Learning Sources for Tu b’Shevat

As part of our 5770 Learning and Action Campaign, we’ve gathered a rich compilation of traditional Jewish texts which may be learned around the holiday of Tu b’Shevat. Canfei Nesharim also offers individual, printable source sheets based on these materials, with discussion questions, which you may like to use for your community’s programs. Sources compiled by Rabbi Daniel Brown. See below for sources for English translations.

Why Tu b’Shevat?

Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1: There are four New Years: … on the first of Shevat the New Year for the tree, according to Bet Shammai. Bet Hillel say, on the fifteenth thereof.

Rabbi Pinchas Kehati comments on this Mishna: "The Talmud explains that the New Year for the tree was established in Shevat, 'Because most of the rains have already fallen, and the resin has come up in the trees, and as a result the fruits begin to form now.'"

Discussion questions:

1. Why was Tu b’Shevat chosen as the new year of the trees?
2. What can this teach us about Jewish thought on the timing of marking events and celebrations?
3. How is this similar or different to Jewish perspectives on birthdays, yarzheits, and the timing of other new years like Rosh Hashanah? Why do you think this might be so?

A. Fruit Trees (recommended for use in Seder World 1)

Devariim (Deuteronomy) 20:19: When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to seize it, do not destroy its trees by swinging an axe against them, for from it you will eat, and you shall not cut it down; for is the tree of the field a man (could also be translated: “for the tree of the field is a man”) that it should enter the siege before you?

Sifrei, Devariim (Deuteronomy) ch. 203: (The scriptural verse) "Because man is a tree of the field" teaches that the life of man is only from the tree.

Rabbeinu Bachya on Devariim (Deuteronomy) 20:19: "...And you will not cut them down because man is a tree of the field". The commentators, of blessed memory, explain thusly: because man's life and sustenance is (from) the 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 shouldn't cut down a tree of the field, rather you should protect it from destruction and damage, and take benefit from it…

Pirkei deRabbi Elieizer (Warsaw edition) chapter 34: Six voices go from one end of the world to the other and the sound is not audible... When a fruit-bearing tree is cut down the voice cries out from end of the world to the other, and its sound is not audible... When the soul departs from the body the voice goes out from one end of the world to the other, and its sound is not audible...

Discussion questions:
1. What do you think of Torah verse and the commentators' conclusions from it?
2. How are trees and people similar? How are we different?
3. Do people rely on trees now as much as they did in the past, given the abundance of products that we now derive from other sources like petroleum and metal? How does this change our view of trees? Of ourselves?

B. Settling the Land (recommended for use in World 2)

Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:23: The land shall not be sold for ever; for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

Sifra (bahar, ch. 3): When it [the land] will be Mine (G-d's), it will be yours (man's).

Tehillim (Psalms) 24:1: A psalm of David. The earth is the L-rd's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell in it.

Tehillim (Psalms) 115:16: The heavens belong to the L-rd, and the earth He has given to the children of Adam.

Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah (25:3): Rabbi Yehudah be Shimon began his discourse with the text. "After the Lord your G-d shall ye walk" (Devarim 12:5). But can a man of flesh and blood walk after the Holy One, blessed be he(?)… But in truth the Holy On, blessed be He, from the very beginning of the creation of the world, was before all else occupied with plantation, as is proved by the text, "And the Lord G-d planted a
garden in the first instance in Eden" (Bereshit 2:8), and so do you also, when you enter into the land, occupy yourselves first with nought else but plantation; hence it is written, "And when ye shall come into the land, then ye shall plant."

Yesha’yahu (Isaiah) 45:18: For thus says the Lord that created the heavens; G-d himself that formed the earth and made it; he has established it, he did not create it a waste land, he formed to be inhabited: I am the Lord, and there is none else.

Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 2b: "He did not create it a waste land, he formed it to be inhabited", specifically for tikkun olam (repairing the world).

Shulhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 175:26: An interested party desires to buy property in order to build houses, and the owner of adjoing property desires the (same) property in order to plant crops- the interested party has first rights to purchasing the property because of "yishuv ha'aretz" ("settling the land") and we are not concerned with the (presumed first rights of) the owner of adjoing property. And there are some (hallakhik decisors) who say that if the owner of adjoing property wants to plant trees, he may be take precedents.

Sm’a (on the preceding source): "...because of 'yishuv ha'aretz'..." (that is to say,) that everything which has greater permanence and is more established in the land better fulfills "yishuv" ("settlement"), houses are more established then crops, and trees are more established and remain in the earth longer than houses. And this hallakhik ruling is also practiced in hutz l'aretz (outside of the land of Israel)...

Discussion questions:
1. Who owns the world, G-d or people? What is humanity’s role in relationship to the land?
2. The idea of settling the land has ancient Jewish roots and many modern applications. Why do you think “settling the land” has been considered such a value in Jewish thought over time?
3. When we settle the land, what is the human relationship to G-d? If it’s not Shabbos, you may find it helpful to have participants draw a diagram that shows their view of the relationship between G-d, people, and the land.

C. The Interdependence of the World (Recommended for use in World 3)

Mishna Avot 5:1: By ten acts of speech was the world made. And what does Scripture mean [by having G-d say say ten times]? And is it not so that with a single act of speech [the world] could have been brought into being? But it is to exact punishment from the wicked, who destroy a world which was created through ten
acts of speech, and to secure a reward for the righteous, who sustain a world which was created through was created through ten acts of speech.

2. The Nineteen Letters- Letter Three Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch

It was not with just one word, one summons of creation, that the Almighty brought this world into being, the whole of it and every detail; for if it had been created in this manner, everything would be directly dependent upon G-d’s Word for its existence, life, and functioning. Instead, He called forth His world into existence in ten stages; He created an abundance of forces, intermingled and functioning closely together, according to His Word - and then He separated them, so that each had to sustain the other: none was henceforth able to exist and function by itself, but had to be sustained by its fellow creatures and, in turn, had to help them exist and function. In this way everything contributes according to its strength, however much or little, to the existence of the whole; and if it destroys a fellow creature, it robs itself of what it needs for its own existence.

Discussion Questions:
1. Why was the world created with interdependence as such a fundamental part of its nature?
2. What can this interdependence teach us about our relationships with other people, and our relationships with the animals, plants and inanimate objects of creation?
3. What can we learn about G-d from the vast and complex nature of creation?
D. “Fruit” Trees (recommended for use in World 4)

1. Rav Shimon bar Yochai and Avigdor Ashkenazi

Bereshit (Genesis) 1:11-12: And G-d said, let the earth bring forth grass, herb yielding seed, and fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so. And the earth brought forth grass, herb yielding seed, after its kind, and fruit tree after its kind, whose seed was in itself, after its kind; and G-d saw that it was good.

Rashi on Bereshit (Genesis) 1:11: "Fruit-tree" That the taste of the tree (will be) like the taste of (it's) fruit. But it (the earth) did not do so, rather (the verse says) "and the earth brought forth…trees yielding fruit", but the tree was not (itself like the taste of the) fruit. Therefore, when Adam was cursed for his sin, also she (the earth) was cursed for her sin, and was cursed.

2. Rashi on Bereshit (Genesis) 1:11: "Fruit-tree" That the taste of the tree (will be) like the taste of (it's) fruit. But he (the earth) did not do so, rather the verse says "and the earth brought forth…trees yielding fruit", but the tree was not (itself like the taste of the) fruit. Therefore, when Adam was cursed for his sin, also she (the earth) was cursed for her sin, and was cursed.

3. Orot haTeshuvah 6:7 - Ray Avraham Isaac Kook

7. At the inception of creation it was intended that the tree have the same taste as the fruit (Genesis Rabbah 5:9). All the supportive actions that sustain any general worthwhile spiritual goal should by right be experienced in the soul with the same feeling of elation and delight as the goal itself is experienced when we envision it. But earthly existence, the instability of life, the weariness of the spirit when confined in a corporate frame, brought it about that only the fruition of the final step, which embodies the primary ideal, is experienced in its pleasure and splendor. The trees that bear the fruit, with all of the necessity for the growth of the fruit have, however, become coarse matter and have lost their taste. This is the failing of the "earth," because of which it was cursed when Adam was also cursed for his sin. But every defect is destined to be mended. Thus we are assured that the day will come when creation will return to its original state, when the taste of the tree will be the same as the taste of the fruit. The earth will "repent" of its "sin" and the way of the practical life will no longer obstruct the delight of the ideal, which is sustained by appropriate intermediate steps on its way toward realization, and will stimulate its emergence from potentiality to actuality.

4. Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a: One day he [Honi the Circle Drawer] was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found [ready grown] carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children.

Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree? The man replied: I am his grandson. Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years.
**Discussion questions:**

1. Think about times in your life when the process of getting to a result was very difficult. When the process is more challenging, do you find the result more satisfying?
2. The sages seem to imply that it was not meant to be that way; that the “tree bark” or the work put in should be as satisfying as the fruit. What would this be like? Do you think this is possible?
3. What things have you been putting off because the fruits of your labor, while important, will take a very long time to achieve?
4. What environmental actions might you take on if you were willing to have the patience of Honi?

Compiled by Rabbi Daniel Brown

**Sources for Translations:**

All entries listed are for English sources in print; all other translations were provided to, or produced by the compiler of this source sheet.