

Rethinking Tu B'Shevat: This is the season of growth and renewal

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

My earliest memories of Tu B'Shevat, I must admit, were not all that pleasant. And I can sum up the reason for this in just one word: *Bokser*. *Bokser* is the Yiddish word for carob, or *haruv* in Hebrew, which we were always sort of force-fed in Hebrew School on Tu B'Shevat. Israeli teachers would bring these gnarled, rock-hard, dark brown sticks to class, and we were told to “eat them, they taste like chocolate!” The word *bokser* comes from the German word *bokshornbaum*: Bock means a buck, as in a ram or a goat; shorn is like the English word, meaning cut off; and baum means tree. So *bokser* is animal horns shorn from trees.¹ Sounds mouthwatering, doesn't it?

Not only is *bokser* a dentist's nightmare, it was also every child's as well. I never tasted anything remotely like chocolate when my teeth finally cracked through the hard carob pod, and I never quite understood why we were eating this particular “food” on Tu B'Shevat. But it wasn't only the carob that was virtually impenetrable, so too was the frozen ground of Cleveland, Ohio in January. How exactly was this a holiday of tree planting, springtime, or tithed fruits...what was a tithe anyway? I didn't know anyone who did that. And it was hard for a little kid living 6,000 miles away from *Eretz Yisrael* to imagine a different climate where seasonal change had begun in January.

So for a long time, I sort of “shelved” Tu B'Shevat. I was content that it was among the most minor of holidays on our calendar, and that it really didn't make any demands of me, except for the annual JNF tree planting campaign! That is, until I discovered that, like most holidays, there are so many other layers of meaning...

People have been marveling at trees for time immemorial. Not only for their fruit, their shade, their protection, but also for their mystique. Trees live an incredibly long time! The oldest known tree is appropriately named *Methuselah*, and it is a bristlecone pine tree that after 4,853 years is still growing in the White Mountains of eastern California! That means that while our ancestors were crossing the *Yam Suf*, which we read about this morning, Methuselah was a little sapling on the other side of the world! The extensive root system of the Pando, a colony of Quaking Aspen trees in Utah, is considered a single living organism thought to be over 16,000 years old! Trees are astonishing in their longevity! Is it any wonder that of all the metaphors for Torah perhaps the most popular one is *Etz Hayim*, a practically eternal tree of life? When the prophet Isaiah wanted to describe the everlasting Jewish people, he said: *ki'yemei ha'eitz y'mei ami*, “the lifespan of my people will be like the lifespan of a tree.”² The truth is that absent clear external factors like a forest fire, a lightning strike, or a human being with an ax, trees can go on living for incomprehensibly long lives. What is the secret to its longevity, and what can we humans—whose average life span is a mere 72 years—learn from our arboreal neighbors?

One of the most remarkable characteristics of trees is that they continue bearing fruit well into their “old age.” The Java Plum tree, for example, can grow to over 100 feet tall and live well over a century, and throughout its life it continues to bear sweet crimson red and black oblong fruits year after year. Trees just don't stop producing, again unless some external factor stops them. What a lesson for us...we

¹ <https://forward.com/articles/2887/a-brief-on-bokser/>

² Isaiah 65:22

talk about our productive years being the time when we are raising a family, or at the peak of our careers. If you look up retirement in a thesaurus, you will find words like withdraw, surrender, separate, depart...What if we understood our lives to truly be *k'yme'i ha'eitz*, like the years of a tree? What if we didn't speak of retirement, but a change of focus or goals? A person should never fully "retire" from life, but should continue to blossom and grow in every season and stage of life.

Plants and trees also have this remarkable ability to regrow lost parts. Anyone who has ever pruned or trimmed a tree has seen this. Trees shed what is no longer necessary or truly alive and replace those parts with new life and potential. After the most recent thawing of snow, I was cleaning up my front yard. There are still clumps of dry leaves and brush from autumn, and the trees look so depleted and bare right now. It's incredible to imagine that in just a few months they will be bursting with radiant color, new blossoms, and flowers; these same skeletons of the winter will reemerge so vividly into life. Some people think that when a dream or a goal or a relationship seems to dry up or wither that that's the end of it. There's no hope for rebirth or renewal. And we go around with our arid branches, hardened and bent over like that's the way it will always be from now on. What if Tu B'Shevat represented a time to focus on pruning, mulching, trimming, and revivifying? What if this holiday, in the midst of winter temperatures and short, cold days was the time we used to prep our lives for new growth and possibility to come? Don't give up because you may be going through a lull. Give yourself the time and opportunity to come back to life!

Trees have remarkable roots. I can tell you all about just how strong they are because one of them punctured our main line several months ago and blocked up all our drains! Those strong roots are what prevent trees from being toppled over every time there's a windy day. They sway back and forth, but remain firmly planted because of those sprawling, anchoring root systems. I find that people who have strong roots, who know where they come from, who have deep connections to family, community, and faith tend to be the most resilient in life. Perhaps this is what Deuteronomy meant when it said: *Ki ha'adam eitz ha'sadeh*, a person is the tree of the field.³ At least we ought to aspire to be. Deeply connected to our source, our foundation...but also reaching upward. As important as roots are, we know that trees really derive their sustenance not from below, but from above; from sunlight, rain, oxygen. Trees reach upward, and spread outward to capture that nourishment from above. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes that we too "live mainly from above, not from below...The basis of our existence, like that of the tree, is intangible. Essentially, our life is made-up of higher things, not of those that seem to be its basic elements. The latter are merely instruments."⁴ Friends, our purpose, our mission, our blessings come from above; a Jew is always yearning for those blessings, reaching for those opportunities for greater holiness, to serve and love the God of the universe. Like trees, we must recognize our roots in this world, as well as our energy from Above.

I do not plan to go over to Moti's to buy a container of carob, and not only because it's \$6.89/pound! More because I still don't like it, and I want to keep all my teeth, thank you very much! But I will tell you something about carob that I recently learned. The Talmud says that it takes 70 years for a carob tree to mature and bear fruit. I'm not sure that is exactly, botanically correct, but for the rabbis, 70 years can also be a euphemism for a long time! And that is true about carob trees and their eventual

³ Deuteronomy 20:19

⁴ Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin. *Change & Renewal, The Essence of the Jewish Holidays, Festivals, & Days of Remembrance*, 2011. Pages 161-162

fruit...according to Wikipedia it's more like 20-25 years before they reach full fruit-bearing potential. Let's take one more lesson from these chocolate brown pods...some of life's greatest blessings come as a result of patience and commitment over the long haul, even and perhaps especially when we don't see the immediate fruits of our labors. So, my Tu B'Shevat blessing for you is not so much that you crack your teeth on *bokser* or even that you run outside on a 25 degree day to hug a tree. But that we embrace these lessons from the natural world that God has planted for us: to uplift us, to inspire us, and to make us better, happier, healthier, more resilient human beings.

Shabbat Shalom and *Tu B'Shevat Sameach!*