

Yitro 5780

Tu Bishvat and Trees of Life

With this week's parashah, Yitro, we arrive at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. And on Monday we celebrated *Tu Bishvat*, the new year for trees. Great, I thought - there's a ready made sermon. However, it pains me to report that there is not a single tree in the parashah. Not even a stick of wood. And far less, any identification of the Torah with a tree.

How can this be? Don't we say, at least three times a week: *'It is a tree of life to those who cling to it: and those who uphold it are happy'*?

Don't we? And I'd suggest, also, that we accept, without thinking twice, that the Torah is a tree (and not, for example, milk, or candy, or a house, or anything else, for that matter). Of course we can say that a tree is an excellent symbol for the Torah - roots in the earth, a strong trunk, branches reaching to the sky, shade underneath it, and so on, and so forth.

But how did the link between the Torah and a tree get made in the first place? Let's take a look.

We'll begin with the words in their original context. They come from the third chapter of Proverbs:

Happy is the person who finds wisdom,
the person who obtains understanding,
For the gain from her is better than gain from silver,
her profit better than gold.
She is more precious than rubies,
nothing you desire can compare to her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of delight,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who cling to her;
those who uphold her are happy.

Say what? But yes - the original text isn't talking about Torah. It's talking about Wisdom personified - as a woman, by the way. So how did the Rabbis come to identify that verse with Torah?

In order to answer that question, we need to look at another source. It is based on a verse in the first chapter of the book of Psalms, which begins:

Happy are the people who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked
nor stand in the way of sinners
nor sit in the seat of the scornful.
Rather, the Torah of Adonai is their desire
in Adonai's Torah they meditate night and day.
They become like a tree planted on streams of water
which gives its fruit in its due season
whose leaf does not wither
and everything it does is successful.

So Torah and trees *are* connected - insofar as Torah has the capacity to turn people into flourishing trees. But we still don't have Torah herself as a tree. For that, the Rabbis have to make a Midrash.

"They shall be like a tree". This is what the text means when it says, "She is a tree of life to those who cling to her." Rabbi Yitzhak bar Hiyya said: 'Why are the words of Torah called a tree of life? Because she is beloved by everything that lives.' Rabbi Yudan said: 'Why is the Torah likened to **a tree of life?** To teach you that in the same way as the Tree of Life was unfurled to all creatures in the Garden of Eden, the Torah is unfurled to every living creature, and brings them to the life of the World to Come.' [Midrash Tehillim *source?*]

So just like the original Tree of Life, which was planted in the Garden of Eden, gave any creature which ate its fruit eternal life, so too the Torah has the power to give life - a life that tastes good, a life that lasts, a life that can be passed down. And so the Torah becomes an Etz Hayyim.

And now we can understand the absence of trees in this week's parashah. There is no need for support or continuity when you are standing at Mount Sinai, in a

protracted, eternal present tense. The Torah of direct revelation needs no description. It's enough for it to be just what it is.

The need for Torah as a symbol of life only came later, with the Jewish journey from the past into the present. We've seen that the combining of the Torah with a tree began with the book of Psalms; and the combining of the Torah, a tree and life is the invention of the Rabbis - the interpreters of Torah, who worried about continuity and the future and life in the World to Come.

And they created combination which is extremely powerful - one which stands, as is the way of the Rabbis, on three things: Torah - the teaching we received at Sinai; a tree - something organic, which grows and becomes stronger over time; and life in this world, but also in the future, so as to give us continuity and hope above and beyond the years of our own lives.

And every time we say or sing those words we remind ourselves that we have to frame our own experiences in ways that are meaningful to us. We weren't at Sinai, so we can't claim that understanding. Instead, we take the Torah of Sinai to ourselves as an inheritance in our own words, with a symbol that we only have to look out of any window to see, a symbol that will inspire us in our turn to grow and flourish and pass our identity on: "It is a tree of life to those who cling to it, and those who uphold it are happy."

Please spend some time with a tree today and thank it for symbolizing Torah for us!