

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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Tu B'shevat – The Fruitfulness of a Relationship with God

A minor Jewish holiday with a great message for humanity

by Galen Peterson

The biblical calendar of Israel had four days that began different kinds of annual cycles or what we call New Year days:

- The beginning of the civil calendar took place on the first day of *Tishrei*, which coincides with the Feast of Trumpets (*Yom Teruah*, now generally called *Rosh Hashanah*). On this day, the Hebrew year advances, and it is the starting point of the sabbatical and jubilee cycles.
- The beginning of the religious calendar occurred in the spring on *Nisan 1* (identified as the first month in the Bible). The order of the seven feasts begins during this month, with the first of them being Passover.
- Another New Year began on the first day of *Elul* (sixth month in late summer). On that day, people would dedicate 1/10th (tithe) of their livestock, including herds and flocks to be used as temple sacrifices unto the Lord.
- A similar day was established for tithing new produce from

trees. It was reasoned that the new annual cycle of tree growth began when the rainy season in Israel started to dissipate and the almond tree blossoms began to appear. The date was set as *Tu B'shevat* (the 15th day of the eleventh month of *Shevat*, equivalent to late January/early February). Trees that blossomed after that date were taxed, meaning 1/10th of the produce was dedicated to temple usage.

It is also important to consider the way that the date of *Tu B'shevat* is numbered. In biblical Hebrew there are no distinct characters for numbers. The symbols of the alphabet have a dual usage of both letters and numbers. So the א (*aleph*) is 1, the ב (*beit*) is 2 and so on.

Also there is no decimal system. Instead, the numbers are additive (you add the individual numeric values of the characters). Normally for a number like 15 that meant adding 10 + 5, represented by the tenth letter י (*yud*) and the fifth letter ה (*heh*). And that

number would be pronounced יהי *Yah*, which would be the same as one of the names of God (an abbreviated form of יהוה *Yahweh*). So out of respect for God's divine name, the number 15 is written instead with the ninth and sixth letters of the alphabet—a ט (*tet*) and a ו (*vav*), which creates the word טו (pronounced *Tu*).

This simple literary device shows that in biblical times people acknowledged the Lord as being the one who brings forth fruit from the earth. He is the sustainer and provider of all things that we need.

But over time, many people have lost that simple recognition. With faith fading in the God of the Bible as the Creator of the universe, *Tu B'shevat* has a new meaning today. It is now considered in Israel to be the equivalent of Arbor Day. So throughout the land on this day a great number of trees are planted, many of them by school children in elaborate ceremonies. It has gained popularity, in part, because of interest in the environmental

movement. So many people are now calling it Jewish Earth Day.

Really the only vestige of the biblical culture that remains is the modern custom on *Tu B'shevat* of eating specific produce that are grown in Israel. These items are derived from the foods listed in Deut. 8:8 that God promised to provide to the Israelites: "wheat and barley, vines (grapes), figs and pomegranates, olives and honey (dates)."

Some people eat them as part of a *seder* (similar to Passover), in which they are eaten in a specific order, along with blessings and drinking wine along the way. But that practice is not biblical in nature. It was started in the 16th century by Yitzhak Luria, the father of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism). Luria taught that there were four different kinds of worlds and you identified with them by:

1. *Eating different kinds of fruit and nuts:*

- Hard on the outside, like almonds and walnuts in shells.
- Soft on the outside and hard on the inside, like olives and dates.
- Soft inside and out, like grapes, raisins and figs.

2. *Drinking wine of four different colors:*

- Completely white.
- White mixed with red.
- Red mixed with white.
- Completely red.

But Luria went even further by including more elements of mysticism. He believed that the sin of Adam and Eve caused a separation to occur in the Garden of Eden between the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He taught that since the harm occurred because of eating forbidden fruit, it was possible to bring healing to this broken state by eating the ordained

fruit found in Deut 8:8.

Luria called this act *Tikkun ha-Olam* ("repairing the world"). For that reason, he and his followers formalized the action by eating all of the foods and drinking wine in a *seder* (orderly fashion) on *Tu B'shevat*. They believed that they were accomplishing the very restoration of our sin-tainted world by eating the ordained fruits of God. They embedded within Judaism the idea that *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the world, is possible if human beings would right the wrong that took place in the Garden of Eden.



It is interesting to note that the Genesis account does not say what was the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. So naturally the ancient Jewish sages chimed in on the subject. One says it was a grape. Another says it was a fig. And still another says it was wheat. Others have speculated that it was a pomegranate because they can hold 613 seeds (one for each commandment of Torah) and golden pomegranate bells were used to adorn the robe of the high priest.

But none of the rabbis of antiquity suggested that the fruit was an apple. Why? Because the apple wasn't on the list and it was only introduced to the region in later times. The legend of the apple comes from even later times, probably because the Latin word for apple, *mālum*, is similar to *mālum*, the word for evil.

The reasoning of the Kabbalists was that if you ate all of the produce listed in Deut 8:8, one of them had to be the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And by doing it in one setting, it would work toward repairing the world.

Today, only devotees of *Kabbalah* maintain this practice in a mystical way. But other parts of the Jewish community have picked up on the tradition of holding *seders* on *Tu B'shevat*. For those who are ecologically-inclined, it has become an opportunity to ritualize their beliefs in caring for the environment without a spiritual emphasis, except perhaps for nature worship. They, too, are working toward the repairing of the world, but in a humanistic manner, not as a means of religiously rectifying sin.

These two extremes—mysticism and humanist environmentalism—represent the most common failures of humanity. We either reject the plain words of God and go in search of hidden meanings or we deny their authority and the reality of God altogether. They neglect the very purpose behind the description of the fruits in Deut 8:8. For if you read it in context, it is very apparent that eating them was not tied to repairing creation, but having a relationship with the God of creation. It is based on three principles...

A relationship with God is based on a recognition of His authority

In every relationship, the issue of authority plays a significant role in defining its nature. Your relationship with your boss, for example, will be very different than your neighbor because in each situation there are great differences in the way that

authority is distributed. The authority within families tends to be generational in nature, with parents holding the authority over their children, except sometimes at the end of life. But the greatest separation of authority exists in the relationship between God and humanity.

Before the Lord gave His promise of fruitful blessings to come in the Promised Land, He declared that He was the one who leads people, humbles them, tests them, lets them be hungry or feeds them, causes people to have understanding, and gives not just physical life but spiritual life (Deut 8:2-3). That describes someone with the authority, the ability and the resources to accomplish what He desires. It is the recognition that He is sovereign over our lives.

But even believers can have a hard time with the issue of authority. It is easy to prevent Him from being Lord over every aspect of our lives. And when we do that, it will have a negative impact on our relationship with Him. Our trust in times of difficulty will be weakened. And we will be prone to respond to situations just like non-believers do.

Ultimately kings get to do whatever they want to do, regardless of the resistance of their subjects. It is no different for the King of the Universe. In fact it is especially true. Thus it is imperative that for anyone to have a genuine relationship with God, there must be a recognition of His authority over one's life.

A relationship with God is based on a recognition of our sinfulness and His forgiveness

Along with His promise of fruitfulness, the Lord promised that He would discipline them

“just as a man disciplines his son” for breaking His commandments (Deut 8:5-6). He expressed His terms of righteousness in the form of commandments in the *Torah* (Law of Moses). As Paul later wrote: “through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). The Law defined the boundaries of what was acceptable and unacceptable in God's eyes.

The fact is that we are all sinners and we stand in rebellion against God regardless of our awareness of the specifics of the Law of Moses. All you need to do is to observe the way that people act when they do something wrong. They usually try to hide it because in their heart they know it is wrong. They don't need the *Torah* to do that.

The advantage of the *Torah* is that you get an opportunity to see how far you miss the mark. The disadvantage of the *Torah* is that if you try to keep it religiously on your own, you will always fail.

We need to recognize that we are not just sinners who fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23) but we are incapable of rectifying the problem. We need God's forgiveness. We need His grace. And we need to believe in His Son and in His act of redemption by dying in our place, thus securing the forgiveness we need. That is the basis of an incredible relationship.

Moreover, our relationship with God becomes like that of a father and a child. He does indeed discipline us, but just like an earthly father, our Heavenly Father loves us, restores us and exhorts us to move ahead with our lives in obedience.

A relationship with God will result in fruitfulness

Since He is King, God has the ability to release blessings to

whosoever He sees fit. In the case of the Israelites, it was in the form of “a land where you will eat food without scarcity, in which you will not lack anything” (Deut 8:9). That has truly been the characteristic of this small stretch of planet earth for many centuries now. Israel continues to feed its own people plus the people of other nations, as well as teaching the agriculturists of many nations how to improve their own food production.

In a similar fashion, God blesses everyone who names Him as Lord. In return, He asks for faithfulness on the part of those who reap the benefit of His promises (Deut 8:10).

But even prosperity can have a downside, for it becomes easy to misinterpret the ultimate source of your abundance. It is easy to trumpet human accomplishments, when ultimately it is God who creates the fruit of the vine and brings forth bread from the earth. And having that realization is foundational for a relationship with Him.

Just as the Israelites could know God's will as revealed in the *Torah* long ago, we can know God's will as revealed in the complete Word of God today. It does not require deep mysticism, digging out hidden meaning to know God's will. On every issue of life, we can find it written down in plain words what God desires from us, including a call to:

“...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).

That means true fruitfulness in which lives are changed for the good will only happen when we act within the boundaries of God's

will. But you might be saying to yourself, “Then I am in trouble because I don’t see any signs of fruit through my faithfulness. I witness but no one ever gets saved. I pray but nothing seems to happen.”

It is true that you may very well need to make a greater commitment to the Lord by being faithful in some regard. But it is also possible that you are not aware of fruit that is actually ripening.

You are bearing fruit when you witness to others. That doesn’t mean saving them, because that is God’s business. We are just called to be witnesses (Acts 1:8). Likewise, using your spiritual gift, whatever it may be, is an act of fruitfulness. Clearly that is the case if you have the gift of discernment or teaching. But in the same way, if it is hospitality and you exercise it, that will bring sweetness to someone’s life. And if it is the gift of mercy, that will bring spiritual nourishment to others as well.

Usually we think about fruitfulness as being some kind of result. But what about the fruit of the spirit? Paul identifies that as being: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). Those things are not so much results as they are personal

character or a state of being. So you are being fruitful in your own life when you practice them. It encourages others to do likewise because when you show love, others tend to respond in love, and when you are joyful, it inspires joy in others, and so on.

A story is told that dates back into the archives of Jewish history about a man who was planting a carob tree. And another man came along and asked him “How long will it take for the tree to bear fruit?” The man with the tree answered “Seventy years.” The traveler then asked him, “Are you sure that you will live seventy more years and will be able to eat the fruit?” The man responded, “I came into this world with carob trees already planted and grown. So just as my fathers planted those trees for me, so too, I must do the same for my children after me.”

The point is that we may never see or hear about a particular spiritual fruit becoming ripe. That may not come until we hear about it in heaven. But our present ignorance does not negate the reality of what is happening in and through us.

All this to say that the kind of fruitfulness God desires to see in our lives is within our grasp. It starts with a realization that God is our authority and that He has made His expectations clear in His

written Word. It is further built on a realization that we are sinners saved by grace. Such things will produce sweet fruits that will nourish our souls and the souls of others.

Life can get very complicated. But regardless of whether we are Jewish or Gentile, we human beings are the ones who make it that way. We can complicate life by trying to find secret mystical answers. Or we can complicate it by denying the reality of God and trying to make it on our own.

But as the biblical message of *Tu B’shevat* demonstrates, God has a plain message for us—that we need to have a genuine relationship with Him, and that He will be the One who makes our lives fruitful.



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