

Tu Bishvat

Planting for the Future

This week is Tu Bishvat. I wanted to spend a little time thinking about trees and their significance. It is true that in the Mishna (Rosh Hashanna 1:1) Tu Bishvat is little more than a technical date in order to distinguish the tithes of a certain year from the next. And yet, under the influence, first of Kabbala, and then of Modern Zionism (now that is a lovely combination) Tu Bishvat has flowered and developed an identity all of its own. In this Devar Torah, we shall attempt to probe certain dimensions of planting Trees.

Imitating God

"R. Yehuda b. Simon: 'You shall walk after God.' (Devarim 13:5) Is it possible for a human to follow the Holy One blessed be He? He about whom it is stated: 'In the sea is Your path, and your walkway is in the many waters, ' (Tehillim 77:20) how can a person fulfill the injunction to "walk after God."? 'To Him shall you cleave' (Devarim ibid) Can a person ascend to the heavens and cleave to the Shechina? At the beginning of the creation of the world, God immediately engaged in the act of planting, as it states: 'He planted a garden in Eden' (Bereshit 2:8) **Likewise, when you enter the land, the first thing you should engage in is the act of planting, as it states: 'When you enter the land, you shall plant all manner of fruit trees.'**"
Vayikra Rabba 25:3

The Midrash is concerned with the instruction to "follow" God, the notion known as *imitatio dei*. The Midrash suggests that one way in which we can actually act in a God-like manner is by planting trees! God planted trees in order to create an environment for man. Likewise, we should act in his image to further the state of the worlds greenery. However, we might ask; what is the purpose of this planting? What role does it fulfill? In what manner does it reflect Hashem?

THE STORY OF CHONI

For one particular vantage point, we should refer to the story of Choni as narrated by the Gemara in Massechet Taanit. We remember Choni. He was the man who confronted God when there was a drought. The Mishna tells us how Choni "drew a circle (on the ground) and stood inside it. He announced: Master of the Universe, Your children are looking in your direction. I swear that I will not leave this spot until you have mercy upon your children." And the rain began to fall. Choni is the person who brazenly orders God around. His colleagues disapproved of his aggressive and arrogant style of prayer, and yet his defiant stand is recorded for posterity in the Mishna. (See Taanit 19a)

R. Yohanan said: Through all the days of that righteous man (Choni), he was troubled about the meaning of the verse "A Song of Ascents. When the Lord brought back those that returned to Zion, we were like as if in a dream" (Ps. 126:1) Is it possible for a man to doze off and dream continuously for seventy years?

One day, as he was walking on the road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asked him, "How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?" The man replied, "Seventy years." He asked, "Are you quite sure you will live another seventy years to eat its fruit?" The man replied, "I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my children."

Once, when Choni sat down for a meal, sleep overcame him and he dozed off.... he continued sleeping for seventy years. When he awoke, he saw a man gathering the fruit of that same carob tree. He asked, "Are you the man who planted this tree?" The man replied, "That was my grandfather." (Taanit 23a)

Apparently Choni, is an impatient fellow. When he talks to God, demanding rain, he insist upon immediate results. He wants rain now! Quickly! Choni finds the notion of long term processes a challenge. In this Gemara, he cannot fathom the notion of how one might dream for the return of the exiles of Jerusalem for seventy years. I think that it was not the length of the sleep that bothered him. It was the fact that a dream might lie unfulfilled for seventy years. He cannot comprehend why a person would plant a tree whose fruit he would not enjoy. Choni sees things in the here-and-now; long-term planning is not his strong point.

And yet, the lesson of the Seventy years is brought home by a simple Carob tree. A grandfather plants a tree because he has faith in the future, because he wants to plan for the next generation and the generation after that. The planting of trees symbolizes permanence and endurance. The tree spans generations, and do we not say in Tehillim, "The span of our life is seventy years" (90:10.) The tree is the notion of endurance of continuity, of the seeds I set down for the future, building, investing and planting. It is the quintessential symbol of longevity, of viewing time beyond the immediate. And it is this that Choni has to learn.

We can live life in the immediate, but in a natural world, God teaches us that we have to plant, to plant seeds, to invest in processes that will persist well beyond our lifetime. We might not eat the fruits of those trees but we live secure in the knowledge that we have toiled to ensure that our children will reap those fruits.

(The passuk that is quoted by the Midrash from Vayikra 19:23 deals with Orla. The entire concept of Orla relates to the fact that I may not enjoy the fruits of a tree the minute that I plant it. I have to wait!)

At the very start of the world, God plants trees. He might have planted them before man entered the scene, but he waited for man, so that man might witness this momentous event. God wished to demonstrate a crucial lesson to mankind. That living is not simply about today.

Sometimes it is not even about tomorrow. It is about a day in the distant future. The trees teach us to plan for the future.

REDEMPTION

But beyond this universal lesson is also a lesson that relates to our particular Jewish future. Choni is not puzzled simply by the notion of planning a lifespan ahead. He is concerned with Redemption. How can one dream of Redemption for Seventy years? Do we not want Mashiach Now? Can one tolerate an unredeemed world for all of one's life?

In our original Midrash, the proof-texts are fascinating in this regard. God's planting is taken from Bereshit as God plants Gan Eden. What is the mirror image of God's planting Gan Eden? It is the when we enter Eretz Yisrael! As the Torah states: 'When you enter the land, you shall plant all manner of fruit trees.' There is something about these trees that relates directly to the Jewish People's tenure in Eretz Yisrael. We yearn to recreate Gan Eden – the perfect reality - in Eretz Yisrael!

"If you are planting a sapling and they inform you that the Messiah is coming, plant first and greet him afterwards." (Avot De-Rebbe Natan, Shechter Edition, chap. 1, version b).

"Rabbi Abba taught: 'You have no clearer sign of the End (i.e. redemption) than this, as it states: (Ezekiel 36:8): 'But you, O mountains of Israel, shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel' (Sanhedrin 98a)

It is quite fascinating that JNF dedicated its efforts to reclaim Eretz Yisrael in modern times by planting forests, and that the early founding fathers of Zionism saw agriculture as the primary tool in which to rebuild the ancient land.

But what message might we take for our confusing times from all this? Eretz Yisrael is blooming! Does that mean that we have the "clear sign" that Mashiach is on his way? Is Mashiach here "Now" as Choni would have it. Or alternatively, should we "plant first and greet him afterwards."?

As I have suggested, the Gemara about Choni is suffused with Messianic overtones. I think that the Gemara is saying that even when waiting for Geula, we might only plant the seeds, and reap the fruits many generations later. It isn't always a case of the Redemption happening "in the blink of an eye."

We talk of "*Reishit Tzmitchat Geulateinu*" (- that Israel is the "Beginning of the flowering of the Redemption.") There were times when we imagined that the flower of Redemption was flowering imminently, that we could see the process of growth so vividly. The process appeared to be taking shape as we watched.

But nowadays, that path seems more confusing. The plant refuses to flower, it twists and turns, it wilts sometimes, and then grows some more. But the flower

of Redemption still eludes us. What should we do? There is a danger here. It is a danger of impatience, of the desire for immediate results. We have to be worried that when we understand that our dreams will not be realized with immediacy that we will refuse to dream! Or worse, that we will try to reshape and adjust the plant – and snap its head off in the process! Maybe if we understand that our dream will take shape in a generation or two we will fail to plant, to sow the seeds for the next generation. And for this reason, we must reread the Gemara about Choni. We CAN hold a dream for seventy years and longer. Sometimes we have to wait for redemption and in the meantime to raise grandchildren as we wait for the tree to take shape. We cannot rush the process. But we will only have what to dream about if we continue to sow the seeds that yield redemption. We must do our part, ploughing the tough earth and sowing the tender seeds with faith and love, with hope and tears, so that eventually, if we are patient – in time - the tree will grow.

Happy planting! Happy waiting!

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