

Rabbi Zamore's Message for January, 2014

Tu Bishvat: Zionism vs. Environmentalism

This time of year is tough on those of us who enjoy gardening. My pots are tucked away, the last wilted blossoms were pruned weeks ago, and the ground has finally reached its deep freeze. In the winter I can only dream over seed catalogues, as I eat fruit and vegetables imported from far off places.

While Chanukah gives us light at the darkest part of the year, Tu Bishvat reconnects us back to the earth when we are most distant from it. Falling on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of Shvat (starting at sunset on January 15th this year), this minor holiday marks the new year of the trees. Of course, the holiday is linked to Israel's climate and agrarian cycle. In Israel, winter is marked by colder weather, but more importantly it provides needed rain. By the 15th of Shvat, the rains have nourished the earth and the weather is starting to shift away from the cold. As a result, the sap rises again in the trees. It is not spring yet, but the seasonal transformation has begun. Yet, here in the Northeast, it is not time to put away our shovels; we have plenty more winter ahead.

For us, the Jews of New Jersey, Tu Bishvat can provide two important tether points to our tradition. First, the holiday emphasizes our connection to Israel. All of our agrarian based holidays force us to celebrate on Israel's seasonal cycle.

New Jersey may share the same shape, size and hemisphere as Israel, but the climate is different. Like all agrarian holidays, Tu Bishvat points Diaspora Jews back to Israel. To quote Yehudah Halevi, "*My heart is in the East, and I am at the ends of the West.*" If we lived in the southern hemisphere, this contrast would be more apparent when we consider the timing of our holidays.

The second tether point is to the environment. Our celebration of the trees provides a perfect time to emphasize our Jewish environmental values, to heighten the call to be responsible *shomrei adamah*, guardians of the earth. God has given humanity this amazing gift which we communally squander daily. Tu Bishvat is the ideal time to teach Jewish environmentalism.

The trick is to balance these often bifurcated themes which live within one small holiday. At a time when American Jews are more and more distant from Israel, we need to come out of our own Zionist dormancy and connect to our homeland. Yet, it is often easier and safer to talk about caring for the earth. After all, who can get angry at saying we should love the trees. Therefore, the challenge is not to forsake one good value for another, but rather to allow them to coexist and flourish together.

Tu Bishvat is a holiday for all ages. For children, we must teach both values, Zionism and Environmentalism, in our communal celebrations. We can use a seder incorporating both values. For example, we can feature by using Israeli produce and highlighting Israeli environmental successes like drip irrigation and electric cars. For adults, we can openly challenge our community to think about the dichotomy of Zionism vs. Environmentalism in our holiday and to seek an integration of these Jewish values. As Psalm 137:5 teaches, “If I forget you, O’ Jerusalem . . .” We need not forget Israel in order to celebrate the trees.

L’Shalom,

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