

## The Blessed Month of *Shevat* –The Month of Spiritual Renewal

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### Introduction

The month of Shevat comes upon us at the peak of winter. All the leaves have fallen from the trees, the colorful flowers have withered, and everything seems dead and frozen. At this time we need renewal more than ever. **Shevat** is the time that the rainwater of the winter months begins to ascend in the veins of the tree, bringing it new life. The month of Shevat is not only the month of nourishing rain for the land, but also the time for the spiritual rain of the Torah which “is a Tree of Life to those who hold on to her.”<sup>1</sup> When most of this year’s rain has fallen, and we have become purified with the waters of Aquarius, we are ready to start over, to learn from our previous mistakes and grow like the trees, allowing our roots drink the sweet spiritual nourishment of Torah. The month of **Shevat** is referred to as the “**New Year for the study of Torah.**” Our new understandings in Torah are the fruits we produce. The fruits we eat on Tu b’Shevat correspond to partaking of and integrating the sweet fruits of Torah wisdom. On the first of Shevat Moshe started to review the Torah, to prepare the Israelites for entering the Land of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Moshe, our Teacher, explained most of the Divine Commandments to the generation who was on its way to the Land of Israel. He infused the mitzvot with renewed meaning, and gave them new mitzvot too. This renewal of the Torah during the month of Shevat sparks us to experience the excitement, and newness of the Divine Torah. Even if we have already learned a certain chapter several times, we must never become complacent and lose the enthusiasm of youth, but feel as if we ourselves stood on Mount Sinai, and G-d told it to us for the first time today. I invite you to share spiritual insights on the month of Shevat, learn about the special energy of Aquarius, women’s special *tikun* of eating, and recreating our lost Paradise through holy eating,

### The Spiritual Attributes of Shevat

המליך אות צ' בלעיטה וקשר לו כתר וצרפן זה בזה וצר בהם דלי בעולם, ושבט בשנה, וקורקבן בנפש זכר ונקבה. He made the letter *tzadik* king over stuffing (eating), And He tied a crown to it and He combined one with another and with them He formed Aquarius in the Universe and Shevat in the year, and the stomach in the soul male and female.<sup>3</sup>

### צדי/Tzadi – The Letter of the Righteous Tree

The letter *tzadi* symbolizes the *tzadik* (righteous person), who personifies the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The early beginning of renewal of growth in trees, that is discernable during the month of *Shevat*, is symbolized by the shape of the letter *tzadi* (especially its final form), which resembles a tree. The tree represents the written Torah and its fruit the oral tradition, which draws sustenance from the tree. The shape of the letter *tzadi* consists of a *yud* and a *nun* symbolizing wisdom and understanding which always operate together.

<sup>1</sup> *Mishlei* 3:18.

<sup>2</sup> *Devarim* 1:3.

<sup>3</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah* 5:2.



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## The Weekly Torah Portions during Shevat

The plagues began in Egypt during the month of Shevat. Therefore, the month is called Shevat – a rod to the Egyptians.<sup>4</sup> Likewise the first parasha we read during the month of Shevat is *Parashat Bo*, which includes the last three plagues through which the Israelites were delivered from the bondage in Egypt.

*Parashat B'Shalach* usually falls out around Tu b'Shevat, and it is therefore fascinating that there are several references to trees in this parasha. After the splitting of the Reed Sea, the Jewish people traveled three days without water. When they finally found water it was intolerably bitter. G-d then revealed a tree to Moshe to throw in the water in order to sweeten it.<sup>5</sup> Immediately afterwards the Israelites traveled and camped in Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms.<sup>6</sup>

*Parashat Yitro* usually read the Shabbat following Tu b'Shevat includes the giving of the Torah which is compared to “A tree of life.”<sup>7</sup> Receiving the Torah also connects with the renewal of the Torah which takes place during Shevat as explained.

The last parasha during the month of Shevat is *Parashat Mispatim*. It includes an episode connected to the topic of eating – the sense of the month of Shevat. “Upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand although they beheld G-d through eating and drinking.”<sup>8</sup> Rashi brings the opinion that the elders who ate and drank while “gazing” at Hashem did so arrogantly, insensitively. Although there is a great temptation to get caught up in our appetites, eating has the potential to be a deep way of connecting to Hashem, especially during the month of Shevat.

## Women and Rectified Eating

G-d created us in a way that we need to eat in order to live. In order to be holy, we must eat in holiness. The month of Shevat is the time to work on rectifying our relationship with food, and learn to extract the holy sparks from the foodstuff. The first direct command given by G-d to humankind is the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>9</sup> All eating disorders and unholy eating are a result of disobeying this initial decree. Rectifying our relationship with “the Tree” entails elevating our eating. As we approach the final redemption, eating in holiness becomes increasingly more vital and proportionally more of a challenge. Perhaps eating problems affect women more than men, because it was the first woman who originally partook from the Tree of Knowledge. In addition, women pave the way for redemption; therefore we are in the forefront of enacting the final rectification through the challenge of elevating our eating. It is, therefore, essential that we put special effort into working on elevating what we eat and our ways of eating.

<sup>4</sup> Rav Tzadok of Lublin, *P'ri Tzadik, for Tu b'Shevat*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Shemot* 15:25.

<sup>6</sup> *Shemot* 15:27.

<sup>7</sup> *Mishlei* 3:18.

<sup>8</sup> *Shemot* 24:11.

<sup>9</sup> *Bereishit* 2:6.

When we begin working on eating for the sake of Heaven rather than to satisfy our cravings, unresolved emotional issues that had previously been numbed may surface. Holy eating is a gateway for reclaiming our emotional and spiritual health. Rav Tzadok HaKohen explains that every time we put food into our mouth, we have the choice of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, or eating like the *tzadik* who takes each bite from the Tree of Life.

### Recreating our Lost Paradise through Holy Eating

Eating in holiness is not only for the great spiritual masters. If this were true what would happen to the holy sparks that fell into the food of regular people? Everyone has the opportunity to extract holy sparks and force away waste and husks, through eating healthy foods with proper intention. Eating only what our bodies need, while recognizing the Creator of our food through appropriate blessings, has great ramifications upon all levels of reality. Since the good and holy originally became mixed and fell to the husks through eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the very meaning of human existence is separating the sparks from the husks through elevating our eating. By working on eating in holiness, and recognizing Hashem as the source of our sustenance through reciting the appropriate blessings with pure intention, we have the opportunity to participate in recreating our lost Paradise.

### Eating the Food of the Land

In addition to having proper intention during blessings, connecting with the land, moreover, help elevate holy sparks. Growing our own food and eating of the crop we have tended and prayed for helps us to realize how the food only grows by the blessing of Hashem. When we become partners with Hashem in working the land, we connect on a very deep level with the spiritual essence inherent in the food. Although it is important to grow our own food wherever we live, nothing compares to what grows in the Holy Land, where Hashem's light shines directly. This is why the Torah emphasizes that Hashem fed us Manna until we could eat from the crop of the Land of Israel, to ensure that the transition from the holy food of heaven to the holy food of the Land.

### The Process of Refined Eating: From Shevat to Shavuot

"A *tzadik* eats to sustain his soul, but the belly of the wicked is lacking."<sup>10</sup> The month of *Shevat* is predisposed to learn to eat like the *tzadik* who eats in order to give life to his soul without any lust. He allows his stomach to release the sparks of Divine life-force contained within the food by breaking down the coarse food substance to finer part. When we reach this level we are able to indulge in eating and drinking on Purim, during the month of Adar following Shevat. This is the beginning of the process of Divine service that culminates with Pesach when we perform the mitzvah of eating the matzah. Since Tu b'Shevat is preparation for Pesach, which is preparation for receiving the Torah, it follows that Tu b'Shevat is preparation for Shavuot. The Torah was given in the month of Sivan, yet Moshe recited the repetition of the Torah (The Book of Devarim) during Shevat. Thus the month of Shevat is preparation for the Giving of the Torah – the Tree of Life, when we rectify eating from the Tree of Knowledge symbolized by the sacrifice of the two wheat breads.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bereishit 2:6.

<sup>11</sup> *Kedushat HaLevi*, Collections.



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## Aquarius – Water-carrier: Watering the World with the Light of Torah

The astrological sign of the month of Shevat is Aquarius or in Hebrew יָדְלִי/d'lee which literally means 'water-carrier' or 'bucket.' The root of the word יָדְלִי/d'lee means "to lift up," as in the verse "...my eyes are lifted up to the most high."<sup>12</sup> Likewise the job of the water-carrier is to draw water from the depth and elevate it. Although Israel is above the constellations, Aquarius is the sign of the Jewish people, because its sole purpose is to draw water, which represents Torah.<sup>13</sup> The task of the Jew in the world is to draw from the wisdom of the Torah and give drink to the rest of the world. The **Ba'al Shem Tov** said that when one meets a water-carrier carrying pitchers full of water; it is a sign of blessing. The *tzadik* is a true manifestation of a water-carrier who draws from the wisdom of the Torah and shares it with others. Moshe, our Teacher, whose name means "from the water I have drawn you," is noticed first by Yitro's daughters as the man who "drew water for us and gave the sheep water too."<sup>14</sup> Moshe personifies the task of the people of Israel to water the world with the light of wisdom.

## Aquarians: Flexible, Open-Minded, Creative & Wise

People born during the month of Shevat are seekers of truth. They are idealistic, and capable of immense devotion. Being born during the month when Moshe taught the Torah anew, Aquarians are often intelligent, concise, clear and logical. Many are strongly imaginative and psychically intuitive. Aquarians embody the flexibility of water and are extremely open-minded. Due to their breadth of vision that brings diverse aspects into a whole, they are tolerant of other points of view. They also have the capacity to change their opinions, however firmly held, if evidence comes to light which persuades them that they have been mistaken. Just like the waters of Aquarius bring renewal, people born under the sign of Aquarius have a talent for originality. The letters of יָדְלִי/d'lee are the same as in יָלֵד/yeled – child or יוֹלֵד/yoled – giving birth. Both indicate creativity. Those born under Aquarius, have energy of fundamental change, a clear break from the past. With the New Year of the Tree as the center-piece of Shevat, people born during this month have an innate feeling of unity with nature, and may excel in fields of natural science and healing. This is the month to focus our attention to our connection with mother earth and in particular with the Land of Israel.

## Shevat – A Month of the Sweet Water of Torah

During the month of Shevat we celebrate Tu b'Shevat – "The New Year of the Trees." Actually, this minor holiday is mentioned in the Mishnah (Oral Torah), as "The New Year of the Tree" in singular, although there is more than one tree in the world. Kabbalah teaches that Tu b'Shevat is the New Year of the particular Tree – "The Tree of Life," planted in the midst of the Garden of Eden. It is through rectifying our relationship with this mystical Tree that we will ultimately return to our Promised Land.

<sup>12</sup> *Yesha'yahu* 38:14.

<sup>13</sup> B'nei Yissascher, *Articles for the Month of Shevat*, Article 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Shemot* 2:19.

**Summary:**

Shevat is a month filled with blessings of renewal. It is an opportune time to elevate and spiritualize eating. Use the power of renewal to immerse yourself in the waters of Torah, nurture your personal vision, and bring forth the fruits of your own creativity.



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