

Nature in the Parasha
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Parashat Korach
The Time-Lapse Blossoming Almond Branch

King of Fruits

I totally delight when the almond trees begin to blossom, heralding the renewal of spring in the midst of the wintry winds. Although the almonds are the first to blossom, their fruits only ripen after we have eaten our fills of mulberries, apricots, nectarines, apples, pears grapes and figs. This is because their fruits are the inner kernel after the velvety fuzzy, fleshy part falls away. There are four parts to the almond: the outer green husk (which some people actually eat), the hard woody shell, the inner brown peel – the seed- coat, which adhere to the nut and is usually eaten, and then finally the inner white kernel – the embryo. As a child, I remember watching my mother blanching the almonds by pouring hot water over them, so you could easily slip off the inner peel. It was a wonder to experience how the almonds changed from brown to become pure white. In my kitchen today, there is no time nor need for such operation. Almonds are soaked, made into delicious almond milk or spreads and added to salads. Sometimes they serve as a snack on the go, together with raisins. Almonds are indeed special; they are the only fruits I know that hosts both protein and a wealth of vitamins. They have, moreover, been proven to lower the risk of heart disease (Harvard Nurses’ Health Study, 1998). In the Indian tradition, almonds are called the “King of Fruits.” According to Rambam, “Figs, grapes and almonds are always the best fruits whether fresh or dried... they are healthier than any other fruit” (*Hilchot Deot* 4:11). No wonder Hashem chose almonds as the fruit that budded, flowered and fruited on Aharon’s stick to prove that Hashem had selected him to serve in His sanctuary.

Flowering Process Versus Fruiting Product

In the aftermath of Korach’s rebellion against the selection of Aharon as the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest), Hashem commanded that each tribe take a rod and place it in the Tabernacle. In order to silence the complaint of the Israelites, Hashem wanted to prove to them that the tribe whose staff would blossom is the one Hashem has chosen for special holy service.

ספר במדבר פרק יז

(כג) וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֱהֱלֵ הָעֵדוּת וַהֲנִיחָה פָּרַח מִטֵּה אֶהֱרֹן לְבַיִת לַיהוָה וַיֵּצֵא פָּרַח וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים:
 “It came to pass that in the morning Moshe went into the tent of testimony, and behold the rod of Aharon for the house of Levi had sprouted, blossomed, brought forth buds, and yielded almonds” (*Bamidbar* 17:23).

Rashi explains that after Aharon’s rod blossomed, the blossoms fell off, whereupon it began to sprout forth the beginning of the fruit (צִיץ/*tzitz*), which then ripened into almonds. Hashem chose to bring forth the miraculous blossoming and fruiting specifically of the almond because

almonds blossom earlier than any other fruits. Likewise, the punishment of those who oppose the constituted *Kehuna* (priesthood) comes quickly. Korach's claim was that the entire congregation was equal in *kedusha* (holiness) (*Bamidbar* 17:3). However, just as the fruit is the main part of the tree, and the inner fruit is the main thing compared to the peel which protects it, likewise the *Kohanim* are chosen, and the Levites after them. Moreover, the almond peel protects the almonds and are only eaten with the almonds when they are still soft. When they complete their growth, it becomes recognizable that the exterior is only a protection, while only the inside of the fruit gives perfect pleasure. (Machaze Avraham, *Parashat Korach*).

Hierarchy is difficult to accept. Like Korach, many of us connect with the circular reality, where each of us will be equidistant from the circle center. Yet, in this world, some places hold more holiness than others, and some people have a greater capacity for holiness than others. If we don't accept Aharon and the Kohanim as having extra holiness, how can we ever accept the sanctity of the Divine will? (Actually, today many of us may sometimes do feel that we know better than G-d!). It is interesting that Hashem didn't just make the almonds sprout forth on Aharon's rod out of midair. I imagine what happened to Aharon's stick was like what we see in certain nature movies that show the opening of flowers and their ripening into fruits. Just this time it was not a time-lapse movie, but for real. Hashem purposely chose to show the Israelites the process of producing almonds on Aharon's stick, and not just the final product of the almond fruits themselves. Although the blossoms and fruit buds have their own value, their purpose is to produce the fruit. So why did Hashem bother with extra miracles of blossoms and fruit buds? Perhaps, this comes to teach us that Aharon and the Kohanim are selected to lead all of us in the process towards perfection. His extra *kedusha* (holiness) is for our sake – in order to elevate the entire Jewish people. In a way, not only does the process (the blossoms corresponding to the Jewish people) serve the product (the fruit corresponding to the Kohen), the product (the Kohen) also serves the process (the people). As a support for this concept, I noticed that the almond goes through one of the longest ripening processes. Being the first to flower, but one of the last to produce ripe fruits.

Levites and *Kohanim* – Bitter and Sweet Almonds

The almonds on Aharon's staff may allude to both the Levites and the Kohanim. The Kohen, who corresponds to the product and purpose, is, nevertheless, compared to the sweet almonds (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*) that have the longest ripening process. The Levites, however, correspond to the bitter almonds (*Prunus dulcis* var. *amara*) that ripen earlier and are best when they are small. Likewise, the Levites are dismissed from their service at the age of fifty (*Bamidbar* 8:25), whereas, there is no age limit to the service of the Kohen (*Sefat Emet*, *Bamidbar*, *Parashat Korach*, year 5652). Yet, the bitter almond has one advantage over the sweet; it is used medicinally in small dosages as a vermifuge, and against bites by mad dogs (Culpepper). However, because of its poisonous nature, great care ought to be exercised in its use. Likewise, the energy of the Levites need to be kept in check, as Ya'acov insinuated on his deathbed (*Bereishit* 49:5-7), and as we learn from Korach's rebellion.

Time-Lapse from the Onset of Creation

The almond merited its Hebrew name because it is the first of the trees to flower, as the Hebrew word for almond – שָׁקֵד /*shaked* means: to be alert, wakeful, industrious, diligent, zealous and to persevere. Likewise, the almonds were chosen to symbolize the *Kohanim*, who are vigorous and agile in their worship. Not only the Kohen, but all Levites are selected for Divine service as Rambam asserts. “The Levites were exempted from the army as they are Hashem’s soldiers” (*Hilchot Shmitta* and *Yovel* 13:12). In their merit, the redemption will come more speedily as we learn from the rod of the tribe of Levi, which sprouted almonds from the language of hastening. Also, the צִיץ /*tzitz* – fruit bud alludes to the speeding up of the end of days, as the word צִיץ /*tzitz* shares the numerical value with the word קֵץ /*ketz* – end (*Sefer Panim Yafot, Bamidbar* 17:23). Rabbeinu Bachaya teaches that Hashem chose the almonds to sprout forth because of their importance. They symbolizes how Hashem hastens or is watchful to carry out his word like in “שָׁקֵד אֲנִי /*shoked ani* I hasten (or I watch over) my word to perform it” (*Yirmeyahu* 1:12). According to Chizkunia, Aharon’s rod with its blossoms and almonds were included among the miraculous things created on the first Shabbat eve at dusk. So, although the process of ripening into almonds was speeded up on Aharon’s rod, if the preparation for these almonds stems all the way back to the first week of Creation, their ripening process actually exceed that of any other fruit in the world.

A Taste of Kabbalah and Testimony for Everlasting Holiness

Another reason why Hashem made Aharon’s rod blossom is that פְּרַח /*perach* – blossom has the numerical value of 288 – the amount of sparks that fell into the shells when the vessels broke (*Arizal, Sefer Likutei Torah, Parashat Bereishit*). Maor v’Shemesh explains that the main purpose of creation was in order to elevate these 288 holy sparks. This is alluded in the very beginning of Creation in “the spirit of G-d [that] hovered on the face of the water” (*Bereishit* 1:2). The Hebrew word for hovered – מְרַחֵף /*merachefet* includes the letters of פְּרַח /*perach* =288. Only the *ba’al teshuva* has the ability to elevate these holy sparks. This is why it states, “In a place where *ba’alei teshuva* stand, complete *tzadikkim* cannot stand” (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 44b). The fruit bud on Aharon’s rod also alludes to these holy sparks – נְצוּצוֹת /*netzutzot* from the same root as צִיץ /*tzitz* – fruit buds. Hashem –the name יְקוּק /*Ykvk* is the soul of the world, the name אֲדֹנָי /*Adn-i* is its garment, while the name אֱהִיָּה /*E-he-y-h* is the surrounding light that is more brilliant than the inner lights. This is because the name אֱהִיָּה /*E-he-y-h* indicates *teshuva* from the future language, as the *ba’al teshuva* has to always say, “I will worship Hashem even if I still haven’t achieved it. I will accept upon myself to serve Him from now on.” The word שְׁקֵדִים /*shekedim* – almonds with the *kollel* (adding 1 for the word) has the same numerical value of 455 as the word אֱהִיָּה /*E-he-y-h* when the letters are spelled out in three different ways (161+151+143). Almonds indeed are suitable to be selected to indicate the holiness of Aharon and the tribe of Levi. Even the letters of the word שְׁקֵדִים /*shekedim* – almonds consist of the exact Hebrew letters as קְדוּשִׁים /*kedoshim* – holy. Thus, the almond blossoms and fruits on Aharon’s rod is a testimony to the selection of Aharon and the tribe of Levi for everlasting holiness.