

Tu BiShvat: The dead of Winter or halfway to Spring?

By: Dr. Leah R. Adams

The Mishna in Rosh HaShanah discusses the delineation of Tu BiShvat as the beginning of the New Year for trees. As we bundle up in our winter coats and hats, remote start our cars to get them warmed up, and usually at this time have to shovel our walkways, the growth of trees and fruit seem to be impossible. Yet, the Tanna Hillel, as explained by Kehati, posits that it is exactly this time, when half of the winter has passed and we are over some of the cold, that the fruit trees have the opportunity to begin their growth. We feel like the glass is half empty of warm days and Hillel explains that the season is halfway to Spring! A perspective focused through the Emunah that there is a plan for the world we live in really is everything. While Emunah sounds like the topic of discussion for a Rebbetzin, not a Psychologist, it is a crucial element in maintaining a healthy emotional state of mind.

In the book “Making sense of suffering: A Jewish Approach” by Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner and adapted by Jeremy Kagan and Yonoson Rosenblum a number of poignant issues are discussed. They write: “Intellectual understanding that helps us frame our situation can also help guide our emotional response. Formulating a constructive vision of suffering that helps us place our suffering in the context of the future helps us avoid reacting with excessive anger.” The authors do not expect us to claim to understand WHY Hashem has dealt with us in a particular way, but to recognize that our lives, with all of the pitfalls and periods of happiness, are part of His plan. This understanding alone, this Emunah, alleviates our pain. This book, that has helped so many deal with the pain of living, was printed posthumously. How fitting of the lessons that the author tried to teach us, that Hashem has a plan for all of us. Even when life seems the darkest, at the time of death, if He wills it, our lives continue to impact others. Here too we see the lesson of Tu BiShvat. The cold season of barren trees seems to represent the death of the plants when, in reality, their roots are sprouting.

My father, HaRav Chaim Lipman Ze'ev Rabinowitz went to the world of truth in 2009 on Tu BiShvat at the age of 80. Any of you who have read my previous columns know already that I focus on the positive, this tribute and psychological lesson will be no different. This day, the anniversary of his death, symbolizes his optimism. He raised us to think like the farmers at

Tu BiShvat, see not death but opportunity for growth. My father was a man of Emunah. This Emunah protected him from the pain that many of us, who foolishly think that we control our destiny, experience. When we know that there is One above us who has a plan for each of us, and when we humble ourselves to recognize that we don't have to understand this plan to be comforted by it, then we will have inner peace.

In September of 1954 my father and his new bride, Esther, were taking a walk one day. A mildly intoxicated driver plowed into them killing Esther and maiming my father for life. He was initially comatose, his body badly broken. Even after his brain returned to its normal function, he remained hospitalized in a body cast for months. For the rest of his life he would have terribly scarred legs and a significant limp. The woman who hit them was taken to court to be charged with the death of my father's wife. My father actually urged the court to not imprison her, but rather place her on probation. As a constant pursuer of truth, he had researched her background, and concluded that she did not seem to be a danger for society, rather a "decent" woman who had made a terrible mistake. The judge was so amazed by my father's plea that he ordered the woman to serve a three year probation during which she was not allowed to drive a car. As a major aside to the main issue we have been discussing here, the whole event caused a tremendous Kiddush Hashem and my father was lauded as a merciful Rabbi by the local papers.

The only explanation for my father's reaction can be that he was a man of Emunah. He understood fully that Hashem runs the world. This woman was merely a messenger sent by Him. It was not necessary for my father to understand why. There is no anger, frustration or need for vengeance in the heart of one that truly believes that his life is in the hands of One who knows all. My father suffered for many years because of poor circulation in his legs likely brought about by the accident. When asked how he was, whether at home, in the nursing home or in the hospital needing yet another surgery, he answered with a smile "Baruch Hashem Yom Yom". It was not a glib, pat answer. It was a proclamation from a man of faith. He said it and he meant it.

When we were children my father, a tremendous Talmid Chacham, always emphasized the opinion that the Avos were born human beings with human frailties who rose above all others through great effort. He empowered us to believe that we, too, could achieve greatness with

tremendous effort, Siyata Dishmaya and Emunah. I shared with you only one of the seemingly super-human stories of his life to teach you the same lesson. My father married my mother in 1956 and continued to be an inspiring man for the rest of his life. He was a husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, brother, uncle, Rav, businessman and community leader. The crown on top of it all was his Hasmada; always with Gemara in hand.

There are times in our daily lives when we are slighted by others. At times, like when the customer in front of you buys the last donut that you really wanted, it is unintentional. At other times, like when the customer behind you cuts in line with his overflowing cart of groceries, it is intentional. How we view these situations and whether we choose to let them eat at us or not determine our happiness. (How this gets played out in front of our children and spouses, determines theirs.) If we are true believers, then these trivial incidents are not seen as bothersome. They are seen as acts in a play directed by a masterful director. We do not know the whole story yet, but we are sure that it will be touching and well conceived. When we encounter truly painful situations in our lives, we will be able to rely on this belief that we have cultivated during less challenging times. So I ask you, do you believe that Tu BiShvat is the dead of winter, a hopeless seemingly worthless season, or the entranceway to Spring, a planned time of growth and blossoming?

Leah Adams, PsyD is a Psychologist in Private Practice in the Monsey area. She participates in some insurance plans and can be reached for appointments or speaking engagements at 845-661-8741. She loves to hear your sprouts of wisdom, and you can write to her at drleahadams@gmail.com.

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