

***TuBeshvat 5771***  
***Productivity Jewish Style***  
***Rabbi Tzadok Cable***

We are now well into the month of Shevat and closing in on the special day on the Jewish Calendar called TuBeshvat (or the fifteenth of Shevat). The Mishnah in Meseches Rosh Hashanah 2a teaches that in fact TuBeshvat is the “New Year” for trees according to Beis Hillel. On a halachik level the ramifications of this “New Year” are that any tree that has blossomed before this day is considered as having grown in the previous year and thus its fruits would only be tithed together with fruits that grew in that previous year. On a botanical level this time of year is when fruit bearing trees begin to draw new sap from the depths of the root system via the ground up into the branches, which will form the new fruits of the coming season.

The Shulchan Aruch in Orach Chaim 131:6 teaches that the custom is not to say “tachanun” on TuBeshvat, a status normally reserved for moadim or days of a festive nature. The Magen Avraham # 16 there brings down based on kabbalistic sources that the custom of Ashkenazi Jews was to eat a lot of fruits on that day. On the face of the matter it is not self apparent why this unique status and emphasis would be ascribed to TuBeshvat. It would seem that there is more depth here.

Our sages teach us in numerous places in the Talmud that the verse in Devarim 20:19 dealing with not cutting down a fruit tree when going out to war is also alluding to a deeper idea that “a man is like the tree of the field”. The Midrash in Pirkei D’rebbe Elazar chapter 21 also uses this idea to expound on the original sin. The choice Adam Harishon was originally faced with i.e. that of eating from the fruit of the tree was actually an analogy for a deeper concept of how to relate to one’s definition of self and his purpose and productivity in the world. The Maharal in Gur Aryeh on the verse in Breishis 9:21 says that “man is the tree of the field” means that the purpose of man was to be planted with his “spiritual roots” in heaven, and to “grow fruits” outward and downward into the world while involved in the service of Hashem. The Gemara teaches in Sotah and Kiddushin that the main fruits of a person are his good deeds.

By “taking” from the fruit of the tree and eating it for his own personal enjoyment and not for the sake of the service of Hashem, what man was doing was basically turning the purpose of his existence upside down. He changed the purpose of his productivity from the service of Hashem to being the source of personal gratification. This in a nutshell is the essence of the first sin of Adam Harishon. He was initially meant to subjugate all of his “fruits” i.e. his creativity, his vitality, his expression in the outer physical world to the purpose of bringing greater honor to His creator. By not “eating the fruit” he would be maintaining his true identity of being a glorious spiritual tree in G-d’s field bringing honor to his Creator. This in turn would lead to a deeper and greater expression of self as a “servant of G-d”, like the Mishnah in Avos says that “the acquisition of a truly good name is the greatest acquisition of all”. What happened instead is that he made the selfish enjoyment of his own creativity, vitality, and outward expression, the pseudo purpose of his existence and thus warped his identity to fit that purpose.

In essence we see that how a person looks at “productivity” and “self expression” is the fundamental and crucial question of existence. Virtually every choice and every move a person makes will be drastically affected by how he relates to this question. The Midrash Rabbah on this verse teaches us

that originally G-d said on the third day of creation that “trees should sprout forth from the ground whose fruits and bark tasted like the fruit” (Bereishis 1:11). The Midrash continues that the land rebelled and didn’t produce the desired result. However, G-d suspended the curse to the ground for not doing what it was supposed to do until the curse of man later on for his first sin. The Maharal in Gur Aryeh there explains that really the ground is representative of the lowliness of physicality in the world, that aspect which is distant from spirituality and actually drives a person away from G-d. Even though the ground didn’t have free will to go against the will of G-d, because of Adam Harishon’s sin to choose to warp his identity and purpose to a more selfish direction and a more physical one, the trees didn’t actually produce this result. Adam was ultimately responsible for the fact that the ground didn’t do what it was meant to do. Had Adam Harishon remained true to his designated identity and purpose, the lowliness of the ground and its lacking would be “fixed” and elevated through him, and thus would fulfill the will of G-d to produce bark that tasted like fruit.

Rav Tzadok Hakohen in his sefer Pri Tzadik on Chodesh Shevat, points out that in the Sefer Yetzirah the month of Shevat is connected to the letter “tzadik” and to the idea of a “desire” for eating. The Arizal also adds that the parshios of “Shovavim” where Klal Israel have a custom to work on fixing the damage of sin to our inner desires and passions, which is represented by the bris milah, always fall out mainly during this month. This shows that there is also an inherent connection to the idea of the fixing of the bris milah to the month of Shevat. Rav Tzadok goes on to explain that this is the reason for the custom to eat fruits on TuBeshvat. The purpose of this custom is to fix the damage we have done to ourselves through sin collectively from the times of Adam Harishon. The essence of this sin, and of all sin for that matter, is the warping of the identity of self and one’s purpose and productivity. When the identity is mainly consumed by the desires and passions for selfish pleasure seeking this drives a person away from his true purpose and away from his true identity. Shlomo Hamelech says in Mishlei “As for a desirous person, he wishes to be detached and separated from others”. This approach leads to a misuse of one’s productivity and ultimately a selfish attitude towards all pleasure. This is the breakdown of a person and ultimately leaves him devoid of any connection to others and even to G-d who created him.

By doing teshuvah at this time of year we attempt to make a paradigm shift in our essential attitude towards productivity. We strive to reverse the negative and decaying effects of sin and become like the tzadik. We strive to reach deep within back to our spiritual roots and pull down new spiritual energy, “new sap” for the sake of revealing “new fruits” and new blossoms. These blossoms are ultimately a rectified form of human productivity. This is when we subjugate our identity “our tree” to the service of Hashem. We look for nothing more but to produce fruits and express ourselves in a way that gives glory and honor to the Creator. This is why there is such a strong emphasis on the fixing of the damage to the Bris Milah during this time. That means we are attempting to become people who put out fruits into the world that are a healthy and constructive expression of the true spiritual self.

It is therefore by no coincidence that we make a big deal about eating fruits on TuBeshvat. This again is the day which is the “New Year” for trees. This means that just as we human beings are now experiencing a spiritual renewal and a realigning of our productivity to our true spiritual selves, so too the trees in the world are in tandem with us. We sit on this festive day and celebrate the results of our teshuvah in this overall time period. We see in ourselves the “fruits” and the idea of “eating” in the right measure. The verse says that there are two ways to eat. The wicked man eats in the spirit of the verse “and the belly of the wicked will always be lacking”. This means that when a person is selfish

and has a warped identity and purpose like we saw above, his whole approach to life is to fill himself and take more pleasure for himself. This is a vicious and never ending cycle that won't lead to satisfaction. On the other hand the rectified person eats in the spirit of the verse "and the righteous one eats for the satiation of his SOUL". This means that a person who has the appropriate view of his purpose and has a healthy identity then his whole approach to life is to do things in the physical world for the sake of higher spiritual pursuits, i.e. he is connected to the service of G-d. He eats in order to have strength to perform mitzvos while enjoying the good taste as well.

Ultimately as we get more and more refined through this process of teshuvah we will bring the world to a complete and perfected state. This is why the sages say that in the future even the barren species of trees will produce fruits. Also the bark and the fruit will taste the same, and bread will sprout forth from the ground without requiring toil. All of the mechanics of the productivity of our world will shift to align themselves with the path of man. When he perfects himself and returns to his true identity, by subjugating his productivity to G-d rather than himself, he will bring the world to completion and we will all reap the fruits of our labor!