

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

TU BISHVAT

8 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eight questions drawn from the lecture of Rav Raphaël Benizri on
Tu BiShvat: why a date of agricultural accounting became a
festival, what the tree — the only being in creation that did not
obey exactly — says about man, and why our Sages called this
day the new year of the ilan and not of the trees.



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 the first of Shevat: it is one of the four new years, the new year of the tree. No joy, no fruits, no cups of wine. All of that came much later.

THE QUESTION

How did a date of agricultural accounting become a festival — and what was there in the tree that deserved to be wished a happy new year?

THE ANSWER

The Mishnah: four new years — the first of Nissan, the first of Elul, the first of Tishrei, and the first of Shevat, Rosh Hashanah la-ilan.

The first of Nissan counts the reign of kings; the first of Elul, the tithe of animals; the first of Tishrei, the anniversary of the creation of the world, the counting of years, the laws of shemitah, the jubilee and planting. And the first of Shevat is the new year of the tree, because that is when the sap, dormant all winter, begins to rise toward the branches and the first buds appear: the return to life of a sleeping nature.

If we kept only to the source in the Mishnah, there would be nothing joyful about this day. The fruits we eat, the wine, the four cups — all of that came much later, as history unfolded, each era giving this day a new dimension. Nowhere, in fact, is there any mention of an anniversary of the planting of trees.

What made this date a festival is that people saw in the tree a symbol that runs through the whole fabric of the Bible: man mirrors the tree. He stands upright, he is rooted in the earth. And how we cherish that rootedness, those earthly roots rediscovered, those branches spread to the four corners of the earth, and that will to bring all those branches back to a single trunk.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A date becomes a festival only on the day a people recognizes its own portrait in it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The tree celebrates the moment the sap rises, long before any fruit appears. What in our lives is rising in silence, showing nothing yet — in a child, in a project, in a relationship? And do we know how to celebrate it before we see its fruits?

The Only One That Did Not Obey



PRESENTATION

On the third day, the earth is asked to bring forth a fruit-tree, that is, one entirely edible. It produces a tree bearing fruit: a tree that gives fruit, but with some waste.

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

The account of creation: an “etz pri” is asked for, an “etz oseh pri” is produced.

In the parallel structure of creation, the tree of the third day corresponds to the man of the sixth. The first day is that of light, from which come the luminaries on the fourth; the second is the separation of the waters, from which animal life will emerge on the fifth; and the sixth day is man.

Now man carries within him the whole of the tree. He is made of the same components: earth and mineral, vegetable, fire which is energy, and finally the medaber, the human. And around the tree we find the same: the mineral lies deep in the ground, the animal prowls around its trunk, the birds fly over it, the friction of its wood gives fire. What does it lack? Air, which it needs.

Man's struggle is, moreover, at the origin of the first sin, and it is a tree that occasions it: the free will from which the tree sprang is found again in man. If we were here only to avoid sinning, we would have been angels, deprived of our freedom of action — that freedom which, by leaving us open to error, allows us to restore ourselves and give ourselves far more strength, far more ardor, far more life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Had G-d created a perfect world in which man had nothing left to contribute, that world would have been his cemetery.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We want a life without fault or deviation for those we love. But one who has inherited everything without forging anything is swept along by the current. What have we tried to spare someone that perhaps they should have been allowed to go through?

One Must Live to Eat



PRESENTATION

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

THE QUESTION

How can eating be anything other than a need — and why is the only blessing of Torah origin the one we say after the meal?

THE ANSWER

“Ve-achalta ve-savata u-verachta” — you shall eat, be satisfied and bless. And: “Tzaddik ochel le-sova nafsho,” the righteous man eats to satisfy his being.

Food is what allows us to integrate the elements that make up creation and raise them to the level of the human, through the sample of them we take in. That is why eating is a mitzvah, and why the only blessing whose origin is in the Torah is that of the meal: you shall eat, be satisfied, and bless. It is satisfaction that justifies the blessing — the righteous man eats to satisfy his being, integrating within himself all the components of creation.

And this good is bound to a land: a good land, flowing with milk and honey, a land that integrates this fruit within it. The only commandment given to the first man concerned food: of every tree of the garden you shall surely eat. There were only two mitzvot there, both relating to the act of eating, one positive and one negative, and our Sages say that together they contained all six hundred and thirteen.

The enjoyment of this world is thus the very way to sanctify G-d's work: we bring together the elements of creation and give them a moral and spiritual dimension.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not sanctify the world by withdrawing from it, but by integrating it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We eat quickly, without thinking, looking at something else. What do we consume without receiving anything from it — food, time, images? And what would it take for a meal at this table to become an act again rather than an interruption?

What Must Be Cast Away in Order to Eat



PRESENTATION

The kabbalists established the custom of eating forty fruits, ten for each level of creation. And they classified them: those eaten with their skin, those hiding a pit, those whose shell must be broken to reach the inside.

THE QUESTION

Why sort fruits by what they keep and what they reject — and which of these states should a person strive toward?

THE ANSWER

The custom of the forty fruits, ten for each level, from Atzilut, the noblest, down to Assiyah, reality.

There are those we eat with their skin, like the grape or the fig; those whose pit we discard; those we eat down to the seeds; and those whose outer shell must be removed, casting away the kelipah to eat only what is inside. Ten of each, like the four worlds: Atzilut, emanation; Beria, thought projected outward; Yetzira, the form we give it as we search for our words; and Assiyah, completed reality.

Since we are inclined to live from within and not from without, the Torah asks us to integrate the outer world and rid ourselves of all that gets in the way. And the ideal is to reach the state where there is neither pit nor shell. For such is man, in his different stages of growth.

Yet one must accept loss. For the tree to grow very tall, one must prune from below every branch that springs up wildly, little by little, and keeps it from gaining momentum. And in this pruning there is a loss of energy.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Between the initial project and what we finally hold in our hands, much will have had to be pruned.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has a shell and each of us has a hard pit. What do we protect behind a bark no one can get through? And what did we have to prune this year in order to grow — did we do it, or did we prefer to keep everything?

Rosh Hashanah of the Ilan, Not of the Trees



PRESENTATION

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

THE QUESTION

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

THE ANSWER

The Mishnah: Rosh Hashanah la-ilan. And the numerical link between ilan and the sum of the Tetragrammaton, twenty-six, and the name Adonai, sixty-five: ninety-one.

Etz gave etza, counsel: the tree asks of you a measure of reflection; it invites you to reassess yourself, to relate the principles of the nourishing tree to your own growth — digging, weeding, manuring around the trunk to keep insects from devouring the roots. That is also why the tzaddik is compared to two trees at once: he flourishes like the palm, and like the cedar which, though it bears no fruit, stands out by the roots it sinks deep into the ground.

Ilan says something else. The vertical growth of the tree is the relationship between heaven and earth — in other terms, between the transcendent and the immanent. And our Sages link ilan to the sum of the Tetragrammaton and the name Adonai: G-d's manifestation in the world on the one hand, and Being in its wholly abstract notion on the other.

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 part of transcendence and a part of immanence.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

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

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are not today what we were yesterday, and tomorrow we will not be what we are now. What in me has stayed frozen for years while everything else has moved? And what height would I need to finally see it?

Why Forbid Him the Tree of Life?



PRESENTATION

After the sin, man is sent out of the garden. 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 otherwise.

THE QUESTION

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

THE ANSWER

The account of the garden: “Mi-kol etz ha-gan achol tochel,” of every tree of the garden you shall surely eat; and the prohibition of the tree of life after the sin.

No, it was not to keep him from living forever. He was not to eat of life having soiled his garments, having soiled his soul, without the possibility of recovering, of restoring himself, of regaining his original nature and returning to the source. And he is told: now that you have preferred the tree of knowledge to the tree of life, you must first use knowledge to find the tree of life again.

One had to begin by valuing life and giving it its moral dimension, and afterwards perfect it with knowledge. What one was not to do was give priority to knowledge and make that knowledge something merely utilitarian.

Indeed, the tree of knowledge was included in “of every tree of the garden you shall eat”: it was no different from the others, it was only marked by a prohibition. Our Sages say that the woman wanted to make this prohibition easier to keep by adding that one must not even touch it — and that was the channel of the sin: to consider that the divine command was imperfect and needed something added. Man did not yet trust himself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no original sin: there is no sin weighing on our shoulders that we could not shake off.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We add prohibitions to our prohibitions, out of caution, above all with our children. What fence have we put up “just in case”? And is it not against that fence, rather than the rule itself, that the household ends up stumbling?

Three Years Without Taking Anything



PRESENTATION

A newly planted tree is not eaten from at once: three full years without touching it, the fourth in a state of purity, in Yerushalayim, and only in the fifth does one begin to enjoy its fruits.

THE QUESTION

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

THE ANSWER

The laws of a tree's first fruits: three years in which they are forbidden, the fourth consecrated, the fifth in which one enjoys them.

Every fruit has its season; so it is with human nature and with all self-education, which takes place over a certain time. One who devotes himself to Torah, says the psalm, is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season — for fruits do not all grow at the same time.

So the tree waits three years. In the fourth year its fruits must be eaten in a state of purity, in Yerushalayim, or else their monetary equivalent: in a spiritual immersion, in an atmosphere of inner renewal. And only in the fifth year does one begin to enjoy the tree. So it is with a child's education, which begins from the age of five, setting aside those first years in which he is a receiver rather than a giver.

For the goal is not to receive. We are sometimes in that state of need, but the goal is to give one's fruit, to share it. And the tree gives its fruits generously, without distinction between people — which should have consequences for how a person behaves toward others.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Devoting oneself to Torah is not renouncing what makes up this world: it is making the Torah embrace the reality of this world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We expect our children to give back before they have finished receiving. From whom in this home do we demand fruit too early?
And who among us is still receiving, though we thought them ready to give?

Plant First, Then Go and Greet Him



PRESENTATION

A tree that is moved stops giving fruit; it must be replanted elsewhere, and some soils suit some trees and not others. That is why exile is felt as a hint of death.

THE QUESTION

If you are told that the Mashiach has come just as you hold a sapling in your hand, what do you do with the tree?

THE ANSWER

The teaching of the Sages: if you hold a sapling in your hand and are told the Mashiach has come, first plant your tree, then go and greet him. And Yirmiyahu: mountains of Israel, put forth your branches and your fruit, for My people is about to return.

A trait of the tree is to be rooted in its land: move it or tear it from its surroundings, and it can no longer bear fruit. So it is with peoples, and that is why 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, just as the tree sheds its leaves and renews itself in cycles. The people is called to do so as well.

The prophet says it to the mountains of Israel: you will put forth your branches and your fruit, for My people is about to return among you. New budding is a way of breathing new life into a people that has passed through long trials — and into man too, who sets himself, along the path of his life, stages of growth like those of the tree.

And our Sages carried this so far as to say: if you hold a sapling in your hand and are told the Mashiach has come, do not abandon it, do not let it go. First plant your tree, then go and greet the Mashiach — because planting this tree contributes to the coming of the messianic era.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A person's fruits mark horizons not bounded by time: descendants are an unbroken going-out of oneself, through one's children and grandchildren.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily drop the small task in hand for the great news that arrives. What did we let go of this year because something more important seemed to be coming? And what still needs to be planted before we go out to greet anything?