

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Branching Out with Growth

Whether by divine design or curious coincidence, the Jewish calendar gives us multiple opportunities to explore spiritual growth. After the darkness of winter is brightened by the sparks of the Hanukkah lights, there is a brief pause in Jewish holiday observances. We are currently in the month of Shevat, which includes the holiday of Tu B'shevat, also known as the Birthday of Trees, or Jewish Arbor Day. The progression of each month builds with different personalities. Shevat leads to Adar, the month with the joyous merriment of Purim; Adar leads to Nisan, and the freedom celebration of Passover.

We often think of Jewish holidays with historical importance, but for us to truly connect with the concepts, we must find a modern significance. Tu B'shevat, a celebration of trees, has great magnitude for the agricultural society of the past. The Torah actually forbids destroying trees in war: "*When you capture a city, you must not destroy its trees. You may eat from them, but do not cut them down.*" (Deuteronomy 20:19) Even in more modern history, with the establishment of the state of Israel, observing Tu B'shevat includes rebuilding the desert Jewish homeland to fill it with green growth. When I was a child, every year there would be a "tree drive" in which we would collect dimes on a card until we reached enough coins to plant a tree. We were taught the desert needed to be replenished to ensure Israel's survival. But Israel is now 75 years old, and has become a modern country, leading the world in technological advances. What enhanced role can Tu B'shevat have in the modern world?

While remembering the importance of trees, this is a good time to also look philosophically at both what trees provide in the physical world and what lessons we can derive. Physically, of course, trees have great value. Cultivated efficiently, trees provide us with wood for shelter, paper for learning and oxygen for breathing. There are many reasons that trees are absolutely necessary for our very existence. But this season is also a good time to contemplate other aspects of growth. A famous story from the Talmud describes a sage named Honi who sees an elderly man planting a carob tree, which would take 70 years to bear fruit. Honi asks the man "*Why plant this tree when you will never see the fruits of your labors?*" The man responds by saying, "*There were trees in this world when I was born. I plant for the future generations.*"

The seeds we plant and the growth we experience are not just about trees. We plant seeds of understanding and wisdom, knowledge and ideas. Just as the tree needs water, space and fertilizer in order to thrive, a community needs nurturing to reach its potential. When we set an example for others by encouraging thoughtful discussion, we provide that nourishment. When we inspire each other to utilize our resources to enhance the world, that is also nourishment. We can reach out and stretch our metaphorical branches to include a wide variety of individuals and ideas. Sometimes, our branches provide shade and comfort; other times, seeds that are planted by our own fruit could inspire surprising innovations. The Jewish calendar gives us Tu B'shevat to honor trees. Let us also allow ourselves to think about how we can develop our own individual growth to create a beautiful and thriving forest.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon