

# Jewish Tree Huggers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

On Monday we celebrate the New Year for trees! Yes, we were tree huggers long before it became fashionable. Where did we get it from?

The Torah's interest in trees focused originally, in the Garden of Eden, as the sources of wisdom and life. Humans were told to guard and protect them otherwise they would face disaster. These trees were uniquely described in the Torah as beautiful and good. Much later on in Deuteronomy (2:19), there is a law about not destroying fruit trees when one besieges a city "Don't take an ax to a tree that you can eat of." But then the text goes on to say, obscurely, "do not cut it down for **humanity is like the tree of the field.**"

I understand this to mean that humans and trees are both valuable and vulnerable. Both can nurture and sustain. Both can easily be destroyed. Just as one should cherish human life and avoid its destruction, so one should cherish the tree and nature in general and make sure it is not degraded.

From a legal point of view, according to the Torah, fruit itself cannot be eaten for the first three years of a tree's growth, called *Orla*. *Orla* also means the foreskin as in the *Brit Milah*. In other words, it means something not yet complete or perfected. In the fourth year, the fruit was dedicated to God and could only be eaten in Jerusalem. Fruit of the fourth year was called *Meta Revai*. No reason is given. One assumes its origin was to give the tree the chance to grow strong and well.

But why the need to differentiate between the fruit of one year from the next? It was like differentiating one tax year from another.

Two thousand or so years ago, the Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah said " There are four New Years. The first of *Nisan* it the New Year for festivals and kings. The first of *Ellul* is the New Year for animal tithes. The first of *Tishri* is the New Year for years, *Shmita*, *Yovel*, plants, and vegetables. The First of Shvat is the New Year for Trees. But Beit Hillel says it is the fifteenth." And the fifteenth of Shvat in Hebrew is *Tu BShvat*. See, we have always had differences of opinions and arguments just about everything.

The first mention of Tu BShvat. It was the cut-off date, the time you started to count the new year for trees when the sap began to rise.

All of this underlines how important in Ancient Israel agriculture was, in terms of its social, charitable and religious life. But society changed to become more industrial and commercial. And since the destruction of the Temple, tithes, and priests became largely symbolical. Agricultural laws applied only in the Land of Israel and for a long time, most Jews no longer lived there. These laws fell into disuse. But the return of Jews to Safed in the sixteenth century and later the creation of a Jewish State has brought them back into focus. There, Tu BShvat took on a new significance. It was part of the Kabbalist revival, spearheaded by Rabbis Cordovero and Luria which, in its holistic, mystical world view, that tried to integrate every aspect of human physical life with the religious. And in part, it was a way the secular Kibbutzim could identify with tradition in an informal way.

Now we live in a world in which nature, climate, and ecology all figure large in our consciousness. There has been an increasing tendency to see *Tu BShvat* in this context too. And I welcome that. But the emphasis on trees in the Torah tells me that trees are more to Judaism than simple biological phenomena. And this is relevant to our current concern over climate change.

The word for tree in the Torah, *Eytz* and the word for wood, *Eytz*, are synonymous. Trees are beautiful creations, decorative. But also essential to maintain the ecological balance of life on earth. Trees give us oxygen. They absorb carbon dioxide which filters our air. A tree symbolizes the ideal of spirituality. "The good person shall be like a tree planted near streams of water, giving its fruit at the right time, its leaves will not wither" (Psalms 1). And in Kabbalah, the "Tree of Life" symbolizes our relationship and interconnectivity with God.

Wood is important too. Wood was used to purify drinking water in the desert. It was mixed with the ashes of purification for the Temple. It was the core material of the Ark and the tabernacle. But at the same time, the word for wood also means a scaffold, a place of physical death. And as a pagan grove, a place of moral death.

Trees, wood, nature, can nurture and destroy. Humanity is a force for good but also for corruption. Much of humanity is now degrading our world and showing little respect for the balances of life on land, at sea and in the air. We are betraying our obligation to be custodians. But the connection between trees and humans is there to give us a sense of priority. Yes, nature is a priority, yes animals are priorities, everything in our universe must be

treated with respect and concern, even if we humans make use of them, for food and for industry. That is why there is a crucial Torah law against destroying anything needlessly *Baal Tachshit*, not to destroy needlessly. Whether it is plants or food all the way up to human life. If we subordinate human life to other forms of life, we are making a mistake. Everything needs to be respected. But some more so.

Our blessings over food are designed to get us to think before and after we consume; to appreciate the gifts of the world. So too our festivals, whether Biblical like Sucot or Rabbinical or customs like *Tu BShvat* are there to remind us of how beautiful our world can be and how fortunate we are when we can enjoy it. But they should also remind us of the fragility of our natural world. And that we must put human life first.