Exploring Trees in Jewish Thought
A Study and Discussion Guide

I. 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, yarzeheits, and the timing of other new years like Rosh Hashanah? Why do you think this might be so?

II. Sustainability: Planting For the Long-Term

Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Raba (Vilna edition) 7:28:
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.'

Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah (Vilna edition) 25:3:
Rabbi Yehudah ben Shimon began his discourse with the text, "After the Lord your G-d shall you walk" (Deuteronomy 12:5). But can a man of flesh and blood walk after the Holy One, blessed be He(?)… But in truth the Holy One, 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" (Genesis 2:8), and so do you also, when you enter into the land, occupy yourselves first with nothing else but plantation; hence it is written, "And when you shall come into the land, then you shall plant."
See now, that the word 'Ki' functions here in the sense of “perhaps”: Is the tree of the field perhaps a man that it should be included in the besieged town because of you, to suffer the tribulations of hunger and thirst like the

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 23a

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.

Discussion Questions:
1. What do trees symbolize in these verses?
2. How do they teach us about what is a good environment for people?
3. What can they teach us about planting for the long-term and preparation for the future?

III. The Tree of the Field is a Person

Deuteronomy, 20:19-20, Judaica Press translation
“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by cutting them down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.

This [is the meaning of] ‘from it you will eat,’ and if you destroy it you will damage and take away its benefit.

Rabbeinu Bachayei, (ben Asher ben Hava), 13th Century, Spain, translation by Yonathan Neril
‘The commentators explain that the life of man and his food is [from] the tree of the field, as the verse says, ‘for he would be taking a life as a pledge’ (Deuteronomy 24:6, Artscroll translation), and therefore I command you that you should not destroy it because there is blessing in it... and it is not the actions of a wise and understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy, and therefore you should not expend energy to cut down a tree of the field; rather you should protect it from destruction and damage and take benefit from it.

This [is the meaning of] ‘from it you will eat,’ and if you destroy it you will damage and take away its benefit.”

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E., France), commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19,
Artscroll Rashi translation
See now, that the word ‘Ki’ functions here in the sense of “perhaps”: Is the tree of the field perhaps a man that it should be included in the besieged town because of you, to suffer the tribulations of hunger and thirst like the
people of the city? Why should you destroy it?

Discussion Questions:
1. Why does the Torah forbid cutting down fruit trees to build siege-works during a war, when it is not needless destruction but use of resources for an important purpose?
2. What does it mean that a tree is compared to a person? Compare the different views of Rashi and Rabbeinu Bachayei in their understandings. Which resonates more with you?
3. What can these sources teach us about our responsibility to trees and all natural resources?

IV. Settling the Land of Israel

Mishna Tamid, 2:3, translation from Judaic Classics Library:

 aantalเวลา בנו 발표 תופור זכר ובית

 תהליך מיון קבעים לותר בשירותינו ובון חמשתשרים ל�ירה ובון חמשתשרים ל�ירה ויתר משלי ישול הציר באיה

כרילינך ממורחב על תانا על פשע עין שמח:

Mishna Tamid, 2:3, translation from Judaic Classics Library:

They [the priests] then began to take up the logs to lay the fire. Were all kinds of wood suitable for the fire? All kinds of wood were suitable for the fire except vine and olive wood. What they mostly used, however, were boughs of fig trees and of nut trees and of oil trees.

Talmud, Tamid 29b, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library.

Aside from of olive tree and grapevine [quote of the Mishna]. Why were these excepted? — Rav Papa said: Because they have knots. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: Because of the settlement of the Land of Israel... Rabbi Eleazar adds [as not suitable]: also wood from the matish and the oak and the date tree and the carob and sycamore. ... But to the one who says, ‘it is because of the settlement of the Land of Israel,' we can object, does not the date tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? — He can reply to you: By the same reasoning does not the fig tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? But what do you answer to this? That we speak of a fig tree which does not produce fruit. Similarly we speak of a date tree which does not produce fruit. But are there fig trees which do not produce fruit? Yes, as stated by Rahabah...

Mefaresh, an unidentified Rishon (writing between 1000 and 1400 C.E.) which appears in place of Rashi, to Tractate Tamid, 29b, translation by Yonatan Neril

Certainly the reason is as stated because knots [these woods] are invalid, but even without the reason of knots, for a different reason they would desist [from using them.] What is it? 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...

1 An unknown kind of hardwood tree.
Discussion Questions:
1. How do you see the mitzvah of settling the land of Israel as relating to this limitation on the kind of trees to use in sacrifices?
2. Can you think of any modern parallels in which we make similar restrictions upon ourselves?
3. Can you think of any modern parallels (for example, in developing countries) where the lack of these restrictions has had severe consequences?

V. Use Them Wisely

Exodus 26: 15-16, Translation by Judaica Press
15. "And you shall make the planks for the Mishkan [Sanctuary] of acacia wood, upright. 16. "Ten cubits [shall be] the length of each plank, and a cubit and a half [shall be] the width of each plank.

Note: a cubit is approximately 1.5 feet, or half a meter. Also, the following Midrash Tanchuma refers to trees as עץ אראזים), while the Torah verses above use the words עץ עצי שיטים (atzei shittim, acacia trees) regarding the wood for the Sanctuary. The Midrash uses the word עץ אראזים (arazim) in a general sense, as it states elsewhere that there are 24 types of עץ אראזים (arazim), of which עץ ע棐ים (atzei shittim) are one type. Rashi on this verse quotes from the following Midrash:

פִּיתָרָה חַמַּאָה (ורשא) פִּיתָרָה חַמַּאָה שְׁלִילָה שֹׁמֵר מִן שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה שְׁלִילָה Shemot Parashah

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From the following Midrash:

"When [did the trees sing this song]? When the Sanctuary was made from them, when God said to Moses about the Sanctuary..."And you shall make the boards for the Sanctuary of standing acacia wood." The Torah does not say 'and you shall make boards,' but 'and you shall make the boards'--those which their ancestors had prepared for them.
Commentary of Rabbi Ibn Sho'eev of Spain, 13th century (approx.), translation by Yonatan Neril

“They [the Sages] said that Adam took trees from the Garden of Eden and gave them to Abraham, and Abraham [gave them] to Isaac, and Isaac [gave them] to Jacob. Jacob took them down to Egypt, and from there the tribes of Israel took them out. This is the acacia wood [commanded for use in the Sanctuary].”

Discussion Questions:
1. Why is this example of cutting down trees acceptable, as compared to examples where it is not permitted above?
2. Why did the planks of wood sing when they were being brought to build the Sanctuary? What factors contributed to their wanting to sing?
3. What does it mean that a tree sings? What might the song sound like?

VI. A Concluding Message

Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer (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 one 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 question:
How does this teaching encapsulate and expand our new understanding of trees?

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