Jewish people^{xxiv}, and which existed as a center for Divine worship for over 400 years.^{xxv} These trees were known by people and were used for a holy purpose. Perhaps from this we can learn to use our resources in a way that is transparent, respectful, and holy.

Trees Today

Trees are so important in Jewish thought that the Torah itself is called “a tree of life.” Jewish wisdom about trees has much to teach us about how we relate to G-d’s creation, and to all the natural resources upon which we rely. Perhaps this Torah wisdom can help us think more wisely about using these resources carefully, and living in a more sustainable way.

Jewish wisdom about trees teaches us that:

- We need to think and prepare for the future, and not only focus on our short-term needs.
- We must avoid needless waste.
- Trees are an important part of our life support system.
- We have no right to take out our human aggression on trees or other parts of the natural world.
- Trees are an essential piece of preparing and maintaining a good environment for human beings.
- When we use our resources in a responsible way, this brings holiness.

These teachings apply not only to trees, but to all of our resources. They apply not only to ancient Israel, but to our troubled, environmentally-stressed modern world. Bringing this wisdom into our daily lives can help us become more cognizant of the precious resources we have been given, and more careful about how we use them. In so doing, we will take better care of our world, sanctify our daily actions, and bring joy to creation. Then the words of the Psalmist will be fulfilled: “The heavens will be glad and the earth will rejoice...then all the trees of the forest will sing with joy—before Hashem...”^{xxvi}

ⁱ This dvar Torah has been adapted by Evonne Marzouk and the authors from Dr. Akiva Wolff’s “The Trees in Jewish Thought” and Rabbi Yonatan Neril’s “The Trees Sang with Joy,” both available at www.canfeinesharim.org.

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- ii Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1. This is the opinion of Beit Hillel. In the Land of Israel, most of the winter rains have fallen by Tu Bishvat, which occurs four months after the beginning of the rainy season. Sap rises within the trees, which begin to flower and bud. Tu Bishvat thus marks a New Year for the fruit of trees concerning mitzvot (commandments) like tithing, distinguishing between last year's fruits and the fruits of a new year.
- iii Midrash Kohelet Raba 7:28
- iv Midrash Vayikra Rabba 25:3
- v Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 23a
- vi Judaica Press translation
- vii For more on this see the article by Rabbi Yehoshua Kahan at <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=11516>
- viii Sifrei, Finkelstein Edition, Piska 203
- ix Commentary on Deuteronomy 20:19.
- x Sifrei, Finkelstein Edition, Piska 203
- xi Babylonian Talmud, Chagiga 2b
- xii Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpot, "Laws of Abutters", 175:21
- xiii Commentary of the Smah on Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpot, "Laws of Abutters", 175:21
- xiv Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 101a
- xv "If a [flooding] river washes away an olive tree and plants it in a neighboring field, and the owner of the tree wants to uproot the tree and replant it in his field, in the land of Israel we don't allow him, because of yishuv erez Yisrael." The purpose for this ruling is to increase the number of olive trees in the land of Israel. The owner of the land upon which the tree was replanted (by the river), since he had not invested time or effort in the tree, would be less likely to bother himself to plant another olive tree were the original owner allowed to reclaim his original tree.
- xvi Mishna, Tractate Tamid 29a
- xvii Commentary of an unidentified Rabbi writing between 1000 and 1400 C.E. which appears in place of Rashi, to Tractate Tamid, 29b. See [Perushi Harishonim](#) for the commentary of the Ra'avad, which also address yishuv erez Yisrael.
- xviii Commentary to Genesis 2:8. In [The Pentateuch](#), vol. 1 Genesis, translated and explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch, rendered into English by Isaac Levy, 2nd edition, Judaica Press: Gateshead, 1989, p. 57
- xix Israel today meets 10% of its demand for wood from domestic sources, according to Dr. Alon Tal in a lecture given at JNF Jerusalem, July 2009. He authored [Pollution in A Promised Land](#).
- xx Midrash Tanchuma (Warsaw edition), Parshat Teruma, Section nine. Rashi cites this Midrash twice in his commentary to the Book of Shemot (Exodus).
- xxi This is implicit but unstated in the Midrash.
- xxii Psalms 96:12-13, Artscroll translation. This chapter is read or sung every week during Kabbalat Shabbat.
- xxiii Rabbi Ibn Sho'eev of medieval Spain, commentary on On the end of the Torah portion of Terumah, cited in [Torah Shlema](#), compiled by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher (1895-1983), p. 14 of volume that includes Parshat Terumah, to Exodus verse 25:6. Translation here by the author.
- xxiv Shemot 25:8.
- xxv The Mishkan lasted until King Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem in 832 BCE.
- xxvi Psalms 96, Artscroll translation