



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

6 - 7 February, 2009

13 Shevat 5769

Parashat Beshalach
(Exodus 13:17–17:16)

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From the Rabbi's desk

Although it is the most minor of holidays, Tu B'Shvat is a monument to Jewish creativity. Its evolution demonstrates that Jews have always reshaped their tradition to meet new needs and reach for deeper insight.

As evidenced by the name of the observance, Tu B'Shvat's beginnings could not be more mundane. "Tu" is simply the vocalization of a number -- "Tet-Vav"-- that is "15". Shvat is just the name of the 11th month of the Jewish calendar. No one in the time of the Rabbis would have particularly looked forward to this day. It was simply the date that determined which "tithing year" the produce of your fruit trees were subject to. This was a necessary calculation perhaps, but not anything anyone would care to celebrate.

Later, Jews of the diaspora needed a way to reaffirm their connection to Eretz Yisrael in a visceral rather than theoretical way. This day, associated as it was with the spring growth of trees rooted in holy soil provided a sense of rootedness for the Jewish people as well. As distant as they might be from the Land, its goodness could be celebrated by reciting Psalms and eating its produce. Olives, pomegranates, and figs were good to eat, but as the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss would say, they were also good to think. Eating them and the rest of the "seven species" associated with Biblical Israel was a way to contemplate and to taste the goodness of the Land of Milk and Honey.

In our day, when Eretz Yisrael is also Medinat Yisrael this link to the physical landscape is still critical. We do not love the idea of Jewish sovereignty in the abstract, but rather Jewish freedom in the rugged mountains, austere deserts, and lush valleys of this particular, precious spot on the globe. To nourish our bodies from its fruit is to remember a place that nourishes our souls like no other.

Thanks to the mystics of Tzfat, Tu B'Shvat has another more global dimension. For them the New Year of the Trees evoked the conduit through which divinity entered the world, conceptualized as a life giving tree. In order to celebrate and encourage the flow of blessing into this world, they devised a seder for Tu B'Shvat modeled on the Pesach seder. While we may not entirely accept the theology of the Kabbalists who created it, the basic message of the Tu B'Shvat seder is a critical one for this wounded world.

It is the nature of the world to generously bestow on us the material blessings that make life possible and, through its grandeur, the intangible blessings that make life a wonder. Much damage has been done by forgetting that the world is a gift from HaShem which we ought to accept in gratitude and in awe. With the simple, but infinitely good things of the earth, the mystics' Tu B'Shvat reminds us that we are sustained by the ordinary miracles of sun, rain, and soil; by forces we did not originate and cannot control. The truth of Tu B'Shvat is that God's overflowing goodness fills and sustains the world. The proof of this is that we live.

All Blessings
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