



Tu Bishvat

Learning to take care of our resources

One of the most fascinating aspects of Jewish festivals is the constant search and renewal of meaning in each one of them. We find festivals that appear in our sources with one meaning but, with time and with a shift in values, they also change their content to adapt to new messages that we want to attach to them: Chanukkah is reformulated on the heels of Zionism and turns into a festival celebrating the struggle for independence, Tu B'Shvat is reformulated - especially in Israel - as a day for lovers. Thus, every festival develops new meanings. Tu Bishvat is one of such festivals.

The Mishnah speaks of four new years. Rosh Hashanah, of course, is the most important, commemorating the Creation of the World. The origins of Tu Bishvat are far humbler: marking the new fiscal year for tree produce. In contradistinction to Rosh Hashanah, Tu Bishvat was not a joyous celebration. Rather, in Temple times, the 15 of Shvat was the day set aside for the tithing of fruits. The trees that had given fruit for more than three years prior to that date were liable for taxation, with the collection destined for the Temple's upkeep. Fruit trees planted within the tree years of that Tu Bishvat were considered 'orlah and their produce was forbidden by Biblical law (Leviticus 19.23). During the fourth year, the fruit of the tree was tithed and offered at the Temple. Thus, after the destruction of the Second Temple (70CE), Tu Bishvat passed quietly into Jewish history as a minor holiday.

In recent years, we see how strongly Tu Bishvat has transformed itself in a festival about environmental awareness, ecology, and our bond with nature. Without a doubt, the idea of celebrating trees and their fruit, the environment and Mother Earth, is especially important in this day and age where greenhouse gases emissions, pollution, global warming and the environmental awareness of corporations is growing. Given the multifaceted nature of environmental care, I would like to share today one that stems from the Torah: the mitzvah of "bal tashchit" - not destroying and not wasting. We read in the book of Deuteronomy:

19 When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by wielding an axe against them; for thou mayest eat of them, but thou shalt not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of thee? 20 Only the trees of which thou knowest that they are not trees for food, them thou mayest destroy and cut down, that thou mayest build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it fall. (Deut 20.19-20)

In a situation of war, when a city is being besieged, one must not destroy the trees, both honoring the values of environmental preservation of a natural resources, and also preventing suffering and pain in the human heart. This verse was also extrapolated to other aspects of life. Thus helping us learn two very important values for our bond with nature and its resources.

The first: **waste not.**

In the Talmud, Rabbi Zutra already warns us that when a candle is lit, it is forbidden to cover, without need, the oil lamp or to open the vial of fuel, since in both cases this increases consumption of precious fuel. Rabbi Yehudah Hachasid (c. XIII) teaches us that someone using expensive clothing under the sun is incurring (because of their wear) in a violation of "bal tashchit".

The second: **ruin not.**

Our tradition teaches us that we must be careful not to ruin something wantonly, demanding careful attention to our actions. For example, when we do the keriah (rending our garments as a sign of grief), we must not rend them too much so that clothes can be mended and used again. Another example is not to pass a cup of wine over bread (or challot), or to refrain throwing bread around the table, to prevent the possibility of ruining in the wine that is on the table.

Now, let us translate this mitzvah into our daily lives: What connection do we have with our natural resources and with resources in general? How much do we mind not wasting, ruining, or destroying our environment without need? What is our connection with the objects around us: with clothes, with food?

Maybe Tu Bishvat holds the key to raising our awareness and generating a change that will help us take care of our environment and our resources. *This Mitzvah teaches to love good and have a more positive outlook on life, and shun bad, and by taking care of nature, take the path of those who love peace.*

Rabbi Mauricio Balter
(Eshel Abraham-Beer Sheva, Israel)

(translated by Rabbi Juan Mejía, Southwestern Coordinator for Be"chol Lashon)

