

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat B'Shalach – The Bitter Tree Sweetener

Reduce & Reuse

It is no wonder that we always read *Parashat B'Shalach* in proximity with Tu b'Shevat – the New Year of the Tree. There are several beautiful references and deep allusions to Tu b'Shevat, in this *parasha*. With all the work preparing my lectures and workshops for my upcoming [2015 North America Tour](#), I'm kind of cheating, but not really. Hashem made other people's beautiful teachings on Nature in the *parasha* fall literally into my lap. So in the Tu b'Shevat spirit of 'reuse' I will be sharing the insights of [Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen zt"l](#) and [Rabbi Avraham Arie Trugman](#) who is very much alive. I have organized and spun my own glimmers into their teachings. As a prelude, I like to emphasize that Tu b'Shevat is a time for strengthening ourselves in the mitzvah of *bal tashchit* – avoiding waste, especially of trees, characteristic of Western consumer society. Think about how many trees we cut down monthly without even knowing it, for uses like writing paper, cardboard packaging, envelopes, toilet paper, wooden furniture, etc. In this week's *parasha* Hashem showed Moshe a tree to put in the water, for the specific, unique purposeful use of allowing the Israelites to drink otherwise intolerably bitter water. Let us be inspired by this to use Hashem's resources only in a mindful purposeful way! Think about this next time when you reach out to take three napkins to wipe up some spilled water on the table. Why not use a rag that can be reused?

The Tree of Life Heals the Bitterness

"They came to Marah and they could not drink the waters for they were bitter. And he cried to Hashem, and Hashem showed him (or taught him) a tree and he cast it into the waters and they were sweetened" (*Shemot* 15:23, 25). The "Tree" that sweetens the bitterness of life is the Torah, which provides us with the waters of דַּעַת/*da'at* – knowledge of how evil is joined to good as part of G-d's unity. The tree, which Moshe threw into the water to sweeten them, alludes to the Tree of Life, as it says, "It [the Torah] is a Tree of Life for those who grasp onto it" (*Mishlei* 3:18). This tree is further connected to G-d's promise to heal the people, "I have created the evil inclination and the Torah as an antidote" (*Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin* 30b). Similar to the Torah, which both sweetens reality and has spiritual, psychological and emotional healing qualities, trees serve the same purpose in a physical manner by providing us with shade, beauty, healing barks, roots and leaves, as well as sweet, nourishing fruits (Rabbi Avraham Trugman).

Being Bitter Makes Everything Taste Bitter

I personally learned with Nechama Leibowitz how it states, "They could not drink from the water because they were bitter" (*Shemot* 15:23). Sitting in her crammed Jerusalem apartment lined with books and teaching files, I heard her say, "It didn't state that the water was bitter, it stated, 'they

were bitter.’ Their experience was a reflection of themselves. When we are bitter, everything we taste is bitter.” The children of Israel were devastated when they found themselves without water after leaving the miracles of the Sea. Perhaps they expected that their miraculous existence would continue forever, and regular life was therefore a bitter pill to swallow. “There is no water except Torah” (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kama 82a*). The people were still so involved in thinking about the physical booty they collected at the sea, (Rashi, *Shemot 15:22*), that it distracted them from immersing themselves in Torah and more spiritual matters. This then led to their going without water on the metaphorical and physical levels for three days, ultimately leading to their bitter mindset. By throwing a tree, which also symbolizes Torah, into these bitter waters, Moshe reminded them that by immersing themselves in the wellsprings of Torah, they could reinstate the necessary balance between the physical and the spiritual in their lives (Rabbi Avraham Trugman).

The Bitter Tree Sweetener

Rabbi Yissochor Frand explains how the Torah section immediately following the description of the Splitting of the Sea – literally in the dawning days of the Jewish nation – describes the incident when Israel traveled for three days and could not find water. They came to a place called *Marah* (bitter). When they were unable to drink the water there because it was bitter, they complained against Moshe. G-d then revealed a tree to Moses which he threw into the water to sweeten them (*Shemot 15:22-25*). The Midrash adds that the bark of the tree that G-d showed Moshe was itself extremely bitter (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah 23:3*). The bitter water was sweetened by a bitter tree. G-d does not perform miracles for no reason. Normal ‘procedure’ would be to sweeten the water with something sweet. This must be to include the following lesson: Sometimes, the sweetest outcome can emerge from the bitterest pain. This is a difficult lesson that not only the Jewish nation, and every nation, must learn. It is also a lesson for us as individuals. Situations that sometimes appear to us as terribly bitter may eventually produce the sweetest of results. While we are in the process of enduring and suffering through bitterness, it is hard to imagine what positive outcome can come out of this situation. However, we have seen over and over again, that a situation that seemed like a terrible pill to swallow turned out to be the Salvation of G-d (*Yeshuat Hashem*).

The Date Palms & the Seventy Facets of Torah

Immediately after this incident, the children of Israel traveled and camped in a desert oasis named Eilim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms (*Shemot 15:27*). Rashi, quoting Midrash Mechilta, associates the twelve springs with the twelve tribes and the seventy date palms with the seventy elders. After learning the lesson of the bitter waters, the people were given the chance to experience the joys of the Torah, a virtual oasis in the desert that life can become when devoid of Torah. The seventy date palm trees symbolize the seventy “faces” or perspectives of Torah that are revealed to those who eat of its fruit. Seventy is also the numerical value of the word *סוד/sod* – secret, the inner Kabbalistic dimension of Torah.

Transforming the Light of G-d into Personal Torah Insights

The date palm also symbolizes the *tzaddik*, the righteous person, of whom it states, “The will flourish like the date palm” (*Tehillim* 92:13). Deep inside their very beings, every Jew has a spark of the *tzaddik*, as the prophet proclaims, “Your people are all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever” (*Yeshayahu* 60:21). Of all fruits, dates has the very highest natural sugar content. They only grow in hot climates with abundant sun. The process of photosynthesis, by which a plant takes the light of the sun and converts it into energy and eventually fruit, teaches us how we can take the light of G-d and Torah, transform it deep within us, to yield the fruit of our Torah insights. The Hebrew word for date תמר/*tamar* has the same numerical value of 640 as the Hebrew word for sun שמש/*shemesh*. When we receive the light of G-d and Torah devoid of ego and ulterior motives, we become transparent vessels that convert this light into the very blood that flows in our veins. This is similar to the date palm that is a pure conduit for transforming the sun’s energy into pure sweetness.

The Universal Date Palms

Given the bitterness of our current situation, we long for the promised sweetness. In this spirit, I will share with you some of Yosef ben Shlomo Hakohen’s sweet Torah about trees, which reminds us of our messianic vision. After our ancestors left Marah, where the waters became sweet,

ספר שמות פרק טו: (כז) וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵילִמָּה וְשָׁם שְׁתַּיִם עֶשְׂרֵה עֵינֹת מַיִם וְשִׁבְעִים תְּמָרִים וַיַּחֲנוּ שָׁם עַל הַמַּיִם:
 “They arrived at Eilim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date-palms; they encamped there by the water” (*Shemot* 15:27)

What is the deeper significance of the twelve springs and the seventy date palms? Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the twelve springs represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the seventy date palms represent the seventy primary nations of the world – the roots of the diverse national groups and cultures that we have today. Hashem brought our people to an oasis of twelve springs and seventy date palms in order to convey the following message: Just as the twelve springs nourish the seventy date palms, so too, the twelve tribes of Israel are destined to nourish the seventy nations of the world. From this teaching, we gain an universal insight: At the oasis of Eilim, our ancestors were reminded that their journey towards Mount Sinai was not for themselves alone, but for all humanity. As the Midrash comments, “The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel in order that through the Torah they would enable all the nations to merit thereby” (*Midrash Tanchuma, Devarim* 3).

Planted in the Mountain of Tzion

Rabbi Yosef Ben Shlomo Hakohen notes another allusion to trees in this week’s *parsha*. Just as each of the seventy nations is compared to a tree – with its own unique roots and fruits – so too the children of Israel are compared to a tree. There is a Divine promise that the tree called ‘Israel’ will be planted in the Land of Tzion, where they are destined to produce their finest ‘fruits.’ In fact, after our ancestors crossed the sea, they had a vision of their future in Tzion – the Sanctuary of the Compassionate One – and they sang,

ספר שמות פרק טו (יז) תבאמו ותטעמו בהר נחלתך מכון לשבתך פעלת יהוה מקדש אדני כוננו ידיך:
(יח) השם ימלה לעלם ועד:

“You will bring them and implant them on the mountain of Your heritage, the foundation of Your dwelling place that You, O Compassionate One, have made - the Sanctuary, Hashem, that Your hands established. The Compassionate One shall reign for all eternity!” (*Shemot* 15:17,18).

Tu b'Shevat the Root of Redemption

On Tu b'Shevat the sap begins to ascend once again in the trees. This sap is the life force that culminates in the spring and summer with buds, leaves and fruit. Therefore, Tu b'Shevat represents the time when new redemptive energy culminating on Pesach begins to well up from beneath the surface. This redemptive energy is reflected in the consecutive cycle of three holidays that fall on the full moons of Shevat, Adar, and Nisan. These holidays – Tu b'Shevat, Shushan Purim (the additional day of Purim celebrated in walled cities), and the first day of Pesach – symbolize both the transition of winter into spring. This explains why we read the story of the ten plagues and the exodus from Egypt in the winter and not in the spring at Pesach time. The Jewish people's exodus from Egypt and transition from slavery to freedom is analogous to nature's transition from hibernation and inaction to rebirth and rejuvenation. The sap rising in the trees on Tu b'Shevat represents the beginning of the redemptive process that climaxed in the Jews' personal and national redemption from the narrow confines of Egypt on Pesach. Therefore, it is no surprise that this portion is always read around Tu B'Shevat, for in this portion the nation Israel is redeemed from slavery and emerges from Egypt (Rabbi Avraham Trugman).

From Tub Shevat to Pesach: Manifesting our Spiritual Sap

Another connection between Tu b'Shevat, Purim, and Pesach is that the drinking of wine is central to all of them. The Tu b'Shevat Seder, created by the Safed Kabbalists, is organized around drinking four cups of wine just as in the Pesach Seder. Drinking wine is also central to the festivities on Purim. Indeed, the Talmud states that “when wine goes in – the secret – *TiO/sod* comes out” (*Babyloniam Talmud, Eruvin* 65a). This connection between wine (*yayin*) and *sod* is also reflected in both Hebrew words sharing the numeric value of seventy (a number also alluded to by the seventy date palms mentioned above). Delving into the inner dimensions of Torah on these holidays, a process aided by the drinking of wine opens up deep concealed secrets and releases redemptive energy into the world, just as the sap rising in the trees on Tu b'Shevat culminates in new life and growth. May we all have the ability to transform the spiritual 'sap,' – our deepest potential, that is now beginning to rise up within us, for humanity is compared to the tree of the field (*Devarim* 20:19). May our potential grow in power and potency as we connect to the redemptive power of Purim and Pesach! May we reach our full manifestation on Shavuot when we receive once again the Torah on Sinai! Throughout our process, may we always grow closer to the Torah – “the Tree of Life for all those who grasp onto it...” (Rabbi Avraham Trugman).