



**Parshat Yisro-14 February 2025 Shabbat times start 4:55 finishes 6:06**

**Celebrating Pleasure -Tu B'Shvat: a Mystical Interpretation**

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The celebration of Tu B'Shvat--the 15th of the month of Shevat on the Hebrew calendar--is not mentioned in the Bible. The oldest reference is found in the Talmud, where Tu B'Shvat is called "the new year of the trees." The Talmud ascribes significance to this date only in terms of the legal implications of taking tithes (10%) from fruits.

About 500 years ago, the Kabbalists revealed the deeper meaning of Tu B'Shvat. They taught that Tu B'Shvat is an opportune time for rectifying the transgression of Adam and Eve. Amazingly, just through the simple act of eating fruit during the Tu B'Shvat festive dinner, we are able to contribute to this cosmic repair ("tikkun").

But how? How are we "fixing" the transgression of Adam and Eve, according to the Kabbalists? First let's explore the transgression of Adam and Eve, and then we can understand the mystical meaning of the Tu B'Shvat holiday, and why eating fruit is the way we celebrate it.

Torah says that G-d put Adam and Eve in the garden "to work it and to guard it."<sup>1</sup> The Jewish oral tradition teaches us that this refers to the do's and don'ts of the Torah. The do's are called the "positive mitzvot" and the don'ts are called the "negative mitzvot." Adam and Eve were given very little to do: "eat from all the trees of the garden."<sup>2</sup> And their only don't--their single prohibition--was not to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.<sup>3</sup> What was that about?

The Torah teaches that G-d created the world so that we could experience goodness in general, and His goodness in particular. Experiencing His goodness--bonding with G-d--is the greatest joy imaginable. G-d empowers us to bond with Him by serving His purpose for creation. Just as when we do for others, we feel connected to them, so, too, serving G-d enables us to bond with Him. Ironically, serving G-d is actually self-serving--profoundly fulfilling and pleasurable.

If we eat and enjoy the fruits of this world for G-d's sake--because this is what He asks of us--then we are actually serving G-d and bonding with Him. We serve G-d by acknowledging that the fruits of this world are His gifts to us and by willfully accepting and enjoying those gifts.

The root of Jewish life is, in fact, enjoyment--the pleasure of connecting to G-d. We connect to G-d by serving Him, and this means obeying His command to enjoy the fruits of this world.

While in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve's entire obligation was to enjoy all the lush fruits--with the notable exception of one forbidden fruit. Sure enough, they went after that one. This misdeed demonstrated their confused orientation to the real meaning of pleasure. Rather than seeing the fruits as pleasurable because they are G-d's gifts and enjoying them as part of their service to G-d, they wanted to partake of them independently of G-d--in fact, contrary to His will.

### **The Art of Receiving**

As already explained, real pleasure is experiencing a connection with G-d. We enjoy the ultimate spiritual pleasure when we enjoy the physical pleasures of this world as part of our divine service. Then, the act of receiving and enjoying G-d's gifts to us is amazingly transformed into a selfless act of serving G-d.

We can understand now that G-d's only desire in giving Adam and Eve those two mitzvot was to give them the ultimate pleasure--bonding with Him. True pleasure was not in the taste of the fruits, but in eating and enjoying these gifts from G-d. This was the way to serve and connect with Him--the Ultimate Pleasure.

But Adam and Eve misunderstood this. They did not see physical pleasure as a conduit to the spiritual pleasure of bonding with G-d. Rather, they sought pleasure independent of G-d.

This is the root of all wrongdoing: when instead of seeing the pleasures of this world as a gift from G-d, enjoying them in the service of G-d and using them as conduits to a connection to G-d, we seek pleasure independent of any connection to G-d. In other words, is the pleasure about us, or is the pleasure about our relationship with G-d?

There is a fundamental difference between having pleasure and receiving pleasure. If we want to have pleasure, it doesn't matter where it comes from. Having pleasure is void of any connection to a reality greater than ourselves. It is simply a selfish desire to experience a particular pleasure for its own sake. Receiving pleasure, on the other hand, is rooted in the soul's desire to serve G-d's purpose, which is to receive the ultimate joy of connecting to Him.

Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit because they were confused about their purpose on earth and, consequently, what is truly pleasurable in this world. They were clueless about what would bring them meaning and joy in life.

Following Adam and Eve's fatal mistake, G-d told them, "Because you ate from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from, the earth has become cursed."<sup>4</sup> G-d was not punishing the earth because of Adam and Eve's transgression; rather He was informing them that their distorted orientation towards physical pleasures has turned the earth into a source of curse rather than blessing for them and for their descendants. Depending on how we view the physical world, it is cursed or blessed. If we look at the physical world as a conduit to a connection with G-d, and if, as a service to G-d, we gratefully receive His gift of delicious fruits, we thereby experience His presence and the physical world becomes blessed. The physical world then becomes a bridge between the human and the divine. But if we fixate on the physical, independent of any relationship with G-d, and mistakenly perceive this world as the source of our pleasure rather than as a bridge to G-d, then this world becomes a barrier to G-d and a curse for us.

Now that we understand the transgression of Adam and Eve, we can begin to appreciate how we can contribute to its rectification on Tu B'Shvat.

On Tu B'Shvat, the new sap begins to rise up into the trees. And we bring abundance to this process when we celebrate Tu B'Shvat.

The Talmud says that more than the baby wants to suck, a mother wants to nurse. The mother not only gets tremendous pleasure from nursing her baby, but the flow of her milk is actually generated by its sucking. The more the baby wants to suck, the more milk the mother has to give. This principle also applies to our relationship to G-d.

G-d wants to give us the greatest of all pleasures, which is a connection with Him. But if we don't recognize that to be the greatest pleasure, and we don't want it, then He can't give it to us. Of course, G-d could give it to us, but it would just be a waste, because we wouldn't recognize it for what it is.

### **The Power of a Blessing**

On Tu B'Shvat, we take a fruit, and before enjoying it, we recite a blessing: "Blessed are you, G-d our G-d, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree." In other words, "You, G-d, are the source of this blessing." In doing this, we attempt to rectify the transgression of Adam and Eve. An apple is not just an apple; an apple is a blessing. Maybe I could believe that apples come from trees, but a blessing could only come from G-d. If I really contemplate the mystery and miracle of the taste, fragrance, beauty and nutrition wrapped up in this apple, I see that it's more than just a fruit--it is a wondrous loving gift from G-d. When I taste an apple with that kind of consciousness, I cannot but experience the presence of G-d within the physical. When I recite a blessing before I eat and acknowledge it as a gift from G-d, I reveal the divinity within it, and the transient sensual pleasure of the food is transformed, because it is filled with eternal spiritual pleasure. The food then feeds not only my body but also my soul. However, when I eat without a blessing, it's as if I stole the food. Perhaps it will nourish and bring pleasure to my body, but it will do nothing for my soul. The soul is only nourished when it experiences its eternal connection to G-d.

Tu B'Shvat is an opportune time to celebrate how eating and enjoying the fruits of trees can be a bridge to G-d, and how it can bring back the blessing to the earth.

When we enjoy the fruits of the previous year as wonderful gifts from G-d and affirm our yearning for G-d's presence manifest in the fruit, we are like a baby sucking its mother's milk with great appetite. We draw forth with great abundance the "milk of the earth"--the sap in the trees rises up with great abundance, so that they will bear much fruit in the coming year.

Unlike Adam and Eve who sought pleasure separate from G-d and who turned physical pleasure into a barrier to G-d, we--on Tu B'Shvat--enjoy the fruits as G-d's gift and experience their pleasure as a connection to G-d. In this way we rectify the transgression of Adam and Eve. We free the earth from being a curse for us--a barrier to G-d. We transform it into a bridge, so that it becomes a wellspring of blessing and G-d-given pleasure.

When you look at a human being, you see his hands working, his feet walking, his mouth talking.

You don't see his heart, his brain, his lungs and kidneys. They work quietly, inside.

But they are the essential organs of life.

The world, too, has hands and feet--those who are making the news, moving things around, shaking things up.

The heart, the inner organs, they are those who work quietly from the inside, those unnoticed, those who do a simple act of kindness with no thought of reward.

### Joke

A Jewish man is sitting on a bench reading his newspaper when an anti-Semite approaches him and says, "You know, all the world's problems are because of the Jews."

The Jewish man looks up and replies, "And the bicycle riders."

The anti-Semite replies befuddled, "Why the bicycle riders?"

The Jewish man responds, "Why the Jews?"

### Story time

The life of Queen Shlomit Alexandra was fraught with violent, political conflict and internecine strife. The saintly queen, however, survived to right the enormous crimes of her predecessors, and eventually became known as Shlomtzion--she who brought peace to Zion. Her first husband, the ruthless king Aristobulus, seized power from his own mother, imprisoned his brothers and persecuted the Sages with great vengeance. After he died, having reigned only one year, the rule passed to his widow, Queen Shlomit Alexandra. She was the sister of the renowned Torah giant Shimon ben Shetach, the leading sage of the generation, and it was under his guidance that she did so much to repair the damage done to the Jewish people during this violent period. The Queen's first act after the death of Aristobulus was to free his imprisoned brothers, the oldest of whom, Alexander Yannai, she married. Unfortunately, and to the terrible detriment of the Jewish nation, Yannai was no better than his shortlived brother. He devoted his energies to war, which took up most of his 27-year reign. His military exploits, however, were performed for his own lust for power and glory. Far more serious for the Jewish people was the battle raging between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, tearing apart the fabric of the Jewish nation. The Sadducees, whose objective it was to eliminate the Oral Torah, strove in every possible fashion to seize power from the Pharisees, the ancestors of all Jews today. To that end, they exerted pressure on the rulers through political intrigue and even outright slander against their enemies. Eventually King Yannai used the mercenary troops which supplemented his own native army to mount a deadly persecution of these leaders of the Jewish people. We can only imagine the terrible pain of Queen Shlomtzion, married to two Jewish kings of noble lineage, who perpetrated terrible crimes against the Torah Sages, the greatest of whom was her own brother.

It was under her benevolent influence that Yannai was persuaded to relent in his war against the Pharisees for a time, and allow those remaining to return to Israel from their forced exiles. Once back in the Holy Land, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach and his sister the queen were able to do much to restore Torah to the people. They acted to restore the authority of the Sanhedrin and to insure the education of the young. The pair were responsible for establishing the first system of public education known. In earlier times education was the domain of the parents. If the parents were poor, uneducated, or deceased, the child was not educated. This respite in the persecution of the Sages did not last, however. In a desperate attempt to wrest power from the Pharisees, the king and his Sadducee allies staged a ploy which succeeded in enraging the populace and provided a pretext on which to enlarge their terrible, bloody designs. When this despised king finally died he transferred power to his queen, instructing her to make peace with the Pharisees, calling his erstwhile allies, the Sadducees, "hypocrites." Now the Queen could finally do as she wished, and her accomplishments are her praise even to our generation. It is said that during the reign of Queen Shlomtzion rain descended every Friday night (as a sign of blessing). The produce of the Land was remarkable. Wheat grew as big as kidneys, barley like olives and lentils were the size of gold dinars (the largest coin of that time). When the Queen assumed the throne all persecution of the Sages ceased and the Pharisees were restored to their rightful positions of power. Shimon ben Shetach sat at the head of the Sanhedrin, and in every area of life the queen and her brother

worked diligently to restore peace and harmony to the Land. It was during her rule that the institution of the ketubah, the legal marriage contract, was established. This ensured that no Jewish woman would be left economically unprotected in the event of a divorce or widowhood. The courts were reorganized so that justice was again available to the people. Her reign was a true "Golden Age" for the Jewish people in their land. The Sages even preserved samples of the amazing grains which flourished in her time to show succeeding generations the rewards of observing the Torah. Just as during the reign of the pious King Shlomo, now also, the Jews lived securely in their land, undisturbed by the nations which surrounded them.

### Parsha Summary

The name of the Parshah, "Yitro," means "Jethro" and it is found in [Exodus 18:1](#).

[Moses'](#) father-in-law, [Jethro](#), hears of the great [miracles](#) which [G-d](#) performed for the people of Israel, and comes from Midian to the [Israelite](#) camp, bringing with him [Moses'](#) wife and two sons. Jethro advises Moses to appoint a hierarchy of [magistrates and judges](#) to assist him in the task of governing and administering justice to the people.

The children of Israel camp opposite [Mount Sinai](#), where they are told that [G-d](#) has [chosen](#) them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that [G-d](#) has spoken, [we shall do](#)."

On the sixth day of the third month ([Sivan](#)), seven weeks after the [Exodus](#), the entire nation of Israel assembles at the foot of [Mount Sinai](#) for the [Giving of the Torah](#). [G-d](#) descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightning, billows of smoke and the blast of the [shofar](#), and summons Moses to ascend.

[G-d](#) proclaims the [Ten Commandments](#), commanding the people of Israel to [believe in G-d](#), [not to worship idols](#) or [take G-d's name in vain](#), to [keep the Shabbat](#), [honor their parents](#), [not to murder](#), [not to commit adultery](#), [not to steal](#), and [not to bear false witness](#) or [covet](#) another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the [Torah](#) from [G-d](#) and convey it to them.