

Tu BiShvat & Shabbat Shira

Opening Thoughts

Most years Tu BiShvat and Shabbat Shira (Shabbat of Song) are close together, and sometimes even converge to the same day. This proximity raises the question: why does the New Year for Trees, the holiday though which we count the years of the tree for a variety of halachot, occur close to the Shabbat called 'Shabbat Shira', the Shabbat on which we read the Song of the Sea and Miriam's Song in the reading of the Torah, and the Song of Deborah in the Haftara? The midrash teaches us about Leah who was the first to thank God, following the birth of Yehuda:

To what is this similar? A priest who went to the granary to receive tithes. When the field owner gives him the tithe, he does not praise him, but if he adds a gift of his own accord [beyond the required tithe], immediately the priest praises him. So it was with Leah. Since she saw that God gave her more than three sons, she thanked Him (Midrash Aggada Bereishit).

Until her fourth son, the son who symbolizes receiving more than expected, was born, Leah didn't give special thanks to God. Receiving something unexpected leads to giving special thanks. But something that we receive frequently, to which we don't pay attention to, we don't always say thanks as we should. The produce of the land – fruit and vegetables – we receive frequently. It's easy to go to the store or market and take all you need, as well as any other product. Tu BiShvat gives us a chance to stop and think – where does this produce come from? Do we stop and say thank you to the Great Provider, Creator of heaven and earth, as well as to the people involved in all the process – from the planting of the seeds until the product reaches our table – the farmers, the salesperson at the supermarket, the person who prepared the food for us to eat at home, at a friend or even in a restaurant? On Tu BiShvat we celebrate the birthday of the fruit of the tree, and as in any birthday, this is a day for self-reflection, looking at our deeds and surroundings, understanding that it is not our strength and might, but that there are many partners to God and we should thank them all.

And what is the connection to Song?

Rabbi Chiya bar Avin quotes Rabbi Yehoshua son of Korcha who said: If from slavery to freedom we sing songs of praise, even more so from death to life! (Tractate Megilla 14a).

Rashi explains that the song mentioned here is the song which the people of Israel sang at the Red Sea. During the exodus from Egypt we became a nation. We came to life as a nation and for this we sing a song of praise. The holiday of the natural world around us – the fruit of the tree, the vegetables, the plants that give air to the world and more – is Tu BiShvat. On this day we remember the Creator and His creation, the basic things that give us life.

Our challenge is to recognize the everyday gifts received from above, and in the words of the Gemara – from death to life, about the things that give us life, it is all the more appropriate to sing a song of praise and thanks!

Sources and Questions for Discussion

The Goodness of the Land

"And I shall come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and a large land, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8)

- What thoughts come to mind when you hear the sound of the Shofar?
- What is special about the sound of the shofar which supposedly makes God change His seat and also His verdict?

Trees Take Precedence over the Mashiach?

If you have a seed in your hand and are told "Behold, Mashiach is coming"; go plant the seed and only then go to welcome him. (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 31)

- Why is planting trees so important that it takes precedence over welcoming the Mashiach, for whom we wait expectantly daily?

Always Singing

And this is what our sages hinted at in Perek Chelek (last chapter in Tractate Sanhedrin): God wanted to make Sennacherib into Gog Umagog (Armageddon) and Hezekiah into the Mashiach. The attribute of Justice said: and King David of Israel, who sang many songs and praises before You, You didn't make him the Mashiach, and Hezekiah who didn't sing such praises before You, You want to make into the Mashiach? But this is problematic, because after all Hezekiah did sing a song of thanks to God after he recovered from his illness (Isaiah 38). The answer is that he only sang the song of thanks after he recovered, whereas he should have said it even before, when the promise was made that he would recover. He should have had more faith in God and sung before him even earlier. (Shelah, Beshalach, Torah Or)

- Is it always possible to sing? Are there situations when singing is not suitable?
- Can song increase faith in God?

The Joy of Song

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: From where in the Torah do we learn of the importance of song? Rav Matna says, from here: "because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and with gladness of heart." What is service with joy and with gladness of the heart? It is song. (Tractate Arachin 11a)

- What is unique about song that it enables gladness of the heart and a service of God that is not evident in other ways of serving Him?

Song for focusing (tuning) the heart

Explore tunes and use these pleasant and sweet in your prayer, so that when you pray with these tunes and with deep devotion, your heart will follow the words of your mouth. (Book of Chasidim)

- How do singing and playing music assist with devotion in prayer?
- Are there tunes that you think will be more helpful and others that will be less helpful?

