

A Circle of Giving



Tu B'Shevat. It's a day that feels like a bonus, a reprieve from the endless wind and cold. But what exactly is this day—the Rosh HaShanah of the trees? **And what can it give to us if we tap into it?**



A Day on the Inside

One of the main features of this day is that **nothing, externally, seems to happen**. This doesn't seem to be an anniversary of any great moment in our history, nor is it connected to the cycle of the harvest, which is marked by the *shalosh regalim*, starting with Pesach and culminating with Sukkos, days that we celebrate to suffuse our daily lives with Hashem's presence.

Instead, something unseen begins to take place. By the time Tu B'Shevat arrives, the majority of winter rains have fallen, and the sap begins to rise in the tree. The lush greenery and juicy fruits of the summer all begin their journey here, in the depths of winter, when everything looks barren and bare. And yet **inside, something momentous is happening**: growth and change are on their way.

The Creation of the World

Let's look into this on a deeper level.

There are two opinions about the world's creation:

Rav Eliezer said, "In Tishrei the world was created...." Rav Yehoshua said, "In Nissan the world was created"

(Rosh HaShanah 10b)

We're all familiar with Rav Eliezer's opinion. After all, on Rosh HaShanah we gather in shul and daven for the renewal of life itself. We coronate Hashem anew and think about the breath of life that Hashem gave to Adam and Chavah, symbolized by the shofar that we blow. **According to this opinion, the first day of the world's creation** was 25 Elul, since Rosh HaShanah marks the creation of Adam and Chavah.

But Rav Yehoshua disagrees. He says that **the**

world was actually created in Nissan, when the world is in a state of renewal, spring is in the air, and *Bnei Yisrael* were liberated from Mitzrayim and became a nation. According to this calculation, 25 Adar was the first day of the world's creation.

.So far, so good

But whether the world was created in Tishrei or in Nissan, whether the first day was the twenty-fifth of Elul or the twenty-fifth of Adar, **the process of creation and renewal begins long before.**

Forty Days to Renewal

In Torah thought, **forty is a significant number, denoting a profound process of change.**

At the time of the mabul, the rain fell for forty days, signifying the renewal of the world.

Moshe Rabbeinu was on Har Sinai for forty days, receiving the Torah. Klall Yisroel arrived at Har Sinai as a nation of slaves, **but after forty days they were transformed** into Hashem's nation.

It takes forty days for an embryo to be formed in its mother's womb.

And there are forty days between the first day of Elul, when we begin blowing the shofar to prepare for Rosh HaShanah, until Yom Kippur, the end of the annual *teshuvah* period. **These forty days are the most auspicious time** for personal growth and renewal.

If we trace forty days back from the twenty-fifth of Adar, the first day of the Creation of the world according to Rav Yehoshua, **we arrive at none other than Tu B'Shevat**, the fifteenth day of Shevat, *Rosh HaShanah l'ilanos*, the New Year for trees.

Tu B'Shevat, then, must **mark the beginning of an essential process.** It's the prelude to the creation of the world. It's the moment when unseen forces coalesce and something cosmic begins to happen.

But what?

Two Aspects of Creation

Let's explore the opinion of Rav Yehoshua, who maintained that the world was created in Nissan. What does it mean? **What is it trying to teach us?**

Nissan and Tishrei correspond **to two aspects of Hashem's rule.** Tishrei is rooted in the attribute of *din*, justice. It is a time when we stand in judgment and ask ourselves how we are fulfilling our purpose in life. We make an accounting of how we are using the gifts that Hashem has given us. We think about how we are fulfilling our potential and what might help us move forward.

Though we tend to identify *din* with fear, with trepidation about our final verdict, **din is actually rooted in tremendous love.** It's a loving Father who keeps us on track and sets down the framework and structure of our lives. But the emphasis is on the *din*. This is the attribute with which *Tishrei* is identified.

Nissan, on the other hand, is the month of spring, when the world wakes up from its winter desolation, the air grows soft and warm, and new life bursts forth. It's the time when we were lifted out of the dark *galus* of Egypt and experienced our own new life, as Hashem's people. In highlighting Nissan as the world's creation, Rav Yehoshua was teaching us that **the universe is built on kindness**. The world, created so that Hashem could bestow goodness on His creations, is filled with Hashem's love. This is a time when we remember how we, as Hashem's children, have been drawn into a loving relationship with Him.

But this doesn't happen from one moment to the next. It's a process, a build-up, a profound shift **that takes place inside each one of us** to enable us to open ourselves up to the love and kindness that is on offer.

And that is why we need Tu B'Shevat.

Trees and People

Tu B'Shevat, we are told, is Rosh HaShanah l'ilanos – Rosh HaShanah for trees. It is the day when the promise of fruit, the first seed of growth, begins to germinate.

The Torah itself brings **the profound connection between trees and people**. "*Ki ha'adam eitz hasadeh*—For man is a tree of the field" (*Devarim* 20:19), the *pasuk* says. The *Shem MiShmuel* (*Beshalach* 6:2) explains the connection.

There is sky, he says, and there is land. And they are two separate, different realms, each with their own forms of life. **But there is**

something that connects them. And that is the tree. The tree receives rain and sun from the realm of the sky, which seeps through the earth and into its roots, and then it grows, higher and higher, until its canopy reaches high above man's stature, scraping the heavens.

And so it is with mankind. We possess a soul—from the higher realms. And we possess a body—from the realm of the earth. And we connect the two of them. We perform physical actions—mitzvos—and infuse the world of the spirit into the world of action. We work and study and cook and drive and shop and talk, and we strive to do so with a consciousness of Hashem's presence. **We infuse mundane life with faith and meaning.**

And so, we become trees: rooted in the soil but stretching toward heaven.

The Secret of Pleasure

Wine for Kiddush. A bowl of steaming cholent on Shabbos morning. The urging of a *ba'al simchah*: *Mach a berachah!* Make a *berachah*. Food or wine features at every significant Jewish moment.

There are profound reasons for this. As a baby, **our first contact with this world is through our mouths**. Cut off from the idyllic time in the womb, one of the first acts of a baby is to suckle from its mother, an act that is both pleasurable and life-sustaining. Even as we grow, we still need to eat a few times a day; just a day without food makes us dizzy, weak, and lethargic.

At the most basic level, we are physical beings and we survive through the physical acts of eating, drinking, and finding shelter. Our state of constant need **reflects our need for regular spiritual nourishment and connection.**

When we think about this, we'll notice that **all the life-sustaining physical acts that we do bring pleasure.** Eating brings the sensation of flavor, texture, and satiation. Sleep brings a laying down of cares and a relaxing of stiff muscles. On a spiritual level, the pleasure we receive may be less tangible and more amorphous, but they are present nonetheless. The pleasure of staring into Chanukah flames, sitting under the leafy canopy of the sukkah, of opening a siddur and knowing that we have an address for all that is on our minds.

Life, the act of living, is bound up with pleasure. This makes sense since it is bestowed on us by HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the source of all goodness. The Ramchal in *Derech Hashem* explains that Hashem is good and "*derech hatov leheitiv*—the way of good is to give good." **The world itself is filled with goodness on every level.** "For with You is the source of life; through Your light, we see light" (*Tehillim* 36:10). Indeed, the *Zohar* states that as Hashem is the source of all pleasure, that all pleasure leads back to Him.

A Circle of Giving

Let's understand this constant need on a deeper level.

Eight-year-old Motty has been waiting for

the new bike his parents promised him for his birthday. Let's zoom in and look at **the emotional dynamics of this moment.**

Motty is happy that he has received his long-awaited bike. Mommy and Tatty are happy that Motty is so pleased with his bike. But there's **another layer to this emotional exchange.**

Motty unwraps his bike. He looks up to his parents and gives them a big grin. He knows that they're waiting for his smile, and so he shows them just how thrilled he is. He doesn't hide his pleasure, but **gives his parents the pleasure of basking in their son's joy.**

From this angle, things look different. Yes, the parents are giving to the child: wheels and a metal frame. But the child is **giving something even more precious to his parents:** the joy of seeing their child happy. He's giving them the warmth of the emotional connection that the gift has engendered.

A circle of giving has been drawn. The parents began this circle by giving their son the bicycle. But the son doesn't simply receive this gift. He takes the gift, shifts it into a different channel, and returns the gift to his parents. He gives his parents the pleasure and deep satisfaction of seeing their child happy. **The giver becomes the recipient, and the recipient becomes a giver.**

Every act of giving **contains a double dynamic:** the physical act of giving, where one person gives something to the other. But there is the emotional dynamic, which then

flows in the other direction. This is not simply gratitude—it's a level of pleasure.

Another example: Make an order in a high-scale restaurant, and the chef may come out to see if you're enjoying your meal. Does he hover by the table to receive a thank you? Usually, the reason he's there is simply to see his diners taking pleasure in the food he has prepared. In doing so, the taker (or partaker) becomes a giver, in turn, affording the chef **satisfaction and delight in seeing the fruits of his efforts**.

If that's true on the simplest level, how can we apply it to our relationship with Hashem? There's no limit to the gifts we receive from Hashem: food, drink, air, people we love, picturesque views, safe and warm homes. Recognizing this, expressing our *hakaras hatov*, is foundational to our lives as Jews. But there's a deeper dynamic at play, too. Like the parents who bask in their son's joy, Hashem wants to see our enjoyment. He wants to see us **taking pleasure in the gifts He bestows while connecting that pleasure to Him**, the source of all pleasure. He wants to see us taking delight in the love He showers on us.

There are many ways people **respond to gifts**:

- We can be embarrassed by the experience and hide away from the feelings it engenders.
- We can treat it with a sense of entitlement.
- We can repeatedly thank the giver, in the hope that in doing so we've somewhat paid our debt.

- We can genuinely thank the giver and spend a few moments showing how much the gift excites us and means to us—and how it reflects the closeness of our relationship.

Whenever we eat a morsel of food or take a sip of drink, **we're obligated to say a berachah**. On the simplest level, we're doing what we urge every toddler: saying thank you.

From this perspective, we see that our mandate is not to cut ourselves away from the pleasures of this world. It's to use them joyfully, mindfully, as a tool that can bring us **to a closer emotional connection to He who bestows these gifts**. Because He is doing so with love.

The Gift of the Trees

Tu B'Shevat, Rosh HaShanah for trees, a day when we are enjoined to enjoy their produce reminds us of this.

It reminds us that we are trees—**that we have the capacity to fuse heaven and earth**. It is this that transforms even the most basic act of all: eating.

Tu B'Shevat, the *ba'alei machshavah* tell us, is **a time when we eat fruit**, and, in doing so, we effect some level of *tikkun* for the forbidden act of eating fruit that was the cheit of eating from the *eitz hada'as*.

Hashem created the world so that we could experience His goodness. But there are two ways of doing so. We can eat fruit—a metaphor for every enjoyable experience—and forget

about Him. Or we can eat fruit and **allow it to deepen our awareness of Hashem's love for us**. We can bite into an apple and feel how it was grown for me because Hashem loves me and wants me to be healthy and happy. Or we can (most of the time for most of us) eat it mindlessly, forgetting to focus on the fact that it was a gift.

When we view the world as a place of goodness—as a garden of love for us—then

we're bringing back the balance between the physical and the spiritual. We're effecting a *tikkun*. We are fulfilling our role as trees—**rooted on earth but with our minds and souls ever in heaven**.

And as we take this message to heart, we are preparing for Nissan, for the recreation of a world built on kindness, love, for our formation as a nation, **and for our ultimate relationship with Hashem**.

Discussion Points

- One of the safeguards that were put into place to help us attain the type of eating that is a relationship is *berachos*. How can you make *berachos* meaningful for you, turning them into a real communication with Hashem?
- What holds us back from experiencing Hashem's love?
- How can we become more conscious of Hashem's love on a daily level? What impact does this have on our *tefillah*? On our daily ups and downs?

Sincerely,
Mrs. Faigie Zelcer