



Lesson 4, Series 2

Tu B'shevat (15 Shevat) corresponding to Feb. 11, is the Jewish New Year for Trees.

Despite the fact that it may be cold and the trees may look dreary, bare, and lifeless-far from experiencing birth or rebirth-there is much going on beneath the surface. It is at this time that the sap, a mixture of water and minerals absorbed through the tree's roots, begins to rise into its trunk, nourishing the tree and developing the production of fruit. Interestingly, although we are used to water always flowing downward, within trees however, water flows against its nature. This phenomenon is so powerful that trees are able to draw upward to heights above 350 feet.

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair, a renowned lecturer in Talmudic logic and philosophy, explains this on a deeper level: You can look at winter in two ways; either as a deathly chill, The End, or as a silent birthday. The same is true of life itself. You can look at the winter years of life as The End. Or you can see those same years as looking forward to a life just about to be born on another plane. **Rabbi Yisrael B'aal Shem Tov**, founder of the Chassidic movement, reflected on a verse in Malachi 3:12: "...for you shall be a land of desire", that each person is like a plot of land-*earthy and rough*-but filled with latent treasure. The Torah likens man to a tree-Just like the tree contains an unseen vigor which rises in the depths of winter, so too wo/man has an unseen vigor planted inside of him/her-an eternal existence (Jewish soul) that springs to life, as we say in the blessing after the Torah reading, "Eternal life you have planted within us." **When we celebrate Tu B'shvat we are not just celebrating the New Year for Trees. We are celebrating our own renaissance, our own rebirth.**

"Man is a tree of the field" Deuteronomy 20:19. Tu B'shevat presents a special opportunity to reflect upon this Torah verse and the many lessons that trees impart to us. Tu B'shevat is one of the days on the Jewish calendar on which we are forbidden to take on elective fasts, and to recite the confession and supplication, during prayer. This implies that the nature of the day is joyous and celebratory.

Lessons we may learn from a tree:

- Stand tall and proud as a Jew.
- Always keep growing physically and spiritually.
- Drink plenty of water. (Torah is compared to water)
- Roots are like faith- so be sure they are strong.
- Sometimes it's necessary to "go out on a limb" and get out of our comfort zone.
- Just as a seed degenerates in the ground before it germinates, sometimes it is necessary to be rid of negative traits or habits to reach higher.
- We should ensure that our "fruits", that which we put forth, our words and deeds, are sweet and bring happiness to others.
- Firm roots begin with a good Jewish education and continues through life-long learning, that will anchor us throughout life, especially during trying times.
- Just as each tree is unique and possesses its particular characteristics, we are all different, individual, and possess our own beauty inward and outward.

On Tu B'shevat we specifically celebrate the fruit tree by eating the 7 species with which the Land of Israel is blessed. Deuteronomy 8:7-8: "For the Lord your G-d is bringing you to a good land, a land with brooks of water, fountains and depths, emerging in valleys and mountains; a land of wheat and barley, [grape] vines and figs and pomegranates; a land of oil-producing olives and [date] honey.

In connection with the [grape] vine, have you ever wondered why wine is so central to Jewish practice and tradition? (Shabbat Kiddush, Havdalah, weddings, circumcisions, Passover, Sukkot, Rosh Hashana, etc.) Rabbi Yosef Wineberg (Lessons in Tanya) explains: "When the Temple stood, the joy of the festivals consisted of eating the sacrificial meat; now that the Temple is no longer, joy lies in drinking wine" (Pesachim 109a) **Although the festivals were given for our souls to rejoice in holiness...meat and wine are prescribed, so as to harmonize the moods of body and soul."**

Biblical book of Judges 9:13: "Wine that brings joy to man and G-d". This means that the very natural human part of us wants to indulge in physical pleasure while the G-dly part of us wants to become close to Almighty G-d by fulfilling His commandments. Wine is thus symbolic of bringing the animal soul on board with the observance of mitzvot and subsequently transforming our animalistic vices into passionate G-dly desires. Ultimately, with wine we say L'chaim and celebrate our very existence as the Jewish people, and we surely have every reason to be joyful and celebrate! May we merit the verse in Isaiah 65:22: "The days of My people shall be [as long] as the days of a tree".

As told by Rabbi Joseph Isaac Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe obm: It was the summer of 1896, and Father and I were strolling in the fields of Balivka, a hamlet near Lubavitch. The grain was near to ripening, and the wheat and grass swayed gently in the breeze. Said Father to me, "**See G-dliness!** Every movement of each stalk and grass was included in G-d's primordial thought of creation, in G-d's all-embracing vision of history, and is guided by divine providence toward a G-dly purpose."

Walking, we entered the forest. Engrossed in what I had heard, excited by the gentleness and seriousness of Father's words, I absentmindedly tore a leaf off a passing tree. Holding it a while in my hands, I continued my thoughtful pacing, occasionally tearing small pieces of leaf and casting them to the winds.

"The Holy Ari," said Father to me, "says that not only is every leaf on a tree a creation invested with divine life, created for a specific purpose within G-d's intent in creation, but also, that within each and every leaf there is a spark of a soul that has descended to earth to find its correction and fulfillment. "The Talmud," Father continued, "rules that 'a man is always responsible for his/her actions, whether awake or asleep.' The difference between wakefulness and sleep is in the inner faculties of man, one's intellect and emotions. The external faculties function equally well in sleep; only the inner faculties are confused. So, dreams present us with contradictory truths. A waking wo/man sees the real world; a sleeping wo/man does not. This is the deeper significance of wakefulness and sleep: when one is awake one sees divinity; when asleep, one does not. "Nevertheless, our sages maintain that wo/ man is always responsible for one's actions, whether awake or asleep.

Only this moment we have spoken of divine providence, and unthinkingly you tore off a leaf, played with it in your hands, twisting and squashing and tearing it to pieces, throwing it in all directions. "**How can one be so callous towards a creation of G-d? This leaf was created by the Almighty towards a specific purpose, and is imbued with a divine life-force. It has a body, and it has its life. In what way is the 'I' of this leaf inferior to yours?"** Both figures in this story were Chabad Rebbes (leaders) whose lives were exemplary and stand to teach us a life lesson to follow on a higher plane.

~ This program was funded, in part, through a grant from the Jewish Educational Enhancement Projects Fund of the Mack's Center for Jewish Education ~

Dear Friend:

This "Lesson in a Box" is brought to you by Aleph Learning Institute of Baltimore, gleaned from our Rosh Chodesh Society classes. **We invite you to share in our work, with a generous tax-deductible contribution payable to Chabad Lubavitch of Maryland, Inc. Dedications for our building campaign are most welcome!** Please visit our website: www.alephlearninginstitute.org.

Sincerely,

Rechel Kaplan, Founder & Director, Aleph Learning Institute

