Trees in Jewish Thought

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

This material was prepared by Rabbi Yonatan Neril and Evonne Marzouk of Canfei Nesharim, as part of the Jewcology project.

Outline of Sources

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I. Why Tu b’Shevat?

ממשנה מפסחא ראש השנה פרק א פסחא א
אורבעת ראש השנה... באה ראש השנה לארץ כדברי בית שופא бил יומינו באור הב้ vom

Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:1:
There are four New Years: … on the first of Shevat the New Year for the tree, according to Bet Shammai. Bet Hillel say, on the fifteenth thereof.

Rabbi Pinchas Kehati comments on this Mishna: "The Talmud explains that the New Year for the tree was established in Shevat, 'Because most of the rains have already fallen, and the resin has come up in the trees, and as a result the fruits begin to form now.'"

Discussion questions:

1. Why was Tu b’Shevat chosen as the new year of the trees?
2. What can this teach us about Jewish thought on the timing of marking events and celebrations?
3. How is this similar or different to Jewish perspectives on birthdays, yarzheis, and the timing of other new years like Rosh Hashanah? Why do you think this might be so?

II. Sustainability: Planting For the Long-Term

כלהל בית (וירל) פשעת נבשנה תברא ה
בשיחת חכמים קהלא אאות חואן תומכו ונחל הוהיודיו עכל אליי או עני ואמר לא ראמה ממעש כהה וכמון ממעבורי Hibernate
בכמות ברחק, אם דעת שחל תלוליה התורזה את يولימ, ש玓 קהללא אין מי יים קאראין

Midrash Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) Raba (Vilna edition) 7:28:
When G-d created the first man He took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him 'See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world - for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.'
Vayikra (Leviticus) Rabbah (Vilna edition) 25:3:
Rabbi Yehudah ben Shimon began his discourse with the text, "After the Lord your G-d shall you walk" (Deuteronomy 12:5). But can a man of flesh and blood walk after the Holy One, blessed be He(?)... But in truth the Holy One, blessed be He, from the very beginning of the creation of the world, was before all else occupied with plantation, as is proved by the text, "And the Lord G-d planted a garden in the first instance in Eden" (Genesis 2:8), and so do you also, when you enter into the land, occupy yourselves first with nothing else but plantation; hence it is written, "And when you shall come into the land, then you shall plant." (Deuteronomy, 12:5). But can a man of flesh and blood walk after the Holy One, blessed be He(?)… But in truth he would be taking a life as a pledge (Deuteronomy 24:6, Artscroll translation), and therefore I command you that you should not destroy it because there is blessing in it... and it is not the actions of a wise and

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ta'anit, p. 23a
One day as [a man named] Honi was walking along he saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him "how many years will it take until it will bear fruit?" The man replied "not for seventy years". Honi asked him, "do you really believe you'll live another seventy years?" The man answered, "I found this world provided with food trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants." What can they teach us about planting for the long-term and preparation for the future? How do they teach us about what is a good environment for people? What do trees symbolize in these verses?

III. The Tree of the Field is a Person

Deuteronomy, 20:19-20, Judaica Press translation:
“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a person, to go into the siege before you? However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.

Rabbeinu Bachayei, (ben Asher ben Hava), 13th Century, Spain, translation by Yonathan Neril
‘The commentators explain that the life of man and his food is [from] the tree of the field, as the verse says, ‘for he would be taking a life as a pledge' (Deuteronomy 24:6, Artscroll translation), and therefore I command you that you should not destroy it because there is blessing in it... and it is not the actions of a wise and
understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy, and therefore you should not expend energy to cut down a tree of the field; rather you should protect it from destruction and damage and take benefit from it. This [is the meaning of] ‘from it you will eat,’ and if you destroy it you will damage and take away its benefit.”

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105 C.E., France), commentary to Deuteronomy 20:19, Artscroll Rashi translation

See now, that the word ‘Ki’ functions here in the sense of “perhaps”: Is the tree of the field perhaps a man that it can produce fruit. But are there fig trees which do not produce fruit? Yes, as stated by Rahabah...

Discussion Questions:
1. Why does the Torah forbid cutting down fruit trees to build siege-works during a war, when it is not needless destruction but use of resources for an important purpose?
2. What does it mean that a tree is compared to a person? Compare the different views of Rashi and Rabbeinu Bachayei in their understandings. Which resonates more with you?
3. What can these sources teach us about our responsibility to trees and all natural resources?

IV. Settling the Land of Israel

Mishna Tamid, 2:3, translation from Judaic Classics Library: They [the priests] then began to take up the logs to lay the fire. Were all kinds of wood suitable for the fire? All kinds of wood were suitable for the fire except vine and olive wood. What they mostly used, however, were boughs of fig trees and of nut trees and of oil trees.

Rav Papa said: Because they have knots. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: Because of the settlement of the Land of Israel... Rabbi Eleazar adds [as not suitable]: also wood from the matish and the oak and the date tree and the carob and sycamore. ... But to the one who says, 'it is because of the settlement of the Land of Israel,' we can object, does not the date tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? — He can reply to you: By the same reasoning does not the fig tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? But what do you answer to this? That we speak of a fig tree which does not produce fruit. Similarly we speak of a date tree which does not produce fruit. But are there fig trees which do not produce fruit? Yes, as stated by Rahabah...

Mishna Tamid chapter two verse thirty.

Talmud, Tamid 29b, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library translation.

Aside from olive tree and grapevine [quote of the Mishna]. Why were these excepted? — Rav Papa said: Because they have knots. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: Because of the settlement of the Land of Israel... Rabbi Eleazar adds [as not suitable]: also wood from the matish and the oak and the date tree and the carob and sycamore. ... But to the one who says, 'it is because of the settlement of the Land of Israel,' we can object, does not the date tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? — He can reply to you: By the same reasoning does not the fig tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? But what do you answer to this? That we speak of a fig tree which does not produce fruit. Similarly we speak of a date tree which does not produce fruit. But are there fig trees which do not produce fruit? Yes, as stated by Rahabah...

1 An unknown kind of hardwood tree.
Mefaresh, an unidentified Rishon (writing between 1000 and 1400 C.E.) which appears in place of Rashi, to Tractate Tamid, 29b, translation by Yonatan Neril

Certainly the reason is as stated because knots [these woods] are invalid, but even without the reason of knots, for a different reason they would desist [from using them.] What is it? Because of 'the settlement of the land of Israel.' Since if they would burn the olive trees and grapevines, there would not be found wine to drink or oil to anoint with, and the land of Israel would be destroyed...

V. Use Them Wisely

Exodus 26: 15-16, Translation by Judaica Press

15. "And you shall make the planks for the Mishkan [Sanctuary] of acacia wood, upright. 16. "Ten cubits [shall be] the length of each plank, and a cubit and a half [shall be] the width of each plank.

Note: a cubit is approximately 1.5 feet, or half a meter. Also, the following Midrash Tanchuma refers to trees as עצי ארזים (atzei shittim, acacia trees) regarding the wood for the Sanctuary. The Midrash uses the word עריים (arazim) in a general sense, as it states elsewhere that there are 24 types of עריים (arazim), of which שעשיים (atzei shittim) are one type. Rashi on this verse quotes from the following Midrash:

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw edition) Terumah, 9, translation by Yonatan Neril

And from where [did the Israelites get] the wooden boards [of the Sanctuary]? Our father Jacob planted them (the trees) at the time he went down to Egypt. He said to his sons, “My children, in the future you will be freed from here, and God will tell you from the time you are redeemed to build for Him the Sanctuary. So get up and plant trees now so that when [the Divine] commands you to build Him the Sanctuary the cedars will be ready for you. Immediately they stood and planted and did so. The Rabbis of blessed memory said, our father Jacob brought down to Egypt the middle bar inside the planks because it would have been difficult to use [one plank of wood] from one end to the other. Not only that, but those cedars were singing before God! Which song were they saying? The one stated in Psalms ch. 96, “Then the trees of the forest will sing with joy before God.”...And when [did the trees sing this song]? When the Sanctuary was made from them, when God said to Moses about the Sanctuary...“And you shall make the boards for the Sanctuary of standing acacia wood.” The Torah does not say 'and you shall make boards,' but 'and you shall make the boards'--those which their ancestors had prepared for them.”

פירוש של י'��ק שטראוס, המסובב בחותמה שלמה

אמרו שארם הרשא חתינה עצי מנין עד תנייה לאברכים ואברכים ליצק יצק ויצק יצק ויצק והרדים לטרון מים ותנים ומשי והזיוואים והשובים

2 That is, Jacob’s staff was used as the middle bar inside the planks.
Commentary of Rabbi Ibn Sho'eev of Spain, 13th century (approx.),

“They [the Sages] said that Adam took trees from the Garden of Eden and gave them to Abraham, and Abraham [gave them] to Isaac, and Isaac [gave them] to Jacob. Jacob took them down to Egypt, and from there the tribes of Israel took them out. This is the acacia wood [commanded for use in the Sanctuary].”

Discussion Questions:
1. Why is this example of cutting down trees acceptable, as compared to examples where it is not permitted above?
2. Why did the planks of wood sing when they were being brought to build the Sanctuary? What factors contributed to their wanting to sing?
3. What does it mean that a tree sings? What might the song sound like?

VI. A Concluding Message

Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer (Warsaw edition) chapter 34: Six voices go from one end of the world to the other and the sound is not audible… When a fruit-bearing tree is cut down the voice cries out from one end of the world to the other, and its sound is not audible... When the soul departs from the body the voice goes out from one end of the world to the other, and its sound is not audible....

Discussion question:
1. How does this teaching encapsulate and expand our new understanding of trees?

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