



For Whom Do You Plant?

By: Rabbi Ben Richards

There's a terrific story for Tu Bishvat: An older man is planting saplings when he's encountered by an important individual who asks him why he is planting. Will he live to see the literal fruits of his labors? The reply: "If I'm worthy, I will eat, and if not, my children will."

Up to this point, you might be saying to yourself, "I think I know this. It's the story with the great talmudic sage, Honi, Ta'anit 23a, right? Where Honi meets a man planting a tree for his descendants, just as his ancestors planted for him. Honi then falls asleep and sees the next generation using a full-grown tree.

Well, not quite. While a poignant tale, I'm talking about a lesser known but equally wonderful story, from Midrash Tanchuma Kedoshim 8:1:

There is a story about the emperor Hadrian... He found an old man who was planting fig saplings. Hadrian said to him, "You are an old man. Why are you persisting in taking the trouble to toil for others?" He said to Hadrian, "My lord king, here I am planting. If I am worthy, I shall eat of the fruit of my saplings; but if not, my children will eat."

Hadrian spent three years at war, and after three years he returned. What did that old man do? He took a fruit basket, filled it with the first-fruits of beautiful figs, and drew near to Hadrian. He said to him, "My lord king, take these figs, for I am the same old man whom you found when you were on your way when you said, 'You are an old man; why are you taking the trouble to toil for others?' See, the Holy One, blessed be God, has already found me worthy to eat some fruit from my saplings. Now this fruit in my fruit basket is your portion from those saplings."

Hadrian said to his servants, "Take it from him and fill it with gold coins."...Therefore one should not cease from planting. Rather, just as he found, one should still continue to plant even though he is old. The Holy One, blessed be God, said to Israel, "Learn from Me. Do I need fruits, as it were?" And yet it states (Gen. 2:8), "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east."

Great story, right? There's even some comedy I skipped:

The old man's neighbors hear that the emperor gave him gold for fruit, and they want gold too. So the husband goes off with a bowl for the emperor. The emperor takes his fruit and has him pelted with it before sending him back home.

Who said our tradition doesn't have a sense of humor?!

Returning to the bookends of the story, we find in our tale similarities to Honi's tale and yet key differences. While both Honi and Hadrian come upon old men planting saplings, the message the planters teach is slightly different. Honi's old man plants for his descendants, Hadrian's plants for himself and his children.

One act is selfless, pure altruism, planting seeds purely for the sake of others.

The other act is more versatile, perhaps it is only for future generations, but perhaps it will benefit the planter as well.

It is this nuanced difference in the stories that makes me favor the Midrash Tanchuma Hadrian one over that of Honi in our Talmud. Because while both are nice, one feels more realistic.

Telling people to contribute to our world because down the line it will be necessary is nice. It's accurate, it's poignant, and it's true. But how much more powerful to remind people that contributing now can enact change now. Sowing energy into our planet today can ensure that the appropriate weather and resources exist today, and tomorrow, and into the future.

Honi's story works for the average *tzaddik*, the commonplace righteous person who wants to always give. But what about the messy *benoni*, the all too fallible so-so human like you or me, who isn't always motivated to place our energies into a future paradise for our distant descendants?!

For us, there is the story of the boastful old man who hopes to benefit and recognizes it might or might not happen. It's both self-focused and other-focused, and it's full of that delightful humor all of us love. (Thank God his neighbor didn't bring any watermelons!

And it ends with the clincher for Tu Bishvat and life in general: Plant because that's the way to be *betzelem elokim*, in God's image. God planted a garden, not because God needs fruit, but because planting is a holy act. It combines you and me, connecting the past, present, and future, in a web of hopes and wishes, some bitter but most sweet and nourishing.

Honi holds a place of great honor in our Tu Bishvat canon. But maybe it's time to add a little Hadrianic fruit pelting?!



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