

Tu Bishvat – The Festival of Eretz Israel

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“Rabbi Yehuda Ben Rabbi Simon said: “[The **Torah** commands us to] ‘follow God your Lord’. But how is it possible for a man of flesh and blood to ‘follow’ God? ... In another place the **Torah** commands us to ‘Cling to Him’. Yet, is it possible for a mere mortal to rise up to heaven and cling to the Divine Presence? Is it not written in the **Torah** itself, ‘For the God your Lord is a consuming fire’? Rather, the intention is to teach us that just as God, when creating the world, occupied himself first with planting trees - as it is written, ‘God planted a garden in Eden’ - you too, when **entering the Land of Israel**, are to **occupy yourselves first with planting** trees, as it is written, ‘When you come into the land, you shall plant trees bearing [edible] fruit’” (Midrash Rabba, Vayikra 25).

Planting trees, especially on Tu Bishvat, is an important Mitzvah which is included in the general commandment of settling Eretz Israel. However, it seems as if Chazal is trying to deliver an important message by emphasizing the importance of this Mitzvah in the

Midrash. Is this in fact the ideal and the ultimate way to cling to Hashem?

We encounter this concept (i.e. the importance of the planting) already in the creation story. Seemingly, Adam had only one role before of the sin:” **And the LORD God took man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to garden it and to keep it**”. Apparently, had not Adam sinned the only Mitzvah we were occupied with until today would have been – gardening the Garden of Eden! Is that the reason why we were brought here to this world – to garden the Garden of Eden? Is this our destiny?

The story of the creation conceals many secrets within it. The verses, which relate to the role of Adam - of humankind - are also metaphoric in a sense. “ **These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created... No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and for there was not a man to till the ground**”. There is supposed to be a harmonious comprehensive process, which brings a mutual connection between heaven and earth. While the heaven causes to rain upon the earth, the earth is supposed to cause the ground to sprout trees and plants. In other words, the spiritual influence that descends from heaven (which is symbolized by the rain) is supposed to uplift and elevate the earth (which is symbolized by the springing shrubs and herbs). The only thing that holds this perfect system from functioning is the absence of the human – “ **and for there was not a man to till the ground**”. Man, Adam, was created in order to integrate heaven and earth, in order to find the harmony between the spiritual realms and the matters of the mundane. Man is supposed to utilize the heavenly influence (rain) in order to uplift the earth (tilling the ground). Therefore, Adam is the only creature that was formed of the dust of the **ground** on one hand, but also was formed of the origin of the souls – “**and [Hashem] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life**”. This complexness provides him with the power to integrate.

This harmonious system is very sensitive. Each and every time that man disconnects one component of this harmony – the whole system falls apart. The first punishment brought on Adam right after his first sin to **Hashem** was the punishment of exile – disharmony between the man and the **ground**, That is the way Hashem formulated the world. Disconnection between the human to **Hashem** leads to disconnection between the human and the **ground**. **“If you shall hearken diligently to My commandments... that I will give the rain of your land in its season... that you may gather in your corn, and your wine, and your oil... Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods...and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD gave you”**. (Devarim 11)

The restoration of this harmony is in fact, integral part of the redemption process. ‘R. Abba said: There is no end of days more revealed than that of Ezekiel 36:8: ‘But, you O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel [for it is near to come]’ (Sanhedrin 98a). “When Eretz Israel yields its produce in abundance, then the end will be near, and no sign of the end of days could be more clear.” (Rashi, Ibid.) The occupation with planting in Eretz Israel is indeed the very Geula by itself. ‘When you come into the land, you shall plant trees... ’. The Torah of Eretz Israel that directs us to find the harmony and integration is being symbolized by the planting. After 2000 years of dealing only with Torah and the spirit during an absence of a homeland, it’s about time to deal also with Avoda - with tilling the ground and uplifting worldly matters. Only then, we will be able to restore this longed for harmony. That will clear the way for the Mashiach to come: “If you have a sapling in your hand, and they tell you: “Behold, the Messiah [has arrived]!” - first plant the sapling, and then go out to receive him”. (Avot D’Rabbi Natan b 31) Let us be Zoche, by the merit of Tu Bishvat, to return to Eretz Israel, to plant trees over there , and then – to behold the Mashiach...