



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Beshalach

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Beshalach - Tu B'Shvat

Fruit for Thought



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

From the way Jews complain about food in this week's Torah portion you would think that nothing is more important in life.

“If only we had died... in Egypt! There at least we could sit by pots of meat and eat our fill of bread! But you had to bring us out to this desert, to kill the entire community by starvation.”

After 210 years of a genocide and oppression, the Jews had finally been freed from the harsh Egyptian rule. They witnessed G-d's amazing wonders and miracles. And yet, all that pales in comparison to their main, immediate and most pressing concern: FOOD!

Do Jews have a “famine” gene that developed in response to the hungers we faced in our early history?! Sure, we need to eat, but what deeper significance is there in something as mundane as food?

The very meaning of food is what we consider today, on *Tu B'Shvat* (the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shvat*) when we celebrate the bounty of the Promised Land, by partaking of its seven species – the seven fruits and grains singled out by the Torah as exemplars of Israel's fertility: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates.

But why these seven?

To understand the answer, this sermon dissects the make-up of a human being and why food is so important to begin with. How the instinct for self-preservation and self-perpetuation – the animal part that must eat to live, the part that craves food – co-exists with and is nurtured by its divine component.

The sermon goes on to analyze the psycho-spiritual symbolism of the seven species we consume on *Tu B'Shvat* and the lessons we learn from the New Year of Trees, by discovering the “tree” and the “species” within ourselves.

TU B'SHVAT: FRUIT FOR THOUGHT

1. Food Obsession

It was lunchtime at the Jewish nursery school and all the children were lined up by the teachers. Then, as usual, they were led into the canteen. Little Moshe quickly noticed that at one end of the dining table was a large pile of apples with the message, “Take ONLY ONE apple each, God is watching.” At the other end he noticed was a large pile of kosher chocolate chip cookies.

Moshe then whispered to his friend Sarah, “We can take all the cookies we want. God is watching the apples.”

Food and Jews seem to have a very integral connection. You all know the expression describing many Jewish holidays: “They tried to kill us. We survived. Let’s eat.”

Why are Jews so obsessed with food?

Take the story in this week’s portion: From the way Jews complain about food you would think that nothing is more important in life.

“If only we had died by God’s hand in Egypt! There at least we could sit by pots of meat and eat our fill of bread! But you had to bring us out to this desert, to kill the entire community by starvation!”¹

¹ Exodus 16:3.

After 210 years of a genocide and oppression, the Jews had finally been freed from the harsh Egyptian rule. They witnessed G-d's amazing wonders and miracles. And yet, all that pales in comparison to their main, immediate and most pressing concern: FOOD!

No matter that God fulfilled their every need – bitter water turned sweet on the first stop, twelve springs and seventy date palms materialized on the next stop – there was NO BURGER KING (kosher, of course)!

Do Jews have a “famine” gene that developed in response to the hungers we faced in our early history?! Sure, we need to eat, but what deeper significance is there in something as mundane as food?

In response to their complaint and demand for food God promised the Jewish people bread and chicken – manna and quail – which duly arrived. But the lesson in all of it was much more profound, as Moses summed up later:

“[God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”²

2. Tu B'Shvat

And this profound lesson – the very meaning of food – is what we consider today, on *Tu B'Shvat* (the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shvat*) when we celebrate the bounty of the Promised Land. We do this by partaking of its seven species – the seven fruits and grains singled out by the Torah as exemplars of Israel's fertility: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates.³

But why these seven?

To understand the answer, we must first consider the make-up of a human being and why food is so important to begin with.

² Deuteronomy 8:3.

³ Deuteronomy 8:8.

3. Animal and Divine

The human being is a combination of matter and spirit. In creating the human God took “dust from the earth” and imbued it with a divine spirit,⁴ the human was created in the “divine image.”⁵ As the Talmud tells us⁶ that the human being has six features, three are similar to an animal, one of them being eating and drinking, and three are similar to an angel, including knowledge.

The masters of Kabbalah teach us that every one of us has not one, but two souls: 1) an “animal soul,” which embodies our natural, self-oriented instincts, and 2) a “divine soul” which embodies our transcendent drives, our desire to relate to that which is greater than ourselves.⁷

As its name implies, the animal soul constitutes that part of ourselves that is common to all living creatures: the instinct for self-preservation and self-perpetuation – the part that must eat to live, the part that craves food.

But man is more than a sophisticated animal. There are qualities that are unique to us as human beings – the qualities deriving from our divine soul.

There is point at which we graduate beyond the self and its needs, beyond the basic, seemingly all-consuming questions: “How do I survive?” “How do I obtain food, shelter, money, power, knowledge, satisfaction?” And we arrive at another perspective, more concerned with: “Why am I here?” “What purpose do I serve?” And when we arrive at that point, we cease to be just another animal and begin to realize our uniqueness as human beings.

This is not to say that the animal self is to be rejected in favor of the divine/human self. These two selves – these two souls – are indispensable to a meaningful life. Even as we stimulate the divine in us to rise above the animal, we must also develop and refine our animal selves. We must learn to empower our self-confidence, courage, perseverance, etc. while weeding out selfishness.

⁴ Genesis 2:7.

⁵ Ibid 1:26-27.

⁶ Chagigah 16a.

⁷ Tanya, chapter 1.

4. Wheat and Barley: the Essentials

And that brings us to food, and what it means in the scheme of things, beyond just providing satiation for the animal self.

Let's begin with wheat and barley.

Wheat, a staple of the human diet,⁸ represents the endeavor to nourish what is distinctly human in us, to feed the divine aspirations that are the essence of our humanity.

Barley, a typical animal food,⁹ represents the endeavor to develop our animal soul – a task no less crucial to our mission in life than the cultivation of our divine soul. (This is alluded to in the prescription of Jewish law to always feed our animals first.¹⁰)

Wheat and barley, the two grains among the seven species, represent the essentials of our inner make-up. Following these come five fruits – “appetizers” and “desserts” on our spiritual menu – that add flavor to our basic endeavor of developing our animal and divine souls.

5. Grape of the Vine: Revelation

The first of these is the grape of the vine, whose defining characteristic is joy. As the Book of Judges describes it, “wine, which makes joyous God and men.”¹¹

Joy is revelation. When we are ignited by joy, we have the same basic traits we otherwise possess – the knowledge and intelligence, the same loves, hates, wants and desires. But in a state of joy, everything is more pronounced: the mind is keener; the loves are deeper; the hates are more vivid; the desires are more aggressive. Hidden emotions come out into the open. In the words of the Talmud, “When wine enters, the concealed emerges.”¹²

⁸ “And bread satiates the heart of man.” (Psalms 104:15)

⁹ “The barley and the straw for the horses and the mules...” (I Kings 5:8); see also Talmud, Sotah 14a.

¹⁰ Talmud, Berachot 40a; Mishneh Torah, Laws of Servitude 9:8.

¹¹ Judges 9:13.

¹² Talmud, *Eruvin* 65a.

A joyless life might be complete in every way, yet it is a shallow life – everything is there, but only the barest surface is showing. Joy reveals what hides below the surface. And that is a good thing because both the divine and the animal souls contain vast reservoirs of insight and feeling that never see the light of day because there is nothing to stimulate them.

The grape of the vine is that stimulus. It represents the element of joy in our lives – the joy that unleashes hidden potential, adding depth, color and intensity to everything we do.

6. Fig: Involvement

Let's move on to the fig, which represents the quality of involvement.

We might be doing something fully and completely; we might even be doing it joyously. But are we there? Are we involved?

Involvement means more than doing something right, more than giving it our all. It means that we care, that we are invested in the task. It means that we are affected by what we are doing, for the better or for the worse.

And this is where the fig comes in.

The fig, the fourth of the seven species is also the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

No, it was not an apple. It was a fig.

This was the forbidden fruit which Adam and Eve tasted, thereby committing the first sin of history.¹³ As Chassidic teachings explains, “knowledge” (*daat*) implies an intimate involvement with the thing known (think of the verse in Genesis, “And Adam knew his wife”¹⁴).

¹³ Genesis 3:7, and Rashi on the verse.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:1.

Adam's sin in eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil derived from his refusal to reconcile himself with the notion that there are certain things from which he must distance himself. He desired to intimately know every corner of God's world, to become involved with every one of God's creations – even with evil, which God had declared out of bounds to him.¹⁵

Adam's fig was one of the most destructive forces in history. In its equally powerful but constructive guise, the fig represents our capacity for a deep and intimate involvement in our every positive endeavor – an involvement which signifies that we are one with what we are doing.

7. Pomegranate: Reaching Higher

The pomegranate represents our capacity to reach higher.

States the Talmud: “Even the empty ones amongst you are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate [is full of seeds].”¹⁶

But the pomegranate is not just a model for something that contains many particulars. It also addresses the paradox of how an individual may be “empty” and, at the same time, be “full of good deeds as a pomegranate.”

The pomegranate is a highly compartmentalized fruit: each of its hundreds of seeds is wrapped in its own sac of flesh and is separated from its fellows by a tough membrane. In the same way, it is possible for people to do good deeds yet have them remain isolated acts, with little or no effect on their nature and character. They may possess many virtues, but these virtues do not define them. They may be full of good deeds, yet remain morally and spiritually hollow.

¹⁵ See *The Price of Knowledge*, WIR, vol. VIII, no. 5.

¹⁶ Talmud, Berachot 57a. (Raka, the Hebrew word used by the verse for “temple” is related to the word reik, “empty.” Thus “your temple is like a... pomegranate” is homiletically rendered “the empty ones amongst you are like a pomegranate.”)

If the fig represents our capacity for total involvement and identification with what we are doing, the pomegranate is its very antithesis – it represents our capacity to overreach ourselves and do noble things that are utterly incompatible with who and what we are at the present moment.

Thus the pomegranate stands for our refusal to reconcile oneself to our current station; it stands for our insistence to act better and more Godly than we are.

8. Olive: Struggle

For most of us, “life” is synonymous with “struggle.” We struggle to forge an identity under the heavy shadow of parental and peer influence. We struggle to find a partner in life, and then we struggle to preserve our marriage. We struggle to raise our children, and then struggle in our relationship with them as adults. We struggle to earn a living, and then struggle with our guilt over our good fortune. And underlying it all is the perpetual struggle between our animal and divine selves, between our self-oriented instincts and our aspiration to transcend the self and touch the divine.

The olive in us is the part of ourselves that thrives on struggle – that would no more escape it than escape life itself.

“Just like an olive,” say our sages, “which yields its oil only when pressed,” so, too, do we yield what is best in us only when pressed between the millstones of life and the counter-forces of a divided self.¹⁷

¹⁷ Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 36:1.

9. Date: Inner Peace

As the fig is countered by the pomegranate, so, too, is the olive in us contrasted by our seventh fruit, the date, which represents our capacity for peace, tranquility and perfection.

While it is true that we're best when we're pressed, it is equally true that the "still, small voice" of our soul speaks to us only when we are completely at peace with ourselves - only when we have achieved a balance and harmony among the diverse components of our souls.

Thus we read in the Book of Psalms: "The *tzaddik* (perfectly righteous person) shall bloom as the date palm."¹⁸

The Zohar explains that there is a certain species of date palm that bear fruit only after seventy years.¹⁹ This alludes to the fact that the human character is comprised of seven basic attributes, each consisting of ten sub-categories. So, the *tzaddik* who blooms like a date palm "after seventy years" represents the human being whose every nuance of character has been refined and brought into harmony with his soul and with God.

While the olive and date describe two very different spiritual personalities, they both exist within each of us. For even in the midst of our most ardent struggles, we can always find comfort in the tranquil perfection that resides at the core of our souls. And even in our most tranquil moments, we can always find the challenge that will provoke us into yet another struggle toward greater achievement.

¹⁸ Psalms 92:13.

¹⁹ Zohar, part III, 16a.

10. Food for Thought

So all this is food for thought – or should I say “fruit” for thought – as we celebrate *Tu B'Shvat* by eating the seven species, grains and fruits.

But there is another lesson we derive from *Tu B'Shvat*, which is the “New Year for the Trees.” This day marks the beginning of the new annual agricultural cycle, when the sap begins to flow after the dormancy of winter.

Why do we humans honor the New Year for the Trees? Because, interestingly, a human being is called by the Torah, a “tree of the field,”²⁰ and we have already partly answered how this is so.

But there is more:

The tree’s primary components are:

- the roots, which anchor it to the ground and supply it with water and other nutrients;
- the trunk, branches and leaves that comprise its body;
- and the fruit, which contain the seeds through which the tree reproduces itself.

The spiritual life of man also includes roots, a body, and fruit:

- The roots represent faith, our source of nurture and perseverance.
- The trunk, branches and leaves are the “body” of our spiritual lives – our intellectual, emotional and practical achievements.
- The fruit is our power of spiritual procreation – the power to influence others, to plant a seed in a fellow human being and see it sprout, grow and bear fruit.

Which is the most important?

A case can be made for any part of the tree, but let me propose that it is none of these – rather, it is the seed that the tree produces and hides within its fruit.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 20:19.

11. The Importance of Seeds

The tree desires to reproduce, to spread its seeds far and wide so that they take root in diverse and distant places. But the tree's reach is limited to the extent of its own branches. It must therefore seek out other, more mobile couriers to transport its seeds.

So the tree produces fruit, in which its seeds are enveloped by tasty, colorful, sweet-smelling fibers and juices. The seeds themselves would not arouse the interest of animals and men, but with their attractive packaging, they have no shortage of customers. And so they consume the external fruit, and inadvertently deposit the seeds in the distant places where the tree wants to plant its seeds.

When we communicate to others, we employ many devices to make our message attractive. We fortify it with intellectual sophistication, steep it in emotional sauce, dress it in colorful words and images. But we should bear in mind that this is only the packaging – this is only the fruit that contains the seed.

The only way that we can truly impact others is by conveying the seed – our own simple faith in what we are telling them, our own simple commitment to what we are preaching.

If the seed is there, our message will take root in the minds and hearts of others. But if there is no seed, our effort will have nothing to show for it, however tasty our fruit might be.²¹

So as we taste the fruit this *Tu B'Shvat*, let us remember the seed and carefully consider what it is that we are currently planting in our lives, in our families, in our communities, and in our world.

²¹ Igrot Kodesh, vol. I, pp. 247-250.

12. The Power of Food

From all the above we take away yet another fascinating aspect to Judaism: Even a mundane matter like food, something we all routinely do out of necessity, without much thought, contains in it volumes of lessons.

My friends, we have the power to elevate even the simplest things in our lives, and infuse it with deeper significance.

So next time you sit down for a meal, look at the food before you, and tell your children to do the same, and marvel at its message to you and to all your loved ones.

Your very food, my dear friends, can lift you up to unprecedented heights, and help bring us all personal and global redemption. Amen.