



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Beshalach/
Shabbos Shira/Tu B'Shvat

February 11, 2017
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**Are You Really Living
or Just Surviving?**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Do you ever feel like your life is spent just trying to make it through the week, or get beyond the next hurdle, or reach the next vacation? Does life sometimes seem like an exhausting never-ending grind – physically, mentally, and emotionally? Are you really living, or just surviving? What does it mean to really live anyway?

This Shabbos marks the convergence of two special celebrations: Tu B'shvat and Shabbat Shira. On a personal level, these two events teach us what we can tap into when we feel directionless and uninspired, that will rejuvenate us and guide us to true growth and fulfillment. In short, they teach us what truly living is all about.

The Torah compares the human being to a tree – specifically a fruit-bearing tree. What is the similarity between a person and a fruit-bearing tree?

A fruit tree is ultimately defined by the fact that others may benefit from its produce. Similarly, to live, according to the Torah, means not just to survive, which is about getting what we need, but to give: to be fruitful. Truly living means that our actions, that which we put out into the world, are productive and contribute in a meaningful way to society, in a way that makes the world a sweeter, kinder, more beautiful place.

A curious Midrash about the splitting of the sea involving a child yearning for fruit bolsters this message: Deep down, what our souls crave above all else is not physical pleasure, but meaning and purpose – which in turn provide us with immense emotional and spiritual pleasure.

Delving into an underlying lesson gleaned from Tu B'shvat and Shabbat Shira, this sermon explores the Torah's best advice for escaping "survival syndrome" and attaining lasting happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment.

ARE YOU REALLY LIVING OR JUST SURVIVING? LIFE CHANGING LESSONS FROM TU B'SHVAT AND SHIRA

1. Opening Joke

A little boy opened the big, old family Bible, peering at the old pages with fascination as he flipped through them. Suddenly, something fell out; it was an old leaf from a tree, which had been pressed in between the pages. "Mom, look what I found!" the boy called out. "What have you got there?" his mother asked. Bewildered, he answered: "I think it's Adam's suit!"

2. Of Humans and Trees

This Shabbos falls on Tu B'shvat, Hebrew for the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat, described in the Mishnah as the "Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) for the Trees." To one who is not familiar with this holiday, this may seem strange: Why do the trees deserve their own new year celebration? Why not celebrate the new year for stars, or the fish, or any other of G-d's creations?

Legally speaking, Tu B'shvat marks a new year in regard to the Jewish agricultural laws observed in the Land of Israel. Physically speaking, Tu B'shvat marks the point at which the rainy season (in the region of Israel) has passed, and the trees begin to develop sap, which leads to the production of fruit. Indeed, on Tu B'Shevat we celebrate the fruit tree specifically, by eating different kinds of fruit, especially the species with which the Land of Israel is blessed.¹

Yet as we know, everything in Torah has layers upon layers of depth—not unlike the many concentric growth rings of a tree trunk. Spiritually speaking, Tu B'svhat teaches us what lies at the core of our humanity: what we can tap into when we feel directionless and uninspired, that will rejuvenate us and guide us to true growth and fulfillment.

¹ Deuteronomy 8:8.

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Because—contrary to what the Superbowl ads this past Sunday may have had you think—true happiness cannot be bought. It's not found in candy bars or soft drinks, or even the most amazing laundry detergent on the market. It's not about what gives us the most physical pleasure. It has to be found within. And that's where trees come in.

The Torah compares human beings to trees.

When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you under siege? However, a tree you know is not a food [producing] tree, you may destroy and cut down . . .²

In this verse, man and tree are contrasted: In a time of war, your enemy can be killed. But a tree that bears fruit cannot be cut down.

Adding some more intrigue to this curious contrast, the Talmud³ enters the discussion and tells us that there is more to the comparison between man and tree. It takes word “ki” and translates it not as “should” but rather “because,” transforming the sentence from a question—“Are trees of the field human?”—to a definitive statement:

“For man is compared to a tree.”

Now, people can be compared to many things, but why does the Torah choose a tree? Specifically, what is the similarity between a person and a fruit-bearing tree?

A fruit-bearing tree’s entire purpose is to, well, bear fruit. It is ultimately defined by the fact that others may benefit from its produce. It exists to give, to serve, to delight the taste buds of passersby, to offer pleasure and sweetness. Likewise, a person’s entire purpose is to be fruitful—to produce, to create, to contribute to this world in a meaningful way, in a way that makes the world a sweeter, kinder, more beautiful place. Thus, the Torah compares man to a tree, for like tree, a person who is fruitful will always thrive. In contrast, a non-fruit-bearing tree, or un-“fruitful” person, someone who is not meaningfully contributing to the world, will feel cut down and destroyed.

¹ Deuteronomy 20:19-20.

² Ta'anit 7a.

3. Surviving vs. Living

Once a man was sitting in a sidewalk cafe and noticed a couple of employees from the Public Works Department working across the street. He watched as one of them would dig a hole, and the other would come along behind him and shovel the dirt back in the hole. They went up and down the entire block like this. Finally, as they stopped to work in front of the cafe, the man said, "I've been watching the two of you work, but for the life of me I can't figure out what you're doing." One of the workers looked at him and said, "Well, usually there are three of us. The guy who plants the trees is out sick today."

Many people go through life without feeling like they're really going anywhere. They spend their days focused on trying to make ends meet; on getting to the next vacation; and on jumping over the next hurdle. Lived this way, life becomes an exhausting grind with no end in sight, wearing away at our happiness (and perhaps even our sanity). We may feel as though we spend our days traveling in circles, digging holes and refilling them—but what's the goal? What are we aiming for? Are we really living, or just surviving? What does it mean to really live?

The tree gives us the answer. To live, according to our Torah, means not just to survive, which is about GETTING what we need, but to GIVE. Truly living means that our actions, that which we put out into the world, are productive and contribute in a meaningful way to society. That we nourish and bring happiness to those who surround us in our lives, and even to those beyond our immediate circle.

4. The Crying Child

This Shabbat is also Shabbat Shira, when we read about the dramatic miracle of the splitting of the sea. As all things are by divine providence, the convergence of these two events must be significant. But what's the connection?

A hint to the connection between the two may be found in a Midrash⁴ which describes an additional miracle that took place as the events of the Exodus unfolded:

⁴ Exodus Rabba 21:9.

Rabbi Nehorai taught: If a daughter of Israel was crossing the sea, holding her crying child in her hands, she only needed to stretch out her hand to take an apple or pomegranate from within the sea to soothe him, as it is written,⁵ and He led them in the depths as in the wilderness." Just as the people did not want for anything in the wilderness, they did not want for anything in the sea. For as Moses had told them, "For the forty years in the wilderness, G-d is with you and you will not want a thing." They did not lack anything; they simply had to articulate their desire and it was there for them.

Rabbi Shimon says that even if they didn't mention their desire, once they felt the desire for something in their hearts, it was there. As it says, "They tried G-d in their heart by requesting food for their craving."⁶

The Midrash tells us that in the depths of the sea as the Jews crossed on dry land, as when they wandered in the wilderness, whatever the Jews desired, G-d provided it for them. But it seems rather odd that the examples given of what the children desired for comfort are fruits—apples and pomegranates. Fruits are luxuries, as food goes. Would it not make more sense that the mother wanted a much more basic food—say, milk—to comfort her baby?

That crying child in the midst of the split sea represents our inner child who is crying, not for the basics of survival and comfort, but for another essential human desire—to be fruitful, purposeful. To live a meaningful life.

We learned from Tu B'shvat that fruitfulness is the purpose of a human being. From this Midrash about the splitting of the sea, we learn that this fruitfulness is also what lies at the core of human desire, what fills an intense craving of our souls. It is the panacea our crying inner child who is yearning to live, not just exist.

The connection between the message of Tu B'Shvat and the splitting of the sea goes yet further.

The conventional structure and nature of existence—including the boundaries between water and land—is necessary for us to exist and survive. That mode reflects our basic survival needs.

⁵ Psalms 106:9.

⁶ Psalms 78:18.

The parting of the sea was a one-time event meant to teach us that beneath the conventional structure – a.k.a., nature – of a human being lies extraordinary power, power that transcends perceived boundaries, power that allows us the capacity to not just exist and survive, but to flourish and thrive, to be fruitful and grow to unimaginable heights, to effect not just the here and now, but to bear perpetual fruit.

The inner child manifests that inner dimension. With the child's enchantment and enthusiasm, coupled with the seasoning of maturity, we can change worlds.

5. Jewish Bucket List

Some believe that "living life to its fullest" means experiencing as much pleasure as possible, checking off all the items on our bucket lists. Sky diving: check. Become a millionaire: check. Visit the Swiss Alps: check.

Judaism says that living life to its fullest means fulfilling our essential human purpose and core desire to live the most productive life possible, to make the world a sweeter, kinder, more beautiful place. That is the recipe for lasting happiness, pleasure, and fulfillment.

As we mentioned earlier, on Tu B'Shvat we partake of the fruits for which the Land of Israel is blessed: grapes, pomegranates, figs, dates, and olives. In fact, the land was blessed with seven species total: these five fruits, plus barley and wheat. If so, why is Tu B'Shvat only a celebration of fruit, not all of the land's bounty?

Though barley and wheat are staples of the human diet necessary for survival, on Tu B'Shvat we emphasize and delight in the luxurious and purely pleasure-inducing fruits. Because living is not just about the extent to which we physically survive. It's about the extent to which we experience satisfaction in our ability to produce, give, and serve. It's about the spiritual beauty, sweetness, and pleasure we experience as we contribute to the world, to our immediate surroundings, to our friends and families, to our coworkers and neighbors, to our children and spouses.

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Let's try to take an inventory of our activities at the end of each day. How many were survival-based, and how many fruitful and perpetual? Were there at least as many of the latter as of the former? As yourself which you prioritized – getting, or giving? When your children come home from school, perhaps ask them not just "How was your day," but rather: "What did you do today for someone else?"; "How productive were you today?"

As we know, G-d, the Creator of the world and everything within it, gives us everything we need and desire, especially the ability to be fruitful in our lives. We need only to be conscious of this desire, to feel this need in our hearts.

I bless us all that we should see the opportunities to use the strengths, talents, and resources that G-d gives us to be fruitful in every sense of the word – and to work every day to make the world a sweeter place

How many fruit will you bear?