

Arboreal delights

The Highgate Haggadah for Tu Bishvat

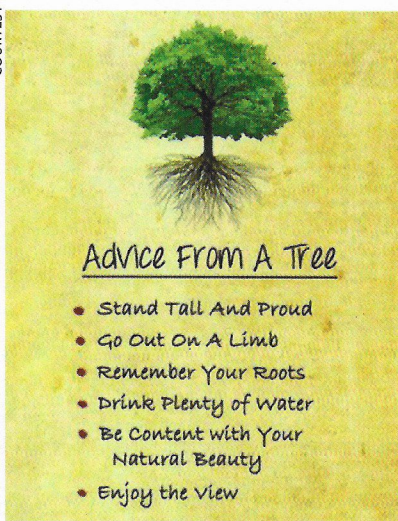
By Mordechai Beck

TU BISHVAT or the New Year for Trees, which is celebrated on the 15th day of the month of Shvat, is one of the post-Biblical feast days in the Hebrew calendar. Although its arrival is announced in the Mishna (Rosh Hashana 1), where there is a famous dispute between the houses of Hillel and Shammai as to its actual date, its celebration as such comes much later. Even Maimonides locates it in his discussion of the tithes rather than in the laws governing festive days. There are some hints that the day was celebrated during the Biblical and Temple eras but was then forgotten. It was revived somewhat in the Gaonic period (6th to 10th centuries CE) by the composing of special hymns (*piyutim*) with quotes taken from earlier texts exhorting trees and nature.

Yet it was only in the 17th century when the book *Pri Etz Hadar (The Fruit of the Goodly Tree)* appeared in Safed that the day took on a significance it had not known beforehand. The anonymous author – possibly the mystic Binyamin Halevi, although the author of the present Haggadah gives the anonymous author credit to Rabbi Chaim Vital – created a source book for the day as a sort of seder echoing that of Pesach. He was inspired, he writes, by a heavenly voice that assured him that the celebration of the fruits of the Holy Land (he counted 30) would bring redemption closer. Alongside the fruits, which were to be eaten in a particular order, participants in this *Seder* were to quaff four cups of wine.

The book's popularity quickly spread around the Mediterranean basin. Nevertheless, the restoration of the day became more explicit with the revival of the State of Israel. Even prior to that enormous event, the idea of planting saplings on this day – which might seem to be an ancient ritual – is a 'tradition' initiated by the early Zionist

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A page from the Haggadah titled 'Advice From a Tree'

pioneers just over 100 years ago. The celebration of Tu Bishvat is seen in Israel as a symbolic return to the world of nature, and of rootedness in a specific place, the ancestral soil. As the Book of Job has it: "For in the tree is hope. If it is felled, it will sprout again..." (Job 14: 7).

And now comes an English translation of the *Seder* ceremony by a gentleman who usually invests his time in sorting out psychoanalytical patients. Dr. Joseph Berke turns his analysis to the world of nature and specifically of trees. Indeed, as Berke explains, there are many connections between the two. Although his Haggadah is rooted in the 16th century *kabbala* of the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria), Berke shows that the significance of the day is universal. For him it is closely aligned with ecology, climate change, psychology and the relationship be-

tween nature and mankind.

What exactly is this relationship? He ponders the peculiar fact that we celebrate trees precisely when the earth is barren and the trees bare. But as puts it "the sap is rising, the life force begins to ascend from the earth." It is when the tree appears lifeless and bare that it comes to life again.

Turning to the world of mysticism, Berke asserts that for the Kabbalah the tree is a metaphor for God:

He is both above the ground – in the heavens – and below, on the earth. He unites the physical and spiritual. Likewise, the four cups of wine, which are drunk in different proportions at the *Seder* table, mixes red wine (pure materialism) and white (spiritual).

The goal of the original Haggadah – the *Pri Etz Hadar* – was to increase the amount of divine blessing in the world. This is done by eating the fruits with the proper intention, an action helped by the angel who commands the fruit to grow.

This analysis of source texts is supplemented by quotes from Berke's friends who maintain that just like a tree, a person needs a rich and fertile soil from which to grow. They need strong and deep roots to access water that is buried beneath the surface. The purpose of this development is to grow fruit so that others can benefit from each individual's genius.

In passing, the author notes that there are many other things we can learn from trees, including remembering one's roots, going out on a limb and enjoying the view!

Berke then quotes a forester named Peter Wohlenben who claims that trees can communicate with each other through their roots and surrounding fungi, and that further they can count, learn, remember, and warn each other about coming dangers. He



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The almond tree and its blossom, according to the Haggada, have a special significance for Tu Bishvat

then invokes six special trees, each with a particular characteristic that again are held up as models for replication by humans. In the process of the *Seder*, he shows how all aspects of trees – their healing barks, roots, leaves for shade, beauty, and fruits – make the necessity of protecting them ever more urgent.

Berke also makes the point that Tu Bishvat is a festival, which is not connected to persecution. Moreover having no fixed, halachic status, its form of observance is varied and different communities celebrate it with different customs.

This said, it is obvious that for the author the Haggadah should take preference in terms of ritual.

Central to this ritual is the drinking of four cups of wine, which helps transform the body and the consciousness of the drinker. As a supplement, a glass of whiskey is also allowed since it contains barley! Berke emphasizes the journey that the body/mind

takes, rising through the four kabbalistic worlds, shedding along the way all the negative, hard impurities that prevent a person from achieving the ultimate breakthrough. Thus the final stage is achieved with the cup of white wine that symbolizes the highest world of *Atzilut*. At this point no fruit is eaten since the participant is already beyond corporeality and beyond the physical.

Finally and although this Haggadah is written with a universal perspective, Berke emphasizes the prime importance of Israel and of planting trees in its soil. You can plant a tree wherever you are, even in Highgate, London, but a special merit inheres if you plant a tree in Israel (or buy trees to be planted in Israel). Berke backs up this option with a quote from the Bible, “When you come to the land, plant fruit trees” (Leviticus 19:23). He wraps up this arboreal text with the prayer of Rabbi Natan of Nemirov which asks us to look on nature as a way of awakening in us the wonder of God’s world. ■



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The cover of the Highgate Haggadah (Teva Publications)