

Tu Beshvat 5757

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Tu Beshvat is the Hebrew form of the "15th day of Shevat." This day in the year marks the New Year for trees.

The tzadik of the generation

In *Sefer Yetzirah*, we are taught that God created the month of Shevat through the Divine channel of the letter *tzadik*—צ. As a word, *tzadik* literally means "a righteous one," of whom it is said: "The righteous one is the foundation of the world." In every generation there is one such righteous person who is also considered "the unique individual in the generation." The month of *Shevat* is the most conducive time for each one of us to manifest his own inner spark of *tzadik*, by strengthening his conscious connection to the *tzadik* of the generation.

The letter which serves as a spiritual channel for the previous month, *Tevet*, is the *ayin*—א. When connected to the letter of this month (the *tzadik*), the two letters form the word אצ (pronounced: *etz*) and meaning "tree." This reinforces the idea taught in Chassidut that the months of *Tevet* and *Shevat* relate, respectively, to the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. The spiritual power of *Tevet*—selflessness—is intended to help us rectify the state of self-consciousness that resulted from Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, thereby precipitating the primordial fall of all mankind. The spiritual power of *Shevat*—pleasure (*ta'anoog*, in Hebrew)—is meant to reawaken our desire for the fruit of the tree of life, which has the power to transform the bitter darkness of mortality that befell man after eating from the Tree of Knowledge into the sweet light of eternal life initially intended for man at the time of creation.

The tree of life, as expressive of the potential for restoring perfection to all reality, appears in Jewish sources as symbolic of both the *tzadik*, the foundation of the world and the Torah, in particular its inner dimension—the esoteric tradition. Thus, when we concentrate on grafting ourselves to the tree of life, the month of *Shevat* is an especially important time for attaching oneself to the *tzadik* by way of the "sweet" Torah issuing from his mouth. For this reason we find that it was during the month of *Shevat* that the children of Israel heard Moses repeat the Torah, as recorded in the book of Deuteronomy (whose traditional Hebrew name, *Mishneh Torah*, literally means "a repetition of the Torah").



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The righteous one in each generation is considered to be the Moses of that generation. He enlivens our souls by connecting us in deeper and deeper ways to "the Torah of life," continuously inspiring us to spread God's light in the world through good deeds and by sharing the Divine wisdom with which we have been blessed.

Traditional meanings

Tu Beshvat, the fifteenth day of Shevat, is commemorated in Jewish tradition as a special holiday: the New Year for trees. According to the sages, until this day trees consume water collected from the previous year's rainfall and from this day on the water they consume was collected from the current year's rainfall. Thus, legally, *Tu Beshvat* determines which tithe is to be taken from the newly-formed fruit of the tree, as it determines to which year the fruit belongs to. In addition, on *Tu Beshvat* we celebrate the trees' re-awakening to life, as sap rises from its roots and delivers the earth's blessings and energy to the branches where new fruit is being formed.

There are actually two opinions among the sages as to which day of *Shevat* is the new year for trees. Shamaï's academy maintains that it is the first day of Shevat, the day of the new moon; Hillel's academy maintains that it is the fifteenth day of Shevat, the day of the full moon. These two dates correspond to the two states of the *tzadik*. The first of the month represents the *tzadik* as he exists in a still concealed state, while the fifteenth of the month represents the *tzadik* as he stands fully revealed. This distinction suits the general perception that Shamaï's academy rules in accordance with potential (states that are as yet concealed) whereas the Hillel's academy decides in accordance with actuality (states that have been revealed).

The four parts of the Tree of Life

By referring to *Tu Beshvat* as "the New Year for the tree" (stressing the singular form of "tree," as opposed to "the New Year for trees," a more common phraseology), the *Mishnah* is alluding to the special connection between *Tu Beshvat* and the tree that represents the essence of creation: the Tree of Life.

The tree—as composed of roots, a trunk, branches, and fruit—is seen in Kabbalah as a metaphor for the process whereby Divine light and energy is channeled into Creation. Let us elaborate upon the various components of this metaphor:

The **roots** represent the power of the *tzadik's* soul, which absorbs and draws forth the invisible Divine life-force underlying Creation, making it available to all mankind in order that each individual can ultimately produce his own unique fruit.

The paradox of the *tzadik* is that while he exists in a revealed state (i.e., he is known to his generation), ministering to Creation and serving as a model of Divine service, his essence (or soul root) remains utterly hidden, like the roots of a tree. The *tzadik* himself is conscious of both these modes of existence. He is thus able to consciously exist "in the world and outside it" at one and the same time.

It is said of the Ba'al Shem Tov (the founder of the Chassidic movement) that he, more than any other *tzadik* before him, perfected this paradoxical state of consciousness. He was able to consciously cling to God's infinite and transcendent light while at the same time conduct a seemingly mundane conversation with a fellow Jew. This enabled him to draw down into Creation an unlimited measure of Divine influx from a realm far beyond Creation itself.

The **trunk** of the tree represents the wisdom of Torah as revealed to each generation by its unique *tzadik*. Torah is the essential medium by which Divine life-force gets carried to the various branches of Creation. The concentric rings of the trunk represent the multiple levels of interpretation associated with the Torah, ranging from the inner core of mystical tradition to the outer layer of law and custom.

The **branches** of the tree represent those humble and loving servants of God imbued with the expansive spirit of Chassidut (ideally everyone), who always seek to reach out and embrace the rest of Creation. Although their conscious connection is to the wisdom of the Torah revealed to them by the *tzadik*, the force which enables them to produce fruit actually derives from his hidden soul root, embedded in the Divine substratum of reality.

The **fruit** of the tree represents the good deeds performed by these individuals in their desire to benefit Creation. These are acts of loving-kindness suffused with the innate Divine flavor of each one's soul.

First Model: The Kabbalistic model of the tree

On *Tu Beshvat* we connect with this metaphor of the tree, as we experience a renewed surge of creative energy coursing up from the roots of our being, inspiring us to dedicate ourselves in the active service of God, to fulfill His purpose in Creation.

As in every metaphor containing four intrinsic components, this one too clearly reflects the meditative-creative flow associated with the four letters of God's essential Name, *Havayah*:

letter of Name	in tree	Description
<i>yud</i>	roots	the essential point at the center of all emerging reality
<i>hei</i>	trunk	initial expansion of one's inner potential
<i>vav</i>	branches	power of extension as one passes from the "concealed realm" of pure potential to the "revealed realm" of actualization
<i>hei</i>	fruit	ultimate expansion of self, achieved through the manifestation of one's inner potential within the revealed context of Creation

The preceding correlation appears especially apt in light of the classical distinction made between the first two letters and last two letters of God's Name. The *yud* and first *hei*, corresponding to the roots and trunk, represent God's concealed powers of

intelligence—wisdom and understanding—organically joined together in an inseverable bond. The *vav* and final *hei*, corresponding to the branches and fruit, represent the range of God's revealed attributes expressed through affect and action. Although these two realms are also meant to achieve union, they are not intrinsically linked in the same way as the complementary functions of wisdom and understanding; hence, the tenuous attachment between branch and fruit.

Second model: The tree and the Kabbalistic Worlds

One can also view the interrelationship between the four parts of a tree and the letters of God's Name according to a second internal division. In this division, the first of the four components stands apart from the remaining three.

In respect to the model of a tree, this division reflects the obvious difference between the roots, which are unseen, and the rest of the tree which is exposed to view.

In the case of God's essential Name, *Havayah*, this division can best be understood in terms of the correspondence between the four letters of the Name, *Havayah* and the four primary Worlds of creation described in Kabbalah. The first world to emerge out of God's infinite light, the World of Emanation (*Atzilut*), corresponds to the insubstantial *yud* of God's Name. Virtually touching the transcendent source of all reality, this World, like the roots of a tree, the World of Emanation exists hidden from view in an absolute state of self-nullification, merged absolutely with the Divine energy (which itself can be likened to the power of growth in the earth) that generates all ensuing realms of Creation.

The three worlds which follow in the evolution of reality—the World of Creation (*Beri'ah*), the World of Formation (*Yetzirah*), and the World of Action (*Asiyah*)—all differ from the World of Emanation insofar as they exhibit various degrees of self-manifestation, just as the trunk, branches and fruit of the tree exhibit in relation to the roots. In this sense, they correspond to the last three letters of God's Name which are symbolically referred to in Kabbalistic terminology as the head, the body, and the feet of created consciousness.

The initial *hei* of God's Name—corresponding to the World of Creation and the trunk of the tree—is described as the *head* insofar as its proximity to the World of Emanation impels it to consciously connect with the hidden root of reality. The wisdom of the Torah, which as we saw above corresponds to the trunk of the tree, provides the medium for achieving this end.

The *vav* of God's Name—corresponding to the World of Formation and the branches of the tree—is described as the *body* of created consciousness insofar as it represents the various limbs, or channels of Divine influence through which God's creative energy seeks to assert itself in Creation.

The final *hei* of God's Name—corresponding to the World of Action and the fruit of the tree—is then described as the *feet* insofar as it represents the medium through which supernal man realizes a tangible connection and involvement with the physical world.

Although this division in created consciousness outwardly implies a split between the initial *yud* and the remaining three letters of God's Name, inwardly it continues to include the division between the first two and last two letters. How is this so? In reconsidering the above model, it becomes apparent that the *head* of God's Name (the initial *hei*) although representing a degree of manifest consciousness is still oriented toward the self-nullifying higher unification alluded to in the hidden *yud*; whereas, the *vav* and final *hei* both seek self-actualization within the scheme of Creation, whereby they produce a lower unification, but with a higher purpose.

Linking heaven and earth

And so we see that the image of the tree, the focus of *Tu Beshvat*, serves as a central metaphor in Kabbalah for describing the evolution of all reality. As such, *Tu Beshvat* represents the linking of heaven and earth, expressed through the consolidation of the four stage creative process corresponding to the four letters of God's Name, particularly by way of the union between the first two letters, *yud* and *hei* (the higher unification) and the last two letters, *vav* and *hei* (the lower unification).

This is beautifully alluded to in the connection between the day and month that coincide on this special day. *Tu Beshvat* is the 15th day of the 11th month, Shevat, in the Jewish year. The number 15 constitutes the sum of the first two letters in God's essential Name *Havayah*, *yud* (equal to 10) and *hei* (equal to 5). The number 11 constitutes the sum of its last two letters: *vav* (equal to 6) and *hei* (equal to 5).

With this thought in mind, let us prepare for *Tu Beshvat* by praying that God remove whatever barriers may threaten the free passage of His blessing from heaven to earth so that we may utilize that blessing in cultivating the delicious fruit of our own creative existence, fruit that is permeated with Divine vitality (the tree of life) and knowledge (the rectified tree of knowledge) as intended by God in creating this garden of His on earth.