

Shevat: Saving the World, One Bite at a Time

Section 1. Tu b'What and When?

The Mishnah (meaning 'study' or 'review') is the first codification of Jewish law or halachah and the first major work of Rabbinic literature. It was redacted by R' Judah HaNassi (the Prince) around 200 CE, at a time when the Roman persecution and forced dispersal of Jews threatened to eradicate our chain of tradition.

Tu b'Shvat, the new year for trees, is named for its date (Tu = טו, meaning 15), but in the mishnaic passage below, we discover that the great rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai here disagree about this, as on many matters.

1. Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:1

The four new years are:
 On the first of Nisan, the new year for the kings and for the festivals;
 On the first of Elul, the new year for the tithing of animals;
 Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon say, on the first of Tishrei.
 On the first of Tishrei, the new year for years, for the Sabbatical years and for the Jubilee years and for the planting and for the vegetables.
 On the first of Shevat, the new year for the trees according to the words of the House of Shammai;
 The House of Hillel says, on the fifteenth thereof.

משנה ראש השנה א:א

אַרְבַּעָה רָאשֵׁי שָׁנִים הֵם
 בְּאַחַד בְּנִיסָן
 רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְמַלְכִים וְלְרֹגְלִים
 בְּאַחַד בְּאֵלוּל
 רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְמַעֲשֵׂר בְּהֵמָה
 רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְרַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמְרִים
 בְּאַחַד בְּתִשְׁרֵי
 בְּאַחַד בְּתִשְׁרֵי
 רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְשָׁנִים וְלְשִׁמְטוֹן וְלִיּוֹבְלוֹת
 לְנִטְעָה וְלִירִקוֹת
 בְּאַחַד בְּשֶׁבֶט רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְאֵילָן
 כְּדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שַׁמַּי
 בֵּית הַלֵּל אוֹמְרִים בְּחִמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּו

R' Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040 – 1105), known by the acronym Rashi, was a medieval French rabbi and author of the most authoritative commentaries on both the Tanach (Hebrew Bible) and the Talmud. Both of these works are a centerpiece of Jewish study and identity, and have long been printed with standard editions of their subjects. Here Rashi explores why the House of Shammai held that the 1st of Shevat should be the new year for trees. What do his words add to our understanding of our own process of growth and renewal?

2. Rashi on Rosh Hashanah 14a

Since most of the 'days of rain' (i.e. winter) have already passed, it is the beginning of the time of the production of fruit, and the sap begins to rise in the trees, and the fruit begins to ripen from this point.

רש"י על ראש השנה יד:א

שִׁכְבַּר עֵבֶר רֹב יְמוֹת הַגְּשָׁמִים
 שֶׁהוּא זְמַן רִבִּיעָה
 וְעֵלָה הַשֶּׁרֶף בְּאֵילָנוֹת
 וְנִמְצְאוּ הַפִּירוֹת חוֹנְטִין מֵעַתָּה

R' Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (Poland, 1783 – 1841) was the founder of the Dinov Chasidic dynasty, and a student of R' Elimelech of Lizhensk and the Chozeh of Lublin. He is known by the name of his widely beloved major work, the Bnei Yissascher, which focuses on the spiritual background and work of each month. Here, he compares Tu b'Shvat to Tu b'Av, another full-moon mini-festival which is a joyous celebration of love and forgiveness. What does his comparison add to our understanding of Tu b'Shvat?

3. Bnei Yissascher on Tammuz and Av 4:2-3

Notice how our teachers say, “Forty days before an embryo is formed a Divine Voice announces in the heavens: The daughter of so-and-so is destined to marry so-and-so” (See Sotah 2a).

Forty days before the 25th of Elul is the time before us of Tu b'Av. [At this time] Israel arise in thought to be wedded to the most honored Sovereign.

And so it is with Tu b'Shvat which is celebrated as a festival. It is the new year for the trees, and notice how it is also forty days before the 25th of Adar, as hinted by the verse, “For the person is a tree of the field” (Deut. 20:19).

בני יששכר תמוז - אב ד:ב-ג

והנה אמרו רז"ל
ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הוולד
מכריזין ברקיע
בת פלוני לפלוני

ארבעים יום קודם כ"ה אלול
הוא זמן שלפנינו ט"ו באב
ישראל עלו במחשבה להתחתן במלך הכבוד

וכן הוא הענין בט"ו בשבט
שעושין אותו יום טוב
והוא ראש השנה לאילנות
הנה הוא ג"כ ארבעים יום קודם כ"ה אדר
נרמז כי האדם עץ השדה

Section 2. Cosmic Appetite

Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Formation) is a work of meditative proto-Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) with strong magical elements. It is traditionally attributed to Abraham (18th Century BCE) and/or R' Akiva (2nd Century CE). In it, each month is associated with a Hebrew letter, a constellation, a part of the human body and a human emotion, sense, or faculty. These are the keys to the month's psycho-spiritual opportunities and challenges. What does the section below tell us about Shevat?

4. Sefer Yetzirah 5:10 (GRA Version, trans. by Kaplan)

He made the letter Tzadi king over taste
And He bound a crown to it
And He combined one with another
And with them He formed Aquarius in the
Universe
Shevat in the Year
And the Korkeban* in the Soul
Male and female.

[*the stomach, according to the Zohar.]

ספר היצירה ה:י

המליך אות צ' בלעיטה
וקשר לו כתר
וצרפן זה בזה
וצר בהם דלי בעולם

ושבט בשנה
וקורקבן בנפש
זכר ונקבה

R' Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823 – 1900), usually referred to as Rav Tzadok, was a major figure in Polish Chasidut. His classes on Shabbat and festivals were transcribed by his students and compiled in Pri Tzadik after his death. Here we see how he understands the spiritual work of our month (according to Sefer Yetzirah) in the context of the entire cosmos.

<p>5. Pri Tzadik on Tu b'Shvat 2:1</p> <p>“He made the letter Tzadik king over taste” (Sefer Yetzirah 5:10) – for the root of the snake's seduction [of Eve] was with eating... And through fixing the deficiency in eating, everything is fixed.</p>	<p>פרי צדיק לט"ו בשבט ב:א</p> <p>אות צדיק בלעיטה דשורש הסתת הנחש היה באכילה ... ועל ידי תיקון הפגם באכילה נתקן הכל</p>
<p><i>It is common knowledge that much of Judaism revolves around food – growing it, distributing it, offering it up to G!d, and, of course, consuming it. From the Torah itself to the present day, there is a rich legacy of Jewish teachings supporting a mindful approach to food, and a spiritual one. Let's explore some of these teachings, and then try out some of their techniques in practice.</i></p>	
<p>6. Deuteronomy 8:10</p> <p>And you will eat And be sated And you shall bless the Eternal, your G!d For the good land He has given you.</p>	<p>דברים ח:י</p> <p>וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ</p>
<p><i>According to the sages quoted below, what is the role of the table in our religious life? What do you think is motivating this statement? Could it be helpful to us in our quest for more meaningful consumption? Are there limits or drawbacks to the application of this idea in our everyday lives?</i></p>	
<p>7. Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 55a</p> <p>R' Yochanan and R' Elazar both say: As long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel's transgressions. Now that it is destroyed, a person's table atones for his transgressions.</p>	<p>תלמוד בבלי – ברכות נה:א</p> <p>ר' יוחנן ור' אלעזר דאמרי תרוייהו כל זמן שבהמ"ק קיים מזבח מכפר על ישראל ועכשיו שלחנו של אדם מכפר עליו</p>
<p><i>R' Bachya ben Yosef ibn Pakuda, known as Rabbeinu Bachya, was philosopher and rabbinic judge (Dayan) who lived in Zaragoza, Spain, in the first half of the eleventh century. In 1040, he wrote the first systematic treatise of Jewish ethics, in Judeo-Arabic, which was soon translated into Hebrew as Chovot HaLevavot (Duties of the Heart) and has remained a highly respected and influential work since then. How might we incorporate this teaching into our regular acts of consumption?</i></p>	
<p>8. Chovot HaLevavot 2:5</p> <p>Whoever contemplates the natural processes of the body – how when food enters it, it is distributed to every part of the body – will see such signs of wisdom that he will be inspired to thank the Creator and praise Him, as David said, “All of my bones shall say: 'G!d, who is like You!'” (Psalms 35:10).</p>	<p>חובות הלבבות ב:ה</p> <p>וכמו כן תראינה פעולות הטבע בתוך הגוף למתבונן בהם בהגיע המזון אליו בחלקו אותו על כל חלק מחלקי הגוף יראה מסימני החכמה כמה מה שיזרז אותו להודות לבוראו ולשבחו שכתוב דוד עליו השלום כל עצמותי תאמרנה השם מי כמוך</p>

<p>They will see how food passes into the stomach through a straight tube, called the esophagus, without any bend or twist; how afterwards, the stomach digests the food more thoroughly than chewing had; how then the food is carried into the liver through thin connecting veins that act as a strainer, preventing anything coarse from passing through to the liver; how the liver converts the food it receives into blood, which is distributed all over the body through tubes that look like water pipes and were formed specifically for this purpose...</p>	<p>והוא שהמאכל הולך אל הבטן אל תעלה מוכנת על קו ישר אין בה עקום ולא עוות והוא הושט אחר כך טוחן אותו הבטן יותר מן הטחינה שטחנו אותו השנים בתחלה ואחר כך ישלחנו אל הכבד בגידים דקים נוגעים בינתיים הושמו כמסננת למזון שלא יגיע ממנו שום דבר עב אל הכבד ויהפכהו לדם ויחלקהו על הגוף וישלחהו אל כל חלקיו בתעלות מוכנות לזה כתעלות המוכנות למים</p>
<p><i>R' Joseph ben Ephraim Karo, (Spain and Israel, 1488 – 1575), was a towering figure in both Kabbalah and Halachah (Jewish law). He was regarded as the leader of Jewry in his generation, and he wrote the Shulchan Aruch (Set Table), the last great code of Jewish law, which is authoritative to this day for many diverse Jewish communities. What is the takeaway here for how we should approach the act of eating?</i></p>	
<p>9. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 231:1</p> <p>Anything that is pleasant for him in this world, his intent should not be for their pleasure, but rather for the service of the Creator, may He be blessed; as it is written: “In all your ways acknowledge Him” (Prov. 3:6). And the Sages said, “Let all of your actions be for the sake of Heaven.” As even optional things – such as eating, drinking, walking, sitting, getting up, sexual relations and conversation – all of them should be for the service of your Creator or for something that enables serving Him.</p>	<p>שולחן ערוך - אורח חיים רלא:א</p> <p>כל מה שיהנה בעוה"ז לא יכוון להנאתו אלא לעבודת הבורא יתברך כדכתיב בכל דרכיך דעהו ואמרו חכמים כל מעשיך יהיו לש"ש שאפילו דברים של רשות כגון האכילה והשתיה וההליכה והשיבה והקימה והתשמיש והשיחה וכל צרכי גופך יהיו כולם לעבודת בוראך או לדבר הגורם עבודתו</p>
<p><i>The Zohar (Splendor or Radiance) is the foundational work of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism. It first appeared in Spain in the 13th century, and was published by R' Moses de Leon. De Leon ascribed the work to the tanna (mishnaic sage) R' Shimon bar Yochai, (2nd Century Israel) an attribution which some take literally, others entirely deny, and still others find to be partially true. Despite this controversy existing from its inception, the Zohar became extremely influential. How does this teaching, presented in the context of a passage about sacrifices, complement the above teachings?</i></p>	
<p>10. Zohar 3:7b</p> <p>Israel sustain their Father in Heaven.</p>	<p>זוהר ג ז:ב</p> <p>ישראל מפרנסים לאביהן שבשמים</p>

R' Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (1534 – 1572), best known as Ha'Ari (The Lion) or Arizal (the Ari, of Blessed Memory), was a leading kabbalist in Tzfat (Safed) in the Galilee and the father of contemporary Kabbalah. The Arizal originated a system of Kabbalah that views the universe as a cosmic drama of exile and redemption. This is its core narrative of the cosmos, in simplified form:

- 1) Infinite Divine (Ein Sof) exists in eternal perfection but wants to share, give and love.
- 2) To make space for independent entities, there must be a Divine contraction (Tzimtzum).
- 3) The Ein Sof channels energy into vessels (Sefirot) for containing and emanating Divine energy. Together, these Sefirot form the body of Primordial Humanity (Adam HaKadmon).
- 4) These vessels cannot bear the energy poured into them, so they break (Shevirat haKelim), causing sparks of Divine light (Nitzotzot) to be scattered across the universe, concealed by the shards of the shattered vessels (Kelipot).
- 5) Adam had the potential to fix the broken vessels and raise up the sparks, but his primal sin causes a second, further, shattering, causing the sparks to be even more hidden and lost.
- 6) Humanity is charged to find and raise up Divine sparks to their Source by using everything they find to serve their Creator, which brings about restoration (Tikkun) of the individual spark, and eventually the entire universe (Tikkun Ha-Olam), and the Divine itself.

R' Yisroel ben Eliezer (c. 1700 – 1760), known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name) or Besht, was a mystic, healer and teacher who lived in the Ukraine and founded the Chasidic movement (Chasidut). The first published work of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings was Keter Shem Tov, (The Crown of the Good Name), published in 1794. How do these teachings develop the worldview of the Arizal, outlined above?

11. Keter Shem Tov 194

Every act of eating and drinking that a person does is literally a portion of their sparks, which they need to repair.

כתר שם טוב - קצ"ד

כל אכילה ושתייה שאדם אוכל ושותה
היא ממש חלק ניצוצות שלו
שהוא צריך לתקן

12. Keter Shem Tov 295

A person should always see which quality is arising in their thoughts, whether it is from Love or Awe or Harmony, and elevate that quality. Even though it is a worldly concern [bound up] in physical desires, they can elevate it. So while eating or drinking, when love arises, then take the pleasure which derives from this act of eating and drinking, and elevate that pleasure to the blessed Creator.

כתר שם טוב - רצ"ה

תמיד יראה אדם במחשבתו איזה מדה נולד בו
אם מאהבה אם מיראה או מת"ת
ויעלה אותה מהמחשבה למעלה
אע"פ שהוא מעניני עה"ז בתאות גופניות
הוא יכול להעלות אותה
כן באכילה ושתייה כשנולד בו אהבה
אז לוקח התענוג שהיה מאכילה ושתייה זו
ומעלה אותו התענוג לבורא יתברך

R' Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov (Ukraine, 1748 – 1800) was born and died in Medzhybizh. He was best known as the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson, in whose house he grew up, and for his Torah commentary, Degel Machaneh Ephraim, which gives us some of the most direct access we have to the Besht's teachings. What is made explicit here that has only been alluded to above?

<p>13. Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Parshat Ve'etchanan</p> <p>A wholesome person can unify the blessed Holy One with their every step and with everything they do, including in material matters – their eating, work and business affairs.</p>	<p>דגל מחנה אפרים על פרשת ואתחנן</p> <p>יכול האדם השלם לייחד קב"ה על כל פסיעה ועל כל דבר ודבר שעושה גם בגשמי באכילותיו ועסקיו ומו"מ שלו</p>
<p>14. Pri Tzadik on Tu b'Shvat 2:2</p> <p>The traditional practice of Israel is Torah (i.e. imbued with utmost sanctity), “for if they are not prophets, they are the children of prophets” (Pesachim 66a).</p> <p>It is possible to bring in sanctity from all kinds of fruit connected to the Tree of Life through the traditional practice of Israel [of eating fruit on Tu b'Shvat], so that all eating will be fixed and sanctified. “A righteous person eats to satisfy his soul” (Proverbs 13:25).</p> <p>... And so they will be redeemed from every single thing in Nisan.</p>	<p>פרי צדיק לט"ו בשבט ב:ב</p> <p>מנהג ישראל תורה היא שאם אינן נביאים בני נביאים הם והוה מנהג נביאים</p> <p>ויכולים להכניס על ידי מנהג ישראל קדושה בכל מיני פירות שיהיה רק מסטרא דהע"ח ויתוקן כל האכילות שיהיו בקדושה צדיק אוכל לשובע נפש ...</p> <p>ואז נגאלין מכל וכל בניסן</p>
<p>15. Pri Etz Hadar – Prayer before the Seder (Translation adapted from Barak Gale and Ami Goodman)</p> <p>May it be Your will, Eternal our G'd and G'd of our ancestors, that through the sacred power of our eating fruit, which we are now eating and blessing, while reflecting on the secret of their supernal roots, their supernal sap that they depend on will be aroused, so that abundance, favor, blessing, and bounty be bestowed upon them. May the angels appointed over them also be filled by the powerful abundance of their glory, may it return and cause them to grow a second time, from the beginning of the year and until its end, for bounty and blessing, for good life and peace.</p> <p>... And may all the holy sparks which were dispersed by us or by our ancestors and [also] through the sin that Adam committed with the fruit of the tree now return to be included in the splendid power of the Tree of Life. May all evil be removed from them through the power of Your great name which emerges from the verse, “the power that he swallows, he vomits out” (Job 20:15).</p>	<p>פרי עץ הדר - תפלה לפני הסדר</p> <p>ויהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו שבכח סגולת אכילת הפירות שנאכל ונברך עליהן עתה ואשר נהגה בסוד שרשהן יתעוררו שרפיהן העליונים אשר המה תלויים בם להשפיע עליהן שפע רצון ברכה ונדבה וגם הממונים והמשטרים עליהן יתמלאו מעוז שפע הדרן לשוב שנית להגדילם ולהצמיחם מראשית השנה ועד אחרית השנה לט"ו ב'ה ולברכה לחיים טובים ולשלום וכל הנצוצות שנתפזרו על ידינו או על ידי אבותינו ובעון אדם הראשון אשר חטא בפירות האילן עתה ישובו להתפלל בעוז הדר עץ החיים ויוסר מהם כל רע בכח שמך הגדול היוצא מפסוק חיל בלע ויקיאנו</p>