

By The Light of The Moon (February 2007)

“There are four roshei shanim...” [Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1]. That is, there are four Rosh Hashanahs (literally “head of the year”), four times during the year wherein the Jewish calendar sets aside a day to mark the annual renewal of a particular cycle.

The first comes on the first day of Nisan, the springtime new year, the time when we renew the calendar. It’s the first day of the first month. The second new year comes on the first day of Elul, the sixth month. This was the time for shepherds to take an inventory of their cattle, to determine how much they should tithe. It was a kind of ancient income tax day. Then came the first of Tishri, what we have come to know and love as Rosh Hashanah. On this day the “year” would be “counted”, a new year (in terms of “dating”) would commence. This annual day of renewal fell on the first day of the seventh or “sabbatical” month.

Last came the new year of the trees, the time when it was customary to tithe fruit-bearing trees in ancient Israel. But on this occasion, there was a dispute. According to the Mishnah, the House of Shammai said it should fall on the first day of the eleventh month, the month of Shevat, but the House of Hillel said it fell on the fifteenth day of Shevat. The Mishnah gives no explanation for the controversy. It says, however, that the House of Hillel’s opinion prevailed. (In Hebrew the number 15 is spelled with the letters tet and vav, together they are pronounced Tu. Hence, Tu b’Shevat, the fifteenth day of Shevat.)

Why do you think that Beit Hillel would break from the norm and insist that we mark the new year of the trees in the middle of the month and not at the beginning? Perhaps they reasoned that the trees needed a couple more weeks to bear fruit, a little more time to assure bounty into the approaching middle eastern spring? Perhaps. But then I got to thinking about what it is like to live according to a lunar calendar, where your sense of time is framed by the structure of nature. The new moon, the first day of the month, is dark. There is no moon. You can’t see it. Now it makes sense that all these new years begin on the first day—in darkness—just as Jewish time begins at sundown. There’s something about time starting with darkness and then emerging to light. It reminds us that creation—and the meaning of life—is found in the transition from nothing to something. Yet for Beit Hillel the trees had to be assessed when the moon was already full, the time of the most light. And I don’t think it had anything to do with photosynthesis.

Trees are about hope. Not only in what they do for us—providing shade and nourishment, stability to the earth, reoxygenating the atmosphere—but also in what they symbolize. There’s just something about a tree that inspires us—its majesty, its resilience, its beauty. From California’s giant Redwoods to Van Gogh’s grove of blue trees to Shel Silverstein’s Giving Tree, trees captivate our hearts and souls. Just as they did for Anne Frank. Actually, it was one tree in particular. Trapped in isolation for nearly two years, Anne grasped at anything she could see from the attic window of her refuge at 263 Prinsengracht. As she often reflected happily on the bells of the Westerkerk church next door, Anne also wrote frequently about the charm of the chestnut tree in the courtyard behind her hiding place:

Nearly every morning I go to the attic to blow the stuffy air out of my lungs, from my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree, on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind. As long as this exists, I thought, and I may live to see it, this sunshine, the cloudless skies, while this lasts I cannot be unhappy. [February 23, 1944]

In her darkest days, she found solace in that tree. And hope. Somehow it represented that which evil could not touch. It bloomed despite the horrors that surrounded it.

Our chestnut tree is in full blossom. It is covered with leaves and is even more beautiful than last year. [May 13, 1944]

That chestnut tree—at over 150 years of age, one of the oldest of its species in Amsterdam—was impervious to the darkness that engulfed the world of Anne Frank. But not the cycle of life. Alas, after nearly fifteen years of trying to save it from a ravaging fungus, the decision to cut it down was reluctantly approved by the Amsterdam city council this past November. Everything dies. We know this. Yet rather than mourn a process over which we ultimately have no control, ours is to affirm life in whatever way we can. Tu b’Shevat reminds us of the mitzvah of taking note of our bounty and, particularly in our modern observance of this late winter new year, replenishing what has fallen. Planting trees. At the brightest time of the month. When the moon is full. And our hope is undaunted.

This is why I take our Confirmation students to Amsterdam every year. They need to know of what happened there. They need to know that the days are growing short for the witnesses who survived the darkest time in human history. Soon they will be the ones who must remember and tell the story.

But I also take them there for myself. You see—they are my hope. These young women and men are no longer seedlings, but ripe with potential illuminated by the light of a full moon. And as they stand in the narrow room where Anne spent the last two good years of her life writing her reflections about life's meaning, I want them to see—and for selfish reasons, I want to see them see—that it was in that dark space where Anne, the same age as they, refused to give up on life. Or on people.

It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart. I simply can't build my hopes on a foundation of confusion, misery, and death...and yet...I think...this cruelty will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again.
[July 15, 1944]

It is a faith to which only a burgeoning adult can give voice. And it is just this kind of faith that sustains our world.

And so, in anticipation of that tree's demise, scientists went and took three grafts to keep Anne's tree—and the hope it nourishes—alive. God-willing they will plant the grafts when the moon is full. A symbolic gesture to be sure. But in a world so filled with darkness, hope needs all the light it can get.