

Invisible movement - Shabbat Shirah 5781

Dear Friends,

Yesterday we marked Tu Bishvat, the New Year of Trees, which in practical terms functions to determine which year a fruit belongs for purposes of tithing. Fruits that form before Tu Bishvat are accounted to last year's tithes, while fruits that form after Tu Bishvat belong to the current year. In the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 14a) Rabbi Elazar quotes the opinion of Rabbi Oshaya that the date for the New Year of Trees was selected, because at this point in the calendar, most of the year's rain has fallen, although most of the winter still remains.

It's not immediately clear why the date for determining which year a fruit belongs to would be based on the point at which one could predict that the majority of the rain for the year would have fallen. Perhaps sensing a gap in the explanation, Rashi, in his commentary to the Gemara, adds that at this point in the year, the sap has begun to rise, and that fruit will form after this.

Rashi's explanation raises its own questions: If it's about the sap, why did the gemara mention the rain? And if it's the rain, as the Gemara explained, why bother mentioning the sap? Perhaps what Rashi is trying to say is that the moment when most of the rain has fallen is significant because at that point, sap has already begun to rise. By Tu Bishvat, the rising sap will be carrying this year's rains, a majority of which have already fallen, and any fruit that forms thereafter can be assumed to be formed by this year's sap, rising from a ground whose moisture comes from this year's rains. Any fruit that had formed prior to Tu Bishvat is assumed to have been formed from last year's sap, nourished by last year's rains, even if the fruit appeared after Rosh Hashanah.

Rashi's explanation helps us understand how a date which on its face appears to be simply a somewhat arbitrary legal demarcation point, could come to be celebrated as spiritual festival by Kabbalists. Kabbalah focuses on the invisible divine origins of creation, the supernal mechanics through which an infinite, transcendent Oneness could give rise to and sustain our multitudinous, diverse, physical creation. What better metaphor for the process by which intangible infinity gives rise to corporeal creation than the mysterious, hidden processes by which invisible water under the ground is transformed into a juicy piece of ripe fruit which delights and nourishes us?

As I wrote in the Jewish Light this week, it is no accident that Shabbat Shirah, when we read the song that our ancestors sang at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, falls right around Tu Bishvat, a holiday when we mark the New Year of Trees. The Song of the Sea celebrates a great miracle that occurs at the beginning of our journey through the desert, a journey whose full fruits will only come later, with the giving of the Torah and after forty long years of wandering, our entry into the land of Israel. Tu Bishvat, like the Song of the Sea, is an acknowledgement of the invisible first steps on the way to achieving a tangible goal. We celebrate the beginning of the sap running, because without that invisible, easily overlooked first step, there would be no leaves, no blossoms, no fruit. We celebrate the crossing of the sea, because without that triumph, we could not have received the Torah, or entered the land, though these accomplishments would only come later.

However, I think even more than the Song of the Sea, and even more than the miracle of the parting of the sea, which that song commemorates, I think Tu Bishvat relates to the moment before before the parting of the sea, when the Children of Israel stood on the edge of the sea of Reeds, with the Egyptians at their backs, and the sea in front of them. There is a confusing sequence, during which the Israelites look up, realize the Egyptians are following them, and then cry out in prayer to G-d, before turning to Moshe and excoriating him for bringing them out of Egypt in the first place, expressing their desire to return to Egypt. Moshe responds, not by chastising the Israelites for being

fickle and faithless, but by reassuring them “Fear not, stand still and see the salvation of Hashem...Hashem shall fight for you, and you shall remain quiet.” (Shemot 14:13-14). Thereupon, Hashem speaks to Moshe: “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Children of Israel to go forward, and you lift up your rod over the sea and split it!” (Ibid v. 15)

At first glance, it seems Hashem is criticizing Moshe for praying, and for telling the Israelites to stand still and trust in G-d's deliverance, when what they should have been doing something active, in the case of the Israelites marching forward, and in Moshe's case, splitting the sea. However, with the people in a panic that the Egyptians were at their backs, was it really realistic to expect them to start marching into the sea, trusting that it would part eventually? Reassuring the people, telling them not to fear, but to stand still, and expect salvation, was probably healthy and necessary. Perhaps Hashem here isn't criticizing Moshe for what he told the Israelites, but letting him know that they are now ready to move forward. We don't know how long elapsed between Moshe's message to the Israelites and Hashem's message to Moshe. Presumably it was long enough for Moshe to begin praying, since Hashem asked him why he was crying out to G-d. Whether it was a few seconds or much longer, something transformed within the Israelites, they were able to suspend their fear and trust in G-d long enough that they were willing to listen to Moshe's instructions and begin walking into the water.

That invisible, internal transition from fear, paralysis and panic, happened after Moshe's instructions to stand still. Sometimes, before movement can occur, before outward visible change, we need to stop and take time to change something internally. Moshe understood that the people in their state of mind were not ready to march into the sea and so he told them to take some time to collect themselves.

Often in life, we can see where we want to go, but fears and insecurity prevent us from actually moving in that direction. Sometimes we might not be even conscious of the fears and insecurity, but just see that for reasons we can't understand we aren't doing the things we know we ought to do, or that we claim we want to do. At such times, we could berate ourselves for not taking the necessary outward visible steps that might seem obvious and easy to do. However, as Moshe understood, when someone is paralyzed by fear or lack of confidence, it's useless to berate them for not moving in the right direction. Before there can be outward movement in the right direction, an invisible, internal movement must take place. Moshe understood this, which is why he told the Israelites to stand still and not to have fear. He knew that before they could take the first steps into the water, they needed to take invisible internal steps to cultivate the faith and calm that would allow them to do so. Those invisible steps are no less real or important than the outward, visible ones.

Tu Bishvat reminds us of this, to honor the invisible internal secret work that is happening even in a tree that appears completely dormant. Far from being dead or stuck, that tree is doing hard work, moving water and nutrients from the earth into its branches, which will eventually bring forth fruit. No one would dream of berating a dormant tree in January for not having ripe delicious fruit on every twig. Let us have at least as much compassion on ourselves as we do in a fruit tree. When we find ourselves feeling stuck, unable to take concrete steps towards our goals, instead of berating ourselves for not being able to move forward, let us, like Moshe, acknowledge and try to understand and support the invisible but important internal work that needs to go on before we can start taking concrete steps, before we can start bearing our fruit.

On this Tu Bishvat, may we all be blessed with renewed energy and compassion for the ways in which we seem stuck, and faith to stop, stand still and trust that if we give the invisible secret internal processes the attention they deserve, they will eventually lead to dramatic transformation.

Shabbat Shalom!
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