

## *Parashat Shoftim*

### Fostering Fruit Friendships

#### My Emotional Attachment to Fruit-Trees

I have a sad, dead nectarine tree in my garden. It is the third nectarine tree to go, and I'm mourning because my trees are in some aspect like my children (not quite – obviously – but I do feel a strong attachment). Even when my husband prunes the fruit trees during their dormant winters, I may feel pain, if too much of the branches were chopped down, or the wrong branches were cut in the wrong way. Not that I could do it better myself – that's for sure – and how can I ever expect my patient and kind husband to wait for me to tell him where to cut each and every branch? Even that, however, may not spare me from pain, as I might give him wrong instructions... Believe it or not, the Torah has very strict requirements regarding cutting down and even pruning fruit-trees. This is because a human being is compared to a tree, as we learn from *Parashat Shoftim*. The special quality of plants and trees lies in their attachment to the earth, the source of our existence and nourishment. Whereas our intellect is connected to the animate, our emotions are compared to vegetation that embody growth and development. Just as vegetation is unique in its constant unification with its source, so too within humans, our emotive powers are always attached to our essence. This also explains why emotional traits and tendencies are so powerful, and why it is so difficult for a kind person to become severe, etc. By comparing humans to “a tree in the field,” the Torah is alluding that our emotional qualities are more essential than our intellect. When we work on ourselves, we need to focus on refining our emotions rather than our mind, for perfecting and polishing our emotive character has the greatest impact on our essence. I hope and pray that the dead nectarine tree in my garden represents some of my negative emotions that I am now ready to let go.

#### Do Not Kill a Fruit-Tree!

**ספר דברים פרק כ (יט) כִּי תִצּוּר אֶל עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת עֵצָהּ לְנִדְחַי עָלֶיהָ  
גִּרְזֵן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכֵל וְאִתּוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָא מִפְּנֵיךָ בְּמִצּוֹר:**

“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, *you shall not destroy its trees* by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down; for is the tree of the field a man, that it should be besieged by you?” (*Devarim* 20:19).

This verse describes a war-situation in which we are forbidden to destroy fruit-trees in the enemy city. Since fruit-trees give life to humanity and are intended for food, we are not permitted to cut them down – even in order to conquer the city. How much more so, may we not cut down trees wantonly. It is prohibited to uproot or cut down a fruit tree if we do not have an acceptable reason to do so (Rambam, *Mishna Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 6:8). There are different opinions about what is considered “acceptable reasons.” Some halachic authorities permit cutting down a fruit tree if we need the place. Others permit cutting a tree down only if it is damaging the ground, and the surrounding trees (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah* 116; *Shemirat haGuf veNefesh veBal Tashchit* 15). Therefore, before cutting down any fruit-tree, please consult with a competent rabbi. Whereas, there is no halachic problem cutting off branches of a fruit tree if it will cause it to grow better, certain halachic authorities hold that destruction of any portion of a tree that does not result in its

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

improvement is forbidden (Har Tzvi, *Hilchot Sukkah*, 101; *Yechaveh Da'at*, Vol. 5, 46). This makes sense since a fruit-tree is compared to a human being, and just like an operation could cause death, so have I experienced trees dying as a result of pruning. How much trepidation must a person have when pruning his fruit-trees. Good my husband is a doctor!

### Take from Nature What You Need, But Do Not Destroy It

Our sages expanded the Torah prohibition of *Bal Tashchit* – “do not destroy” – to refer to vandalism of any nature. It includes any wanton or needless destruction of anything on earth.

**רמב"ם, הלכות מלכים פרק ו, הלכה י' ולא האילנות בלבד, אלא כל המשבר כלים, וקורע בגדים, והורס בנין, וסותם מעין, ומאבד מאכלות דרך השחתה, עובר בלא תשחית...**

Not only trees, but also whoever breaks vessels, rents garments, destroys a building, obstructs a wellspring, or wastes food in a destructive way transgresses the mitzvah of “*Bal Tashchit*” (“do not destroy”)... (Rambam, *Mishna Torah, Hilchot Melachim* 6:10).

The Torah cautions us not to waste anything in the world, especially not food. In our world of abundance, we often take food for granted and are not always careful to avoid wasting it. On a deeper level, we can learn the importance of not squandering our talents and time on unworthy pursuits. The mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* also highlights the Divine imperative to do what we can to preserve our environment. *Sefer Hachinuch* makes a connection between character development and avoiding even the slightest waste. He equates unnecessary destruction with “*every evil thing*” and explains that righteous people who inspire others to come close to the Torah must develop a higher sensitivity and love for everything good in Hashem’s world. Therefore, by conducting ourselves with concern for the environment, we gradually accustom ourselves to caring for not only our fellow human, but also for all of Hashem’s creation (*Sefer Hachinuch*, Mitzvah 529).

### Guidelines for Fruit-Pickers

It can be challenging not to waste the fruits of the garden. During picking season, most fruit trees are surrounded by mounds of fallen fruits that attract flies and insects. Chickens will happily munch on fallen and damaged fruits, especially when picked up before they are completely sundried. As part of caring for all of Hashem’s creation, I endeavor to master the art of picking fruits, walking the tightrope between under and over ripe. We can learn to develop our sensitivity to these gentle G-d given beings, by considering texture and color. This way we may hear the soft call of the fruits asking to be picked. Grapes need to be soft to the touch and not hard as golf balls. Yellow plums must not be green, and you actually need to wait for red plums to turn purple. The trick is to tug very gently at a fruit. If it comes off easily without having to yank it, then it is fully ripe. It is a challenge to get to everything in time and to manage to put the fruits, which need extra time to continue ripening in the house, in the fridge at the right time, before they turn brown.

### Using Each Fruit for Its Highest Purpose

Keeping the mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* entails utilizing each item according to the way it is created to benefit us best. Each fruit has its purpose. You may serve the highest quality fruits in a fruit basket. Those with blemishes can be cut and used for fruit-salad. The mushy overripe fruits are ideal for a smoothie. Likewise, we sort the grapes into three piles: for eating, for grape-juice, and to feed the

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

chickens. You can make fruit compote by cooking any combination of soft-pitted fruits for approximately twenty minutes to half an hour on low heat. I like to add raisins and cinnamon to my compote. There is no need to add sugar. A favorite compote with my students is made from apples, raisins, and cinnamon. Fruit compote keeps in the fridge for several weeks. Applesauce, pie, peach preserve and apricot ice cream grace my freezer. When fall kicks in, and the trees stand bare, I sigh a sigh of relief!

### Practical Tips to Avoid Wasting Precious Natural Resources

Avoiding waste is relevant year round and we must always inculcate the mitzvah of *Bal Tashchit* into our overall awareness. Here are a few things we can do to reduce wasting paper – made from trees.

- Keep a place or box for scrap paper to be used for quick notes, shopping lists and art projects, etc.
- Save your work on the computer and only print out the final version.
- Adjust the default of your printer settings to print on both sides.
- Donate online and minimize the need for printed materials to be sent to you.

Trees need water, and especially during the hot and dry Mediterranean summers, water is scarce. Water is our most vital natural resource, since no human effort will ever be able to artificially manufacture water. Repeated water abuse is threatening our planet with dehydration. Let us develop positive habits for the conservation and recycling of water:

- Scrub your fruits and veggies in a big bowl and tub, and reuse the water to water your garden or houseplants.
- Reuse the water from rinsing your sprouts to water your plants. Notice how your plants will grow better with the extra nutrition contained in the “sprout water.”
- Do not wash your dishes with running water but in a tub. Soap the dishes with the water off and then turn it on to rinse. You will use less water this way and the water of the tub can be reused to water your grass or fruit-trees.
- Be mindful of waste with regard to watering gardens, and do NOT hose down your walkway to make it clean.
- When turning on water while waiting for it to turn warm enough for the shower, fill up a bucket or a few *Netilat Ya'dayim* cups for reuse.

We live in an era of instant gratification. The western “consumer culture” (an outgrowth of the hedonistic Roman perspective) persuades us to concern ourselves with our immediate comfort without considering future consequences. However, everything in creation contains sparks of vitality. We can elevate these sparks by making a conscious effort to compost, preserve and recycle rather than throwing everything away.