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Perceptions On The Parsha

Tu B'Shevat

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"Tu B'Shevat has arrived, the holiday for the trees ..." Tu B'Shevat (literally, Fifteenth of Shevat) is one of those Jewish holidays that means very little to many Jews. Most don't even know that it is called a Rosh Hashanah (one of four), or why.

Halachically, Tu B'Shevat is the day of the year that separates the previous year from the upcoming year with respect to fruits grown on trees, since most of the rains have already fallen in Israel by then. As a result, any trees planted at that time are sure to take root in the already rain-saturated ground. Therefore, this is the day the rabbis designated to determine the fruits of the previous year's crop, for purposes of tithing. For this reason, Tu B'Shevat is a day of judgment for the trees, to determine how bountiful they will be in the upcoming year based upon the merits of the Jewish people.

Tu B'Shevat is also a day that bespeaks the praise of the Land of Israel, and it is therefore imbued with a festive sense. Work is not prohibited, but there is a tradition to eat fruits of the Land of Israel, especially of the seven species for which Israel is praised (they are: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates).

Conceptually, Tu B'Shevat means much more, especially coming in the weeks of Shov'vim (see Parashas Bo). As the Pri Tzaddik points out, it is not called the "Rosh Hashanah for the trees," but for "the tree" (singular); whenever the word "tree" is used, it always refers to Torah, which is called "Aitz Chaim," the Tree of Life. What is this supposed to allude to?

Most people are aware that there were at least two trees in the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life. What many are not aware of is that, really, there had only been one tree before Adam ate the Forbidden Fruit: the Tree of Life.

But the Torah speaks about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil before the sin as well? Yes, says the Zohar-but before the sin, it existed merely as a branch off the Tree of Life itself. Only once Adam ate from the Tree against God's will not to did the "branch" break off and become an independent tree and source of knowledge.

Rectification of creation means re-unifying the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil with the Tree of Life; Moshiach comes once they are one, just as with the reunification of God's Ineffable Name (see Rashi at the end of Parashas BeShallah). We do this primarily by learning Torah and doing mitzvos, which serves to remove the veil of nature from over G-d's hand and make His Presence clearer.

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Therefore, Tu B'Shevat is not simply a non-holiday, to be marked merely by the consumption of carob. It is a time of deep contemplation, of developing a spiritual unity with Torah and Eretz Yisroel. Like on Purim after it, the festive mood of Tu B'Shevat is to help us elevate our consciousness to tap into God's master plan for creation, and find our place within that plan. In doing so, we bring the Tree of Knowledge closer to unification with the Tree of Life.

Not only this, the Pri Tzaddik (how appropriate-his name means: Fruit of the Tzaddik!) points out, but the Jewish people are referred to as "apples hanging on the Tree in the orchard," the Tree here referring to G-d Himself. Therefore Tu B'Shevat is also the celebration of the unique and intimate relationship the Jewish people have with their G-d, and a day to pursue that closeness.

Having said all of this, I wish you Chag Samay'ach, and a fruitful day!

Pinchas Winston

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