

Torah Thoughts Beshalakh

5779:

It looks like East Brunswick will finally get a taste of real winter this week, as snow seems likely. Judaism sometimes has the reputation of being above such things, for intellectualizing everything, elevating thought above all else. But this is a time of year when we remember how intimately involved our ancestors were in the natural world. In the first century, most Jews lived in what is now modern Israel, and the majority of them were farmers. Each year farmers gave a certain percentage of their crops to the Temple in Jerusalem, an offering in thanks to God for abundance. When it came to fruit trees, the early rabbis decreed that the cutoff date for determining which trees were mature enough to tithe their fruit was the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shevat (Tu b'Shevat). It was known as the new year for trees because that was when trees over a certain age were old enough to be included in the fruit tithe.

Even after the time of the Temple, Tu b'Shevat retained its association with trees, right up to the modern period. Jews continue to eat new fruit and say a *shehechiyanu* over it on that day, and many customs have developed around the ritual of a Tu b'Shevat seder, in which we eat the produce of the land of Israel. We are also familiar with the tale of Honi the circle maker, a kind of Jewish Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep and then awoke in the distant future to learn the lesson of long-term planting done by one generation for another.

Tu b'Shevat can remind us how rooted in the land the Jews have been. For the most part, the Torah speaks in terms of an agricultural society in the Holy Land, with the Temple at its geographic, economic and religious center. Tithing was not limited to Tu b'Shevat; it occurred every day, and the three major festivals (Sukkot, Pesakh and Shavuot) were harvest celebrations when Jews from all over the land would bring their first fruits to Jerusalem.

That history should inspire us to sensitivity toward the world around us, to remembering our responsibility to keep it healthy and take our obligation to it as caretakers seriously. Pollution and damage of the land, water and air is not only bad for our health and a danger to the entire ecosystem; it is a violation of our covenant with God to tend the earth. As we mark Tu b'Shevat this Monday, let's rededicate ourselves to an awareness of those connections and those responsibilities.