

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

TU BISHVAT

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Tu BiShvat: The New Year of the Trees": how a date in the agricultural calendar became a festival, what the tree — the only being in creation that did not obey exactly — says about man, why one must live to eat, and why our Sages spoke of the head of the year of the ilan.



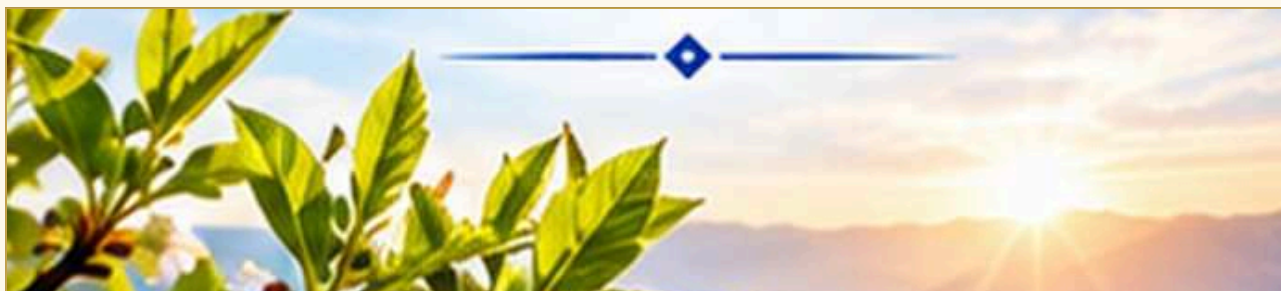
Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Tu BiShvat table

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A New Year Without a Celebration



PRESENTATION

The Mishnah knows only one thing about this day: it is one of the four heads of the year, that of the tree. No joy, no platter of fruit, no cups of wine. All that, says the Rav, came much later.

THE QUESTION

How did a mere date in the agricultural calendar become a festival — and what exactly do we celebrate on that day?

THE ANSWER

“There are four heads of the year... the first of Shevat is the head of the year for the tree, according to Beit Shammai; Beit Hillel says: the fifteenth” (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1).

The first of Nisan, the Rav recalls, counts the reign of each king; the first of Elul, the tithe of animals; the first of Tishrei is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world, the count of the years, the laws of shemittah, of the Jubilee and of plantings. And for the tree we follow Beit Hillel: the fifteenth of Shevat, when all the sap that slept through the winter begins to rise toward the branches and the first buds appear. It is the return to life of a sleeping nature.

If we kept only to the source in the Mishnah, this day would not have its joyful character. The fruits we eat, the wine, the four cups: all of that came much later, as history unfolded, each era giving this day another dimension.

Indeed, nowhere is there any mention of an anniversary for the planting of trees, even if planting is associated with it today.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the return to life of this sleeping nature.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The tree celebrates the moment the sap rises, long before the fruit appears. What, in our lives, is quietly beginning to live again — in a child, in a project, in a friendship? Do we know how to celebrate it before we see its fruit?

SUBJECT 02

“See How Beautiful My Work Is”



PRESENTATION

We all know the ecological problems threatening our world. The Rav notes that the Torah did not wait for our era to give guidance so as not to damage nature.

THE QUESTION

What does G-d say to man as He shows him His universe — and why is destroying a tree so serious?

THE ANSWER

“See My works, how beautiful they are... take care not to ruin My world, for if you ruin it, there is no one to repair it after you” (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13); “You shall not destroy its trees” (Devarim 20:19).

When G-d created man, the Rav relates from the aggadah, He took him and led him around His entire universe, saying to him: see how beautiful My work is; try not to ruin it, for if you come to ruin it, no one will be able to repair it.

These ecological problems are therefore linked to bal tashchit, the prohibition against destroying anything in nature. So much so that, say our Sages, whoever takes the life of a tree causes a cry of distress to be heard from one end of the globe to the other.

Why? Because he in a sense deprives nature of this good, and humanity of its resources. The tree does not belong only to the one who cuts it down: it feeds the world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If you come to ruin it, no one will ultimately be able to repair it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often waste without thinking: food, water, things thrown out too quickly. What could we change in our home to show more respect for creation? Let each person suggest one concrete step for this year.

Man Is a Tree of the Field



PRESENTATION

What gave this anniversary the look of a festival, the Rav explains, is a symbolism running through the whole fabric of the Bible: man is in the image of the tree. “For man is a tree of the field,” says the Torah.

THE QUESTION

In what way does the tree resemble man more than any other being in creation?

THE ANSWER

“For man is a tree of the field” (Devarim 20:19).

Man, like the tree, has a vertical axis, says the Rav; he is rooted in the earth. And how attached we are to this rootedness! Today, thank G-d, we have tasted the pleasure of finding our earthly roots again; and then there are these branches spread to the four corners of the earth, and this desire to bring all these branches back to a single trunk.

Man is made of four components: earth, the mineral; the vegetable; fire, energy; and finally the medaber, the human, the one who speaks. Now around the tree we find them all: the mineral is buried deep underground, the animal prowls around its trunk, the birds fly over it, the friction of its wood produces fire.

What does it lack? Air, which it needs. So the four components of life found in the makeup of man are found in the tree.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This desire to bring all these branches back to a single trunk.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our families often have branches scattered to the four corners of the world. What do we do to connect them to the same trunk? And what are the roots — a place, a language, a tradition — that we are proud of?

The Only One That Did Not Obey



PRESENTATION

On the third day, G-d asks the earth for a “fruit-tree”, that is, one entirely edible. It produces a “tree yielding fruit”: a tree that bears fruit, but with some waste. Rashi points it out: the wood was meant to taste like the fruit.

THE QUESTION

The only being in creation that did not obey exactly is a tree. What does this foretell about man, created three days later?

THE ANSWER

“A fruit-tree yielding fruit” (Bereshit 1:11); “and the earth brought forth... a tree yielding fruit” (Bereshit 1:12).

In the parallel structure of creation, says the Rav, this tree of the third day corresponds to the man of the sixth. The first day is light, from which we have the luminaries on the fourth; the second, the separation of the waters, from which the fauna emerge on the fifth; the third, the tree; and the sixth, man, who carries within him the whole of the tree.

Man's confrontation lies at the origin of the first sin, and it is a tree that occasions it: the free will shown by the tree is found again in man. If we were here only so as not to sin, we would have been angels, deprived of our freedom of action. Yet this freedom, through the opening it gives us to error, allows us to restore ourselves and to give ourselves far more strength, ardor and life.

G-d wanted man to be His partner in creation. Had He created a perfect world, in which man would have nothing more to contribute, that world would have been his graveyard. Often, when we have inherited everything without having forged ourselves, we let ourselves be carried along by the current. Trials are formative.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Had He created a perfect world, with man having nothing more to contribute to it, that world would have been his graveyard.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We would like a life without mistakes or difficulty for our children. What trial, on the contrary, made us stronger? And what have we tried to spare someone that we perhaps should have let him go through?

One Must Live to Eat



PRESENTATION

The saying goes that we eat to live, and not live to eat. On Tu BiShvat we eat fruit in abundance and recite blessings. The Rav reverses the formula: one must live to eat.

THE QUESTION

How can eating be a mitzvah — and why is the only blessing of Torah origin the one said after the meal?

THE ANSWER

“You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the L-rd your G-d for the good land” (Devarim 8:10); “The righteous eats to the satisfying of his soul” (Mishlei 13:25).

The only mitzvah G-d gave the first man, says the Rav, was: of every tree of the garden you shall eat. Eating is a mitzvah. Contrary to the saying, we say that one must live to eat, because food is what allows us to take in the elements that make up creation and raise them to the level of the human. Through the sample we take of it, we consecrate the whole of G-d's work.

Indeed, the only blessing that has its origin in the Torah is Birkat Hamazon: you shall eat, you shall be satisfied and you shall bless, for the good land that G-d placed at man's disposal, the land flowing with milk and honey. It is being satisfied that justifies the blessing: the righteous satisfies his soul, his being, by taking into himself all the components of creation.

The enjoyment man draws from this world is thus the way to consecrate G-d's work: one associates the elements of creation with it, takes them in, and gives them a moral and spiritual dimension.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man's enjoyment of this world is the only way to consecrate this work of G-d.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often eat quickly, without thinking. How can we make a meal, tonight, a moment in which we elevate what we eat? And do we take the time to say the blessing after the meal, once we are satisfied?

What Must Be Cast Away in Order to Eat



PRESENTATION

Among the kabbalists, the custom arose of eating many fruits — forty, for some: ten for each level of creation. And they classified them: those eaten with their skin, those hiding a pit, those whose shell must be removed.

THE QUESTION

Why sort fruits by what they keep and what they cast off — and toward what state must man strive?

THE ANSWER

The four worlds: Atzilut, emanation; Beriah, creation; Yetzirah, formation; Asiyah, action.

There are those we eat with their skin, like grapes or figs, the Rav explains; those whose pit we throw away; those we eat down to the seeds; and those whose shell must be removed, the kelipah cast off, to eat only the inside. Since we are inclined to live from within and not from without, the Torah asks us to take in the outside world and to rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way. Such is man through his different stages of growth; the ideal is to reach the state in which there is neither pit nor shell.

The four worlds are like a thought: emanation, barely perceptible; beriah, the thought projected outward; yetzirah, when we look for the words to give it form; asiyah, when we have finalized it.

Between the initial plan and what we hold in our hands, a great deal must be pruned. For a tree to grow very tall, every branch growing wild down below and keeping it from soaring must be pruned. In this pruning there is a loss of energy.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Since we are inclined to live more from within, and not from without.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has his shell and his hard core. What are we protecting behind a bark no one can get through? And what did we have to prune this year in order to grow — or did we prefer to keep everything?

Every Blade of Grass Carries a Remedy



PRESENTATION

The fruits, say our Sages, are the mitzvot. And the tree gives them generously, without distinguishing between people. The Rav draws from this a lesson for our conduct toward our fellow human beings and toward all creation.

THE QUESTION

What does the tree's generosity teach us — and why are we not allowed to neglect anything in creation?

THE ANSWER

“A river went out of Eden... and from there it divided into four heads” (Bereshit 2:10).

The tree gives its fruit, says the Rav, and it gives generously, without distinguishing between people. This should have consequences for man's conduct toward his fellows and toward nature. Tu BiShvat is thus a day that calls man to his responsibility toward what G-d has placed at his disposal, and invites him to give his fruit, just as the tree gives its own.

That is how the world is made: already in the Garden of Eden, the river divides into four streams. Man must know how to serve, because everything is indispensable to the balance of creation, and we have no right to neglect anything.

Our Sages say that every blade of grass carries a remedy we have not yet discovered. And in times to come, even the bushes, even the brambles and thorns will bear fruit. It is this idea of the tree that accompanies man in his spiritual ascent.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Everything is indispensable to the balance of creation, and we have no right to neglect anything.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly give to those who resemble us. To whom could we give “without distinction”, like the tree? And what person, what thing we consider useless, perhaps carries a remedy we have not yet seen?

Why Forbid Him the Tree of Life?



PRESENTATION

After the sin, Adam is exiled from the Garden of Eden, and he is forbidden to eat from the tree of life. This prohibition is often explained by the fear that he would live forever. The Rav answers differently.

THE QUESTION

Why forbid man the tree that would give him life, at the very moment he has just sinned?

THE ANSWER

“Lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Bereshit 3:22).

Because he would live forever? No, says the Rav. He was not to eat of life having soiled his garments, having soiled his soul, without having the possibility of recovering himself, of restoring himself, of finding his original nature again, of returning to the source.

That is why G-d says to him: now that you have preferred the tree of knowledge to the tree of life — and knowledge will rather cause you problems if you do not know how to appreciate life — you will henceforth first have to use knowledge to find the tree of life again.

The first sin had to do with this order. One had first to begin by appreciating life, by giving life its moral dimension, and then to perfect it through knowledge. What should not have been done was to give priority to knowledge and to make that knowledge somewhat utilitarian. Tu B'Shvat, with its fruits and its blessings, is a way of taking this sin of Adam back in hand.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One had first to begin by appreciating life, by giving life its moral dimension, and then to perfect it through knowledge.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We place great value on knowledge, degrees, success. Do we also teach our children to appreciate life and give it a moral dimension? And what use do we make of what we know?

The Prohibition We Add



PRESENTATION

G-d had said: do not eat from the tree of knowledge. The woman answers the serpent: G-d said not to eat from it and not to touch it. The prohibition on touching — she added it. And Hebrew has three words for sin.

THE QUESTION

Why did adding a prohibition open the door to sin — and what kind of sin was Adam's?

THE ANSWER

“You shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die” (Bereshit 3:3); avonot, pesha'im, chata'ot (Vayikra 16:21).

There were only two mitzvot, says the Rav, that concerned eating: to eat of all the trees, and not to eat of the tree of knowledge. Our Sages say that these two mitzvot contained all six hundred and thirteen. The tree of knowledge was not different from the others: it was only marked by a prohibition. The woman wanted to make this prohibition more practicable by adding that it must not be touched. That is where the channel of sin lay: in considering that the divine command was imperfect and that something still had to be added to it. Man was not yet confident in himself.

There are three words translated as sin. Pesha is the rebellious act, the one that defies others. Avon, from the verb to twist, is bending the law to one's own advantage — one can do it even while keeping kashrut or Shabbat.

And there is chet: an error. One has missed one's target; one thought one was doing right and it turned against oneself. Adam's sin was a chet.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To consider that the divine command was imperfect and that something still had to be added to it... That means man was not yet confident in himself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Out of caution, we sometimes add rules to rules, especially with our children. What “fence” have we put up just in case? And when we sin, is it more out of rebellion, out of twisting, or out of error?

Rosh Hashanah of the Ilan, Not of the Trees



PRESENTATION

The Mishnah does not say Rosh Hashanah la-etzim, the head of the year of the trees. It says Rosh Hashanah la-ilan, using another word, in the singular. Two names for the same thing, and two distinct teachings.

THE QUESTION

Why did our Sages choose the word ilan rather than etz to name this day?

THE ANSWER

“The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon” (Tehillim 92:13); “like a tree planted by streams of water” (Tehillim 1:3).

Etz gave etzah, counsel, says the Rav: the tree asks you for a little reflection. Apply to your own growth the principles of the fruit-bearing tree — digging, weeding, manuring around the trunk to keep insects from devouring the roots. That is why the righteous is compared both to the palm that grows tall and to the cedar, which, even though it bears no fruit, commands respect by the roots it sinks deep into the earth. Devoting oneself to Torah is not renouncing this world: it is ensuring that the Torah weds the reality of this world.

Ilan says something else. The tree’s vertical growth is the relationship between heaven and earth, between the transcendent and the immanent. Our Sages connect ilan, whose value is ninety-one, with the sum of the Tetragrammaton, twenty-six, and the name Adonai, sixty-five: G-d’s manifestation in the world, and Being in its wholly abstract notion.

By saying Rosh Hashanah la-ilan, they ask man to realize that the tree before him represents what he himself holds: in each of us there is a share of transcendence and a share of immanence. That is what allows us to renew ourselves, for we are not today what we were yesterday.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The transcendent is his ability to rise above and not remain conditioned by the pettiness of life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Tomorrow we will not be what we are today. What has remained frozen in us for years while everything else has changed? And what height would we need so as no longer to be conditioned by the pettiness of life?

SUBJECT 11

Three Years Without Taking Anything



PRESENTATION

A newly planted tree is not eaten from right away: three years without touching its fruit, the fourth in a state of purity, in Jerusalem, and only in the fifth does one begin to enjoy it. Tu BiShvat serves as the date for counting these years.

THE QUESTION

Why impose four years of waiting on a tree — and what does this calendar say about raising a child?

THE ANSWER

“For three years its fruit shall be as uncircumcised to you... in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy... in the fifth year you may eat its fruit” (Vayikra 19:23–25).

The fruit, says the psalm, is given in its season, the Rav recalls: fruits do not all grow at the same time. Each fruit has its season; so it is with human nature and with all education of oneself, which takes place over a certain time.

We are not permitted to eat the tree's first fruits during the first three years. In the fourth year, we must eat them in a state of purity, in Jerusalem, or else their equivalent value: in a spiritual bath, in an atmosphere of renewal. And only in the fifth year do we begin to enjoy this tree. So it is with the education of a child, which we begin around the age of five, without counting the first years in which he is rather a receiver.

We may find ourselves in this state of asking; but the aim is to give one's fruit, to share one's fruit. That is what gives Tu BiShvat the character of a festive day, on which we say no supplications and do not fast.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each fruit has its season; so it is with human nature; so it is with all education of oneself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes expect fruit too early, from our children as from ourselves. From whom are we demanding that he give before he has finished receiving? And what have we received that we are now ready to share?

Plant First, Then Go and Greet Him



PRESENTATION

A tree uprooted from its surroundings stops bearing fruit; it must be replanted elsewhere, and some soils suit a given tree better than others. So it is with peoples, says the Rav, and particularly with us and the land of Israel.

THE QUESTION

Why is exile like a hint of death that is never final — and what should we do with the sapling in our hand if the Mashiach is announced?

THE ANSWER

“But you, mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel, for they are soon to come” (Yechezkel 36:8); Avot de-Rabbi Natan.

That is why, says the Rav, we regard exile as a hint of death. But this hint is never final: there is the possibility of coming back to life, of catching one's breath again, just as the tree loses its leaves and renews itself in cycles. The Jewish people is called to do so too. The prophet says it to the mountains of Israel: you shall bear your branches and your fruit, for My people is preparing to return among you. The new budding breathes new life into a people that has come through long trials.

And into man too, who sets himself, along the path of his life, stages like those of the tree. Man's fruits mark milestones that are not limited in time: offspring, in Hebrew, is a going out — an uninterrupted going out of oneself, through one's children, through one's grandchildren.

Our Sages set such store by this messianic dimension that they said: if you are holding a sapling in your hand and you are told the Mashiach has come, do not let go of it. Plant your tree first, and then go and greet the Mashiach, because the planting of this tree contributes to the messianic advent.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Plant your tree first and then go and greet the Mashiach, because the planting of this tree contributes, adds, to the messianic advent.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We easily drop the small task in hand for big news. What “planting” — a child to raise, a project, a course of study — must we not let go of while waiting for great events? And what fruits do we want to leave our grandchildren?