

A Taste of Torah – Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Shoftim: “The Fruits of Life”

How Does the Fruit of the Tree Connect Us to the Source of Life?

Do Trees Have Spirits, and Do They Experience Pain?

Since my childhood, I have always felt a deep connection with trees. I was fortunate to grow up near the renowned Deer Park forest in Denmark, and our back garden even included a small section of the forest. Throughout the years, I have befriended many trees. Especially when I lie in my hammock on Shabbat afternoons, I sense the Creator’s life energy flowing through the trees, the way they seem to communicate with one another, and the quiet conversation they invite me to join.

There is something deeply beautiful about connecting with trees. I particularly treasure fruit trees for their generous gift of organic sweetness. Yet my sensitivity to the energy of trees also has a downside. As I contemplate the way their branches are reaching outward, I often notice places where they have been pruned in ways that seem to hinder their natural growth. I feel their pain at having their growth constrained, their full power contracted into awkward twists and turns, ‘branching in’ instead of branching out freely toward the light. Whether or not others perceive it as I do, I experience it as the tree’s silent distress.

Since I am not skilled in using any pruning tools, I cannot simply pick up a pair of hand pruners with my own hands and prune the trees myself. Therefore, sensing what I perceive as the tree’s suffering fills me not only with compassion but also with frustration. This has led to an ongoing discussion with the person who usually prunes our trees. He believes that trees must be adapted to human convenience, with their branches cut back to satisfy people’s desire for comfort and convenience, rather than accustoming ourselves to interact more harmoniously with nature. I, on the other hand, believe it is healthier for us to adapt ourselves to the inherent expression of creation. If an overhanging branch requires us to bow our heads slightly or walk around it, perhaps that is not an inconvenience but an opportunity to cultivate humility and respect for the living world Hashem created.

The Torah teaches that trees deserve such respect. Chazal explain that every plant has a heavenly spiritual force appointed over its growth. If, G-d forbid, we inflict needless harm upon a tree, that harm extends beyond the physical world to the spiritual source of its growth as well.

Parashat Shoftim gives expression to this remarkable perspective when it warns us not to destroy fruit trees, even in the midst of war.

Does the Torah Recognize a Living Soul within Trees?

The Torah’s concern for fruit trees extends far beyond merely preserving a future food supply. It reflects a profound awareness that trees are living creations worthy of respect. Chazal teach that every plant possesses a heavenly spiritual force appointed over its growth:

“Rabbi Simon said: There is not a single blade of grass below that does not have a heavenly *mazal* above that strikes it and says, ‘Grow!’” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 10:6).

This teaching reveals that every plant is connected to a higher spiritual reality. It is therefore not surprising that the Torah commands us to treat fruit trees with extraordinary care, even during the harshest circumstances of war:

ספר דברים פרק כ פסוק יט כִּי תִצּוּר אֶל עִיר יָמִים רַבִּים לְהִלָּחֵם עָלֶיהָ לְתַפְשָׁהּ לֹא תִשְׁחִית אֶת עֵצָהּ לְנֹדֶהּ
עָלֶיהָ גֵּרֹן כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ תֹאכַל וְאֵתוֹ לֹא תִכְרֹת כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה לְבָא מִפְּנֵיךְ בַּמִּצּוֹר:

“When you besiege a city for many days, fighting against it in order to capture it, you shall not destroy its

trees by wielding an axe against them, for from them you shall eat; therefore, you shall not cut them down. For is the tree of the field a human being, that it should be besieged by you?" (Devarim 20:19).

Rabbi Avraham Saba explains that the Torah's concern is rooted in the very nature of the tree itself: "Just as a human being possesses a sensing soul (*nefesh margeshet*), so too a tree possesses a plant soul that is capable of sensing (*nefesh tzomachet margeshet*)." He explains that the comparison between human beings and fruit trees is not merely poetic. Just as human beings bear fruit through their deeds, fruit trees bear fruit according to their nature, and both possess the form of soul appropriate to their level of creation. He continues by citing the astonishing teaching of Chazal that although human beings are unable to hear it, when a fruit tree is cut down, "its voice is heard from one end of the world to the other." This suggests that the tree's destruction reverberates throughout creation, as if it cries out in pain.

If trees possess a living, sensing soul, the Torah's concern for them becomes understandable. It first prohibits even striking their fruit-bearing branches with an axe in a way that damages them, and only afterwards forbids cutting down the tree entirely.

Moreover, unlike human beings who can flee or defend themselves in times of war, trees remain completely defenseless. Precisely because they cannot escape the destruction around them, the Torah commands us to show them compassion and spare them whenever possible (*Tzror HaMor*, Devarim 20:19).

In light of this teaching, the Torah's command not to destroy fruit trees takes on a deeper meaning. We are not merely forbidden to waste a valuable food source. We are called to recognize that a fruit tree is a living creation, sustained by a heavenly spiritual reality, whose growth, fruitfulness, and even silent suffering matter in the eyes of Hashem.

Why Does Hashem Want Us to Eat His Fruits?

The Torah's emphasis on preserving fruit trees raises another intriguing question. If fruit is so precious that the Torah protects the tree even in the midst of war, what is the spiritual significance of actually eating its fruit? The Jerusalem Talmud teaches:

ירושלמי קידושין פרק ד הלכה יב עתיד אדם ליתן את הדין וחשבון על שראם וענה נפשו ולא אכל ממנו:

"In the future, a person will have to give judgment and an accounting for everything he saw, deprived himself of, and did not eat" (*Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 4:12*).

At first glance, this teaching seems surprising. Why should a person be called to account for refraining from eating a beautiful fruit that Hashem created?

A profound insight may be found in the Kabbalistic commentary *Ketem Paz* by Rabbi Shimon ben Lavi on the opening chapters of *Bereishit*. He explains that Adam's sin was not simply that he ate fruit. On the contrary, Hashem explicitly commanded him, as it states:

ספר בראשית פרק ב פסוק טז וַיֹּצֵא ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכֵל:

"And Hashem G-d commanded Adam, saying, 'From every tree of the garden you shall surely eat'" (*Bereishit 2:16*).

According to Rabbi Shimon ben Lavi, Adam was not forbidden to eat from the Tree of Knowledge because its fruit was inherently evil. Rather, he was forbidden to partake of the fruit separated from its Source. The fruit was meant to be received together with the Tree of Life, remaining connected to the Divine unity from which all life flows. Adam's mistake was to separate the fruit from the tree, an act the *Tikkunei Zohar* describes as *kitzutz ba-neti'ot* ("cutting the saplings"), a rupture in the unity through which Divine life flows into creation (*Tikkunei Zohar 102b*). By severing the fruit from its spiritual source, he chose separation from life itself (*Sefer Ketem Paz, Parashat Bereishit*). This also explains the teaching that we will be called to account for refraining from partaking of the permitted fruits that Hashem created. Hashem did not create the fruits of

His world merely to decorate the trees, nor solely to satisfy our physical hunger. Every fruit invites us to receive His blessing with gratitude, holiness, and awareness of its Divine Source.

When we refrain unnecessarily from the wholesome fruits Hashem has graciously provided, we may be declining opportunities for spiritual connection. Conversely, when we eat them with blessings and gratitude, recognizing that Hashem continually calls all creation into existence, we fulfill the original command given in Gan Eden, transforming nourishment into an encounter with the Creator.

In this light, the Torah's command, "For from it you shall eat," reveals a deeper dimension. The purpose of eating fruit extends far beyond nourishing the body. It enables us to reconnect creation with its Divine Source.

What Is the Greatest Nourishment We Can Offer Hashem?

The Zohar reveals a deeper dimension of the Torah's command, "For from it you shall eat." It implies that this command cannot refer simply to the soldier who destroys the tree, for he is not the one who will eat from it. Rather, the fruit tree is an allusion to the Torah scholar, whose wisdom continually nourishes others (*Zohar*, Part III: 202a-b). Just as a fruit tree bears fruit season after season, so too the righteous continually bear the fruits of Torah, offering life-giving nourishment to every person who learns from them. Thus, the Torah scholar is an *Etz Chayim* – a Tree of Life, whose spiritual fruits sustain the world.

Since the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, when the *korbanot* (sacrifices) ceased, Hashem's 'nourishment' in this world is no longer the offerings brought upon the altar. Rather, from then on Hashem is 'sustained' in this world through the words of Torah and the fresh Torah insights that emerge from the mouths of those who study His Torah. As it states, "there is no delight or desire for the Holy One, blessed be He, in this world except the Torah of that righteous person, who, as it were, nourishes Hashem and provides Him with sustenance in this world more than all the sacrifices of the world" (*Zohar*, Part III: 202a).

The fruit tree now emerges in an entirely new light. Not only are we called to respect its living soul, treasure its fruit, and recognize that eating is meant to connect us more deeply with Hashem, the Zohar moreover reveals that it serves as a model for our own lives. Just as a fruit tree exists not for itself but to nourish others, so too we are called to become people whose words, deeds, and Torah continually nourish those around us.

Perhaps this is the deepest meaning of the Torah's words, "For from it you shall eat." The highest form of nourishment is not merely the fruit we receive from Hashem's world, but the spiritual fruit we cultivate and generously share with others. When our Torah inspires another soul, our kindness strengthens another heart, or our wisdom brings someone closer to Hashem, we become living fruit trees whose fruits continue to nourish the world.

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