

Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

Parashat Pinchas – The Cryptic Caper Bush

Delicate Fleeting Flower Flash with Steadfast Perseverance

Every summer I am dazzled by the exquisite elegant caper flowers with their stunning purple pistils enveloping them like daunting protective power plants. These exotic delicate flowers open their petals at the dusk of the cooling sundown summer evenings, for a tantalizing fleeting flash until the blazing late morning sun wilt away their elusive petals at the heart of day. During the growing peak of the year from fall to summer, when the Middle Eastern landscape bursts with flowery herbage, the latent caper plant stands silently dormant. A few dry sticks is all that remains of its former glory. Yet, during the scorching month of Tamuz (July) with the wilting sun-beaten yellowish scenery, the raw beauty of the striking caper flowers surprise us with their splendor. Not only are the caper flowers a delight for the eyes, the capers can be cured into a piquant delicacy served at the Shabbat table. For centuries, capers have been one of the most desired ingredients in the kitchens all around the Mediterranean basin. They are very high in powerful anti-oxidants, and contain a good amount of vitamin K, which promotes bone health and prevents excessive bleeding. Vitamin K also aids in cell growth, development of cartilage and the nervous system. Caper parts are used to relieve rheumatic pain in traditional medicine. In addition, the spicy caper pickles help relieve stomachache and flatulence. I always look forward to *Parashat Pinchas*, which mentions the capers by way of allusion. What serendipity that the peak of their growth here in Israel is synchronized with the *parasha* mentioning the daughters of Tzelafchad – meaning ‘sharp caper.’ The caper is indeed a plant with sharp thorns. This is why its Latin name is, ‘Capparis Spinosa’ – the latter meaning ‘thorn.’ I never planted any caper plants in my garden. They seem to have always been their smack in the middle of a large relatively leveled area, which we wanted to make into a nice grassy area to host large groups and celebrations. The thorny capers did not fit into our landscaping plan. With great effort, we uprooted the caper plants and moved them to the edge of our plot, where they never did very well, in the shade of our neighbor’s growing fig tree and our strangling crack grass. Yet, new caper plants keep popping up on undesired locations such as on the walkway from our studio apartment, scratching the legs of our poor tenant, who, awed by the magnificent sight of the caper flowers, didn’t dare to complain. The Torah is replete with interesting teachings and anecdotes about the caper plants. I am happy to share some of these with you.

The Hidden Sin of Tzelafchad

The beginning of our *parasha* mentions the five righteous daughters of Tzlafchad, who plead that the land of their father should be passed on to them, since he died without siring any sons.

ספר במדבר פרק כז (א) ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד בן חפר בן גלעד בן מכיר בן מנשה למשפחת מנשה בן יוסף ואלה שמות בנותיו
מחלה נעה וחסלה ומלכה ותרצה...לאמר: (ג) אבינו מת במדבר והוא לא היה בתוך העדה הנועדים על השם בעדת קרח כי
בחתאו מת ובנים לא היו לו:

“The daughters of Tzelafchad son of Chefer, son of Gilad, son of Machir, son of Menashe, of the families of Menashe son of Yosef approached. The names of his daughters were Machla, Noah, Chagla, Milka and Tirtza... saying, ‘our father died in the wilderness, he was not among the congregation of those congregating against Hashem, in the congregation of Korach. Rather he died in his own sin without having any sons...’” (*Bamidbar* 27:1-3).

The Torah does not mention which sin brought about the death of Tzelafchad, yet according to the Talmud, Tzelafchad is the man who broke Shabbat during the wandering in the desert. There is an analogy between Tzelafchad and the man gathering sticks on Shabbat in the wilderness, since both of these men are associated with the same phrase: בְּמִדְבָּר/*bamidbar* – “In the wilderness.” “Our Rabbis have taught, the one who gathered wood is Tzelafchad, as it states, ‘while the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Shabbat day’ (*Bamidbar* 15:32). Afterwards it states, “Our father died in the wilderness.” (*Bamidbar* 27:3). Just as over there it refers to Tzelafchad, also here it is Tzelafchad. These are the words of Rabbi Akiva (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 96b).

Dry Caper Wood for Kindling in the Winter

Nogah Hareuveni explains that familiarity with the caper helps us unravel the chain of associations that brought Rabbi Akiva to say, “the one who gathered kindling is Tzelafchad.” Rabbi Akiva knew as a shepherd himself, that in the rainy winter season, it is tough finding dry firewood. Most of the trees and bushes available are green and growing. The caper bush, which thrives in the summer, is dormant, dry and leafless during the rainy season, thus an excellent choice for kindling wood when there is little else to burn in Israel. Rabbi Akiva linked two separate biblical chapters, and concluded that the nameless kindling gatherer who died for the sin of braking the Shabbat was in fact Tzelaphchad, “who died for his sin in the wilderness” (*Bamidbar* 27:3), but whose specific sin is not mentioned. The dry caper was a logical plant for the gatherer of kindling to have collected. Tzelafchad was out collecting dry caper bushes for fire in the winter on Shabbat. He was caught, paid the price, and left his daughters to plead for his share in the Land. His name hints to the deed Tzelaf-chad – sharp Tzalaf (See *Three and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage*, pp. 42-53). A further support for linking the Shabbat stick gatherer with Tzelafchad is that עֵצִים/*eitzim* – wood with the בֵּית/bet of בְּיוֹם/*b’yom* in the following phrase, הַשַּׁבָּת בְּיוֹם/*b’yom hashabbat* has the same *gematria* as צֶלְפַּחַד/Tzelafchad (212) (*Da’at Zekeinim, m’baalei Tosfot, Bamidbar* 15:32).

The Shabbat Breaker and the Righteous Man

Many generations later, the Talmud tells a story of a righteous man who found a break in his fence and was about to go out to repair it when he remembered that it was the Shabbat. The righteous man overcame his very strong urge to fix the break in his fence and refrained from violating the Shabbat. A miracle occurred: A caper bush grew (closing off the break in the fence), and he and his family lived off (the income) from that caper for the rest of their lives (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 150b). Noga Reuveni points out that one important aspect of the caper is its extreme thorniness. Each leaf has two companion thorns shaped as hooks bent inward towards the center of the plant. There is no problem thrusting a hand downward into the center of the caper. The pain is only felt when trying to withdraw the hand. Then these barbed hooks jam into flesh and cloth! The caper is

not a plant to approach carelessly, for it has ample protection against the unwary. Therefore, the caper that grew in the gap in the righteous man's fence was well suited to mend the fence and keep out unwanted intruders. Arizal explains that the story of this pious man who found a break in his fence was Rabbi Yehuda son of Rabbi Elai. This Chassid rectified in his piety the sin of gathering sticks on Shabbat in his prior incarnation as Tzelaḥad. This is the meaning of the words of the sages, that a sharp caper grew for him, and he and his family sustained themselves from it. For the sharp caper is Tzelaḥad, and he sustained himself from rectifying that which he messed up previously, and his sins became merits in his higher *Tshuva* (Arizal, *Likutei Hashas, Mesechet Shabbat*).

Underlying Spiritual Connection between Tzelaḥad and Rabbi Yehuda

The soul of the Shabbat breaker, Tzelaḥad, who gathered kindling, became reincarnated into the righteous man who refrained from breaking the Shabbat. The original Tzelaḥad died for his sin of breaking the Shabbat, but the righteous man was able to earn his living from the selfsame caper that he had sinned with in his previous reincarnation. The daughters of Tzelaḥad began rectifying their father. Therefore, it is possible that the caper provided their livelihood as well. Archeological data reveal places all concentrated in the northern regions of the mountains of Efraim in Shomron called in the names of three of the daughters of Tzelaḥad (Noah, Choglah and Tirzah). Many slopes in this area are composed of poor limestone on which even the sturdiest of fruit-trees cannot produce good crops. The caper, on the other hand, grows extremely well in this soil and to this day can be seen there as a wild plant. It is logical to assume that the Israelites utilized such areas to cultivate capers. The link that ties Tzelaḥad to the righteous man and his livelihood seems, therefore, to have roots in the reality of the ancient settlement of Israel.

Cultivation and Usage

From the discussions of the Sages in the Talmud, we learn that the caper was cultivated as a full-fledged agricultural crop. "Rabbi Eliezer says, the caper shall be tithed on its *timorot* (the young leaves at the tip of the branches), its *aviyonot* (the fruit), and its *cafrisin* (the young flower buds). Rabbi Akiva says, only the *aviyonot* shall be tithed because only they are fruit (*Mishna Ma'asrot* 4:6). The caper 'fruit' we find today in small jars on supermarket shelves are actually the *cafrisin* – the unopened caper flower buds. It is not fruit in the botanical sense, although it is a crop harvested from the caper bush for food. In Israel it is possible to also find the marinated caper fruit (that develops from the pistil after the flower has been pollinated), called *aviyonot* in the Talmud. A condiment was moreover made from the most tender young leaves at the tips of the branches (*timorot*). The caper grows in the entire Mediterranean area, and near the banks of the Jordan River, in the wilderness of Yehuda, in the Negev and in the Arava. It grows along walls, fences, piles of rock and poor soil. According to Rambam, preparing capers with vinegar, salt and oil and eating them as appetizers before the main meal cleanses and opens blocks of the spleen and liver. Capers are also very accepted in Arab folk medicine as a remedy for defective hearing, female infertility, infected open wounds, diabetes, toothache and chest ailments. Whether the desired crop was the flower bud, the leaf tip, or the fruit there is no question that the Israelites planted the caper as an income producer, which bears three different types of crops.

Persevering among Trees

In spite of the lack of water, the caper bush seems to flourish in every nook and cranny, literally coming out of the rocks and cracks in the walls. “Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, said, ‘three are persevering: Israel among the nations, a dog among the animals, a rooster among the birds, and some say the goat among cattle, and some say even the caper among the trees’” (*Babylonian Talmud, Beitzta 25b*). Very few trees persevere in so many different growing regions: in the hills and plains, in the valleys and along the coast, in rocky crags, in wilderness and desert areas, and even on stone house walls and fences. There are capers that grow in stonewalls of houses and are repeatedly cut down year after year, yet continue to grow new branches that flourish and produce flowers and fruit. The caper can even revitalize itself after fire. There is nothing comparable to the speed with which its belowground stock can produce fresh green branches from the charred remnants. The caper has certainly earned its place among the persevering as the “persevering among trees,” together with the Jewish people whose similar feats of survival make it the “persevering among nations.”

Like a Tree of the World to Come

Rabbi Gamliel expounded, “in the future, the trees will produce fruits every day as it states, ‘Lift up a branch and yield fruit’” (*Yechezkiel 17:23*)... A certain student mocked him and said, “doesn’t it state, ‘There is nothing new under the sun’” (*Kohelet 1:9*). He answered him, “come, I will show you an example of this principle in this world,” and he showed him a caper... (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b*). Why did Rabbi Gamliel select the caper as an example of the fruits of the future messianic time when all fruit trees will produce fruits daily? The answer is apparent to anyone familiar with the caper plant. During its lengthy flowering season, the caper produces new flowers daily. Toward evening, the bud opens into a flower. By late morning, the following day as the heat increases, the flower wilts, leaving the embryonic fruit to protrude on top of the pistil. The caper actually does give new fruit each day of its extraordinarily long flowering season. Noga Reuveni notices that Rabban Gamliel took his students out and showed them the caper bush. He taught them to look at one branch of the caper, from the tip down to the base, seeing in progression the young caper buds, flower buds waiting to blossom. Further down on the branch he showed them the open flowers, wilted flowers with embryonic fruits peeping out from among the drooping petals, and a row of fruit, the youngest closest to the wilted flower and the oldest nearest the base of the branch.

Thus, the caper is a perfect example of a tree in the world to come. Look closely, and you’ll see that every day new flowers open along the branch. The flower lasts but one day, only to wilt and bring forth a caper berry. Every day a new flower, every day a new berry. To get a prime yield, the harvesters must go out to the caper bush every day, otherwise the yield of a missed day will be lost. The crop will be too large and bitter. This necessity of harvesting the caper every day is what gave rise to the impression that it gives fruit every day. Green shrubs of caper plants grow from between the ancient cracks of the *Kotel* – the western wall of our ancient Temple. The fact that the ancient Temple rocks are still alive with renewed growth, signifies how Judaism lives, thrives and flourishes as a vibrant lifestyle reviving the ancient stones of our heritage. Furthermore, perhaps Hashem made the caper plants grow from the stones of the *Kotel* – our last vestige of the connection between this world and the world to come, because the caper likewise is a plant bridging between the worlds.