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בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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דרכיה דרכי נעם

TU B'SHEVAT

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Introduction

The celebration of Tu B'Shevat is another testament to the vitality and plasticity of the Jewish tradition. The fifteenth (in Hebrew counting lingo, letters taf vav, or t'u) of the month of Shevat was originally a tax day:

> There are four New Years. The first day of Nisan is the New Year for Kings and Festivals.
> The first day of Elul is the New Year for animal tithes (Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Shimon say that this is on first day of Tishri).
> The first day of Tishri is the New Year for Years, for Shemittah, for Jubilees, for plantings and for vegetables.
> The first day of Shevat is the New Year for Trees, according to Bet Shammai; Bet Hillel say that it is on the fifteenth day of that month.[1]

In order to tithe your orchard, you needed to know if your fruit belonged to last year's harvest or this year's. Since most fruit ripens in summer, they chose a cutoff date in the middle of winter.

Fast forward more than a thousand years to the mystical renaissance in Sefat during the sixteenth century, where Kabbalists created the Tu B'Shevat seder. Using the Pesach ritual as their model, they blessed the seven species of the Land of Israel and various fruits between four cups of wine.

The Tu B'Shevat *seder* is still in the process of formation. In line with their theology, the Kabbalists performed the ritual in order to draw down the blessings of the divine flow or energy and to raise their souls towards heaven. In a twist on this theme today's neo-Kabbalists integrate the insights of modern psychology into their seders. Others impart other messages to the ceremony. Israelis, for example, celebrate the Jewish return to the Land of Israel (and call on us to plant trees), while environmentalists use the *seder* to raise our ecological awareness. (For more information on conducting your own Tu B'Shevat *seder*, see the Resources section at the end of this article.)

In contemporary North America, it is this environmental theme that dominates the holiday. We live in an unprecedented age of climate change and face a wide range of environmental problems. Tu B'Shevat is both a chance to celebrate God's creation and to do *teshuvah*, to consider our values and behaviors, in relation to the natural world that sustains us. As the latter was ably considered by Dr. Jeremy Benstein previously in this series (*Walking with Justice*), I would like to concentrate mostly, though not exclusively, on the former.

While I get to God in many ways, the most powerful and consistent path for me is through the natural world. I am not alone. Not thousands, but tens and hundreds of thousands of Jews spend time in nature every year. So many feel the sublime, the transcendent and the sacred in God's greatest sanctuary. But the sad reality is that many Jews are unable to connect these feelings to their Jewish spiritual lives.

For them, and for a Jewish community that wishes to connect with them, Tu B'Shevat is an important opportunity. As Jews, how do celebrate God's great gift: this beautiful, awesome, life-giving planet. How might we relate ethically to our home? How does nature shape our spiritual lives? Can a connection to the natural world catalyze our connection to God and Judaism?

Two of the biggest influences on Jewish religious thinking today – Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber – arrived at their innovative ideas by experiencing and reconsidering our relationship with the natural world. We start with Heschel.

Heschel's magnum opus on Jewish theology is entitled *God in Search of Man*.[2] It covers the themes that any serious work on Jewish theology must: the revelation at Sinai, the authority of Jewish law, the problem of evil. But he only

[1] *Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:1.*
[2] *Note: Heschel wrote in the 1950s. Had he been doing so today, he surely would have embraced non-sexist language.*

reaches those subjects on page 167! The first part of the book is dedicated to the universal, human experience that religion is built upon. In particular, he devotes chapters to "wonder" and "awe" and gives rise to a new theological category: radical amazement.[3]

I emerge from the tunnel on the road from Wawona and suddenly Yosemite Valley stands before me in all its glory. El Capitan towers to the left, Bridalveil Fall plunges to my right, Half Dome looks over it all from the center. I have seen it many times, but here I am again, astounded and ecstatic. What Heschel calls the grandeur of nature envelops me. I am filled with wonder.

Wonder, Heschel teaches, is different from curiosity. At this moment I am not interested in a scientific explanation. I don't care about the geology of the valley or knowing how certain visual stimuli cause synaptic responses in the brain. Neither explains my amazement nor satisfies the longing in my heart. I just want to say, "Thanks."

This wonderful, that is, wonder-filled mystery, says Heschel, leads us to God:

> Awareness of the divine begins with wonder. It is the result of what man does with his higher incomprehension. The greatest hindrance to such awareness is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is.[4]

Wonder is that way of being in the world when we can truly be surprised; when, like children, we are not imprisoned by our past ideas of the way things are supposed to be. Heschel, whose prose reads like poetry, would be the last one to disparage the value of words. But when it comes to the awareness of God, satisfaction with words and dogmas is more likely to blind than enlighten.

For Heschel, wonder flows into awe, where we will ultimately meet the divine. With all due respect to snowboarders, the word "awesome" is used far too glibly in our culture. It points to nothing less than the most precious moments in life: childbirth, standing under the chuppah, witnessing the end of a life, beholding overwhelming suffering or beauty.

Originally, the Hebrew word *yirah* meant "fear." But over time it came to denote "awe" as well. The two meanings are connected, for the paradigmatically awesome moments of life, such as childbirth, are also filled with danger.

"What is the difference between fear and awe," asks Heschel? Think about a lightning storm. If it is right on us, a healthy reaction would be to leave quickly and find shelter. But if we are a safe distance away, we want to stick around.[5] When we feel awe, we are not repelled; we are attracted. We intuit that something important awaits discovery. Here, next to the mysterious threshold between life and death, we experience our most passionate emotions and holy desires. Here, God is close.

The experience of awe, so readily available in the natural world, is critical to Heschel's theology. Heschel famously began a lecture to the faculty of Notre Dame University with a startling declaration. "I have just seen a miracle! I have just seen a miracle!" One can imagine the rapt attention of the audience as he continued, "I have seen the sunrise." In moments of awe we know that the most physical things—rivers, flowers, mountains, sunsets—point to the transcendent.

It's so difficult to talk about the "who" and "what" of God. But when I say that I have "God-moments" in wilderness, people know exactly what I mean. In his description of radical amazement, Heschel captures this experience. When

[3] *The section is adapted from my, A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness; Wilderness Ways into Judaism (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006).*
[4] *A. J. Heschel, God in Search of Man (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955) p. 46.*
[5] *Ibid., pp. 76-77.*

we are awestruck, the question of God is not contrived. And so Heschel writes:

> *Awe precedes faith;* it is *at the root of faith*. We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew.[6] (italics in the original).

Normally, one thinks of wonder and awe as a reaction to something we see in the world around us. But Heschel claims that it is much more than that:

> To the prophets wonder is *a form of thinking* … it is an attitude that never ceases.[7] (italics in the original)

This point is critical. Wonder happens to us. It is a gift we receive in the presence of beauty and grandeur. But the religious personality does not wait passively for it to happen again. Rather, she internalizes it as a value. She works to cultivate awe as a virtue. The attitude of radical amazement enables her to experience more and more wonder in the world.

Before Heschel, it did not occur to me that some people experience awe and wonder more than others or that we can consciously try to make them happen rather than wait for them to happen to us. But, of course, this is true. The ramifications are important. If awe is an attitude, we can educate and train ourselves to acquire it. This, says Heschel, is the aim of Jewish spiritual practice:

> Every evening we recite: "He creates light and makes the dark." Twice a day we say: "He is One." What is the meaning of such repetition? A scientific theory, once it is announced and accepted, does not have to be repeated twice a day. The insights of wonder must be constantly kept alive. Since there is a need for daily wonder, there is a need for daily worship.[8]

Another Jewish thinker who lends insight into the religious significance of nature is Martin Buber. You are probably familiar with his distinction between I-Thou and I-It relationships, but for those who are not, here is a brief explanation.

An extreme moment of I-It might be a trip to the bank. The teller tends to my transaction. Perhaps we exchange niceties and wish each other a nice day, but for all intents and purposes, there is little difference between my encounter with this human being and an ATM.

An extreme moment of I-Thou: listening intently to the baby in your arms, trying to discern his needs; looking into your partner's eyes the moment you realize that you are truly in love; debating the merits of an issue with a stranger, going where the discussion takes you without worrying about face or ego, and arriving at an insight of truth beyond what either of you imagined before.

Buber characterizes such moments of connection. When I receive a "thou" I am literally all ears. I listen deeply. As Buber puts it, the other "fills the horizon". Second, I receive my "thou" exactly as they are, without judgment, for judgment would prevent me from truly listening. Third, I see the other as a whole. In I-It mode, I view the other in terms of function or utility. Like a scientist or a philosopher, I analyze the other by breaking them or it down into parts. Can this person help me in business? Might he strike me? How does blood clot into the scab on her arm? In I-Thou, I embrace the other in their full personhood.

[6] *Ibid., p. 77.*
[7] *Ibid., p. 46.*
[8] *Ibid., p. 48.*

Finally, for Buber, I-Thou is the window to God. In moments of I-Thou, time and space fade away and we experience the Absolute and the Eternal. The mystery of transcendence is present, not in our heads, but in our guts. We know that no amount of I-It moments make life worth living, that we find meaning when we drop our own dramas, reach out to another, and create a bond. Here the spiritual is real. It is living in these moments of felt transcendence, of awe and mystery, that makes life worthwhile.

As one who feels the most spiritual in the most physical of places, in the natural world, I can understand why Buber's first I-Thou encounters were not with people. In his autobiographical writing, Buber describes his first awareness of I-Thou encounter after looking deeply into the eyes of…a horse.[9] At the very beginning of *I and Thou*, in a passage we will study, Buber describes an I-Thou encounter with a tree.

Buber vividly describes the experience of those of us who perceive the natural world as sacred and holy. When we are focused on our partners in this world – that is, when we attend to the world around us through our senses – we fill with spirit. Or as Heschel puts it, we are attuned to the meaningful mystery, to God.

Lastly, there is always an ethical dimension to I-Thou relation. Whatever a thou requires is not optional. When I hold an infant in my arms, what the child needs is my command. When I gaze into the eyes of my loved ones, I know the sanctity of life with all the moral ramifications.

For some, celebrating nature brings up fears of a pagan, tree-hugging, narcissistic spirituality. But reaching out to the world through deep, compassionate listening and bringing the attitude of awe to all I encounter is not a self-serving activity. And if there is one thing we environmentalists know, it is that logical calculations and prudent considerations rarely motivate people to act responsibly towards our environment – even when the consequences are dire for plants, animals and humans. Rather, I believe that people are passionate about what they cherish. Would you allow someone to harm a person you love? Or your pet? Or the fruit tree in your back yard? In my opinion, it is a mitzvah in our time to bring ourselves and our children out of the city and into the natural world. We need to establish a direct relationship with the source of our sustenance. Not only would our ecological behavior improve. Properly perceived, nature leads us to God, an organic understanding of commandment, and the life of mitzvot.

[9] *Martin Buber, "Autobiographical Fragments," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman (La Salle, IL.: Open Court, 1967), p. 10.*

TU B'SHEVAT – TEXT 1

A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1955), p. 46

Wonder

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder. (46)

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is missing from a purely scientific description of the world?**
- **The phrase "A will to believe" is the title of a famous essay by William James. As an academic, embracing science, he asks, "How can I believe in [religious] dogma?" How would you answer this question?**
- **What is the difference between relating to God by affirming a dogma (James' faith) and experiencing the world through wonder (Heschel)?**
- **Do Heschel's insights resonate with you? In your experience, are moments of wonder a window to God?**

TU B'SHEVAT – TEXT 2

A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, pp. 74-5

Awe

Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality. The awe that we sense or ought to sense when standing in the presence of a human being is a moment of intuition for the likeness of God which is concealed in his essence. Not only man; even inanimate things stand in a relation to the Creator. The secret of every being is the divine care and concern that are invested in it. Something sacred is at stake in every event.

Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference everywhere to Him who is beyond all things. It is an insight better conveyed in attitudes than in words. The more eager we are to express it, the less remains of it.

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What are the characteristics of a moment of awe according to Heschel?**
- **Do you share Heschel's perception? Do you ever "sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance"?**
- **Heschel links the experience of awe to God as portrayed in the Torah and later Jewish tradition. Does this strike you as a defensible pairing? How so (or why not)?**

TU B'SHEVAT – TEXT 3

MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* (NEW YORK: CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS, 1958), pp. 7 & 8

I contemplate a tree.

I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground…

I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life.

I can …recognize it only as an expression of the law—those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate.

Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree.…

Everything belonging to the tree…its form and structure, its colors and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, are all present in a single whole.

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it—only in a different way.

Let no attempt be made to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation: relation is mutual.

The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience…I encounter no soul or dryad (a "tree spirit") of the tree, but the tree itself.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Does Buber's basic distinction between I-Thou and I-It relation make sense to you? Is it consistent with your experience in life?**
- **Contrast the I-Thou versus I-It ways of relating to a tree.**
- **Have you ever had an I-Thou encounter with a pet, a wild animal or any aspect of the natural world? If so, do you feel that Buber has captured the experience? If not, do you believe the phenomenon that he describes exists?**
- **Is I-Thou encounter, actually or potentially, important to your Jewish spiritual practice?**

TU B'SHEVAT – TEXT 4

משנה מסכת ראש השנה פרק א משנה א

אַרְבָּעָה - ר֯אשֵׁי שָׁנִים הֵם. בְּאֶחָד בְּנִיסָן - ר֯אשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לַמְּלָכִים וְלָרְגָלִים, בְּאֶחָד בֶּאֱלוּל - ר֯אשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לִמַּעְשַׂר בְּהֵמָה. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְרַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמְרִים: בָּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרֵי. בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרֵי - ר֯אשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לַשָּׁנִים, וְלַשְּׁמִיטִּין, וְלַיּוֹבְלוֹת, לַנְּטִיעָה, וְלַיְרָקוֹת. בְּאֶחָד בִּשְׁבָט - ר֯אשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לָאִילָן, כְּדִבְרֵי בֵּית שַׁמַּאי, בֵּית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים: בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ.

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

There are four New Years: On the first of Nissan is the new year for the kings and for the festivals. On the first of Elul is the new year for the tithing of animals. And Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar say: On the first of Tishrei is the new year for observance of the Jubilee and *shmittah*, for saplings and vegetables. On the first of Shevat is the new year for the tree(s) – this is according to Beit Shammai, and Beit Hillel says, on the fifteenth of that month.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What is the point of designating multiple "starting points" to the year? How does this practice change the way in which we think about the calendar? the world?**
- **On what basis are the sages assigning these "new years" to particular months? What does this tell us about the world in which they lived? To what extent are these still relevant to our own lives?**
- **This Mishnah speaks of a controversy between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai with respect to the exact date on which the new year for trees begins (our own tradition follows that of Beit Hillel)? What might have prompted these sages to question the date? Why not start the year on the first of the month as is done for each of the other "new years"?**
- **The designation of a new year for trees was originally relevant because of the practice of orlah, leaving the fruit of a tree unused for the first three years after planting. What are the practical implications of such a law? How does it shape our relationship to the natural world?**

TU B'SHEVAT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

Yitzhak Buxbaum,
A Person is Like a Tree: a Sourcebook for Tu'Beshvat, (2000, Jason Aronson).

Man's very name – Adam – is derived from the word Earth, *adama*. While man is at once the pinnacle of creation, the master and caretaker of the world, he is also dependent on the earth for his most basic needs. The Torah, in outlining the negative commandment of destroying fruit trees, refers to man himself as a tree of the field (Deut. 20:19). Our sages learn from this verse a prohibition against any needless destruction. In other words, fruit trees serve as the archetype for man's relationship and responsibility to his environment.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What are the implications of saying that "man"/humankind ("adam") is derived from earth ("adama")? What is the Biblical reference being made?**
- **What is the nature of the relationship between man and Earth/earth at a physical level? at a spiritual level?**
- **When in Jewish tradition are images of trees and nature invoked? What do they stand for? What ideas or sentiments are attached to them?**
- **The verse from Deuteronomy cited in this text is taken from a set of statutes limiting our conduct during times of war. Given the essentially destructive nature of war as an enterprise, what is the point of setting limits? Why is the destruction of fruit trees established as one of the boundaries that we may not cross?**

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