



Celebrating a Birthday for a Tree¹

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Tu Bishvat is often called the “birthday of the trees.” There is also a reactionary trend to reject this framework of “birthday” and go back to its original, technical and halakhic purpose, which is found in the Mishnah:

משנה ראש השנה א:א

ארבעה ראשי שנים הם:

באחד בניסן ראש השנה למלכים ולרגלים

באחד באלול ראש השנה למעשר בהמה רבי אלעזר ורבי שמעון אומרים באחד בתשרי

באחד בתשרי ראש השנה לשנים ולשמיטין וליובלות לנטיעה ולירקות

באחד בשבט ראש השנה לאילן כדברי בית שמאי, בית הלל אומרים בחמשה עשר בו:

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

There are four new years:

The first of Nisan is the new year for kings and for festivals.

The first of Elul is the new year for the tithe of beasts. R. Elazar and R. Shimon say: The first of Tishrei.

¹ I want to thank my teacher R. Pdaya Nagar, whose short talk about Tu Bishvat many years ago stayed with me and inspired this line of thought.



The first of Tishrei is the new year for years, for sabbatical and jubilee years, for planting and for [tithe of] vegetables.

The first of **Shevat is the new year (*rosh hashanah*) for trees**—according to the words of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel says: **On the fifteenth** of that [month].

The halakhic meaning of Tu Bishvat is clear. It serves as a marker that distinguishes the fruit of one year from those of the next, important for the correct fulfillment of tithing, first fruits, and other land-dependent *mitzvot*.² This midwinter date was chosen, according to the Talmud,³ because the fruits that set before the month of Shevat are a product of the previous winter, and those that set afterward are a product of the current winter.

But the technical halakhic sense does not cover the full sense of what some of the new years mentioned in the Mishnah really mean. The very phrase “Rosh Hashanah” carries weight. The Mishnah names the first of Tishrei as the “New Year for years,” and at least one Rabbinic strand understood this as marking the creation of the world, or more specifically the creation of Humanity.⁴ It’s hard not to see the link between the Rosh Hashanah Festival, as a day of Judgment, and the day that marks the beginning of human time. The story of creation is to remember that God created the world, and created us - and that memory naturally calls us to take stock of our lives.

²See for instance: Rashi on Bavli Rosh Hashanah 2a, s.v. לאילן; Rosh Hashanah 14a; Rambam Laws of Ma’aser chapter 2. For a summary of the halakhic role of Tu Bishvat, see R. Melamed’s *Peninei Halakhah Zemanim* 14:1. Tu Bishvat was also “adopted” by the Zionist movement as a day for planting trees in Eretz Yisrael. For more on this adoption and its complicated history and practice, see של חזקי שהם, “נטיעות בשיא החורף? הסיפור האמיתי, של” available at: <https://heb.hartman.org.il/true-story-of-tu-bishvat/>.

³Rosh Hashanah 14a and R. Menahem ha-Me’iri on Rosh Hashanah 2a.

⁴The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a) brings a dispute whether the world was created on Tishrei or Nisan. It is clear from the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah that the Tishrei approach was widely accepted, for example, in Musaf: “This is the day, the beginning of Your works, a remembrance of the First Day.” See also Vayikra Rabbah 29:1, Pirkei de-R. Eliezer 8.



In a sense, Rosh Hashanah functions like a birthday for the world. After all, what is a birthday if not a day that brings us back to the miracle of birth, and to the truth that every person has a mother? It reminds us that a person has not always been here, that their existence is not a given. It evokes gratitude for their presence in the world; it gives us a reason to express our appreciation.

Following this line of thought, I would like to lean into this understanding of Tu Bishvat as a birthday for trees.⁵ But what does it mean to celebrate a birthday for a tree?

The birth of a human being is dramatic, an unmistakable moment. But the birthday of a tree is something else entirely. It is subtle, almost hidden. Its emergence is slow and gradual. The seed germinates deep in the earth, long before anything is visible. Even the moment it breaks through the soil is quiet and easy to miss.

More deeply, we simply don't witness the "birth" of trees. Their long lifespan means that a person can live an entire lifetime without seeing the beginning or the end of a single tree. Trees feel automatic, taken for granted. Even when a new tree is planted on our street, it's already a sapling.

In this, trees stand in contrast to vegetables and grain—the things humans must plow, sow, water, and tend. In the more agriculturally connected ancient world, every person knew the "birthday" of the bread they ate. But who knows the birthday of a carob tree?⁶

⁵ One could object that it would be more precise to talk about a birthday for **fruit**, since they are the objects of the related halakhic discussions (which fruit "belongs" to of which year). However, the *mishnah* talks about a "new year for **trees**" and we will follow its lead. The livelihood of the tree and its yearly renewal are manifested in the fruit that it bears, so when I talk about the trees "birth" or "appreciating" the tree, I refer to the fruit as well.

⁶ On this theme, see also the Talmud's story about Honi in Ta'anit 23a.



This distinction is not just botanical. It is woven into the Torah's own telling of creation in Genesis:

בראשית ב:ה,ט,טו-יז

⁵וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִהְיֶה בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יִצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹקִים עַל הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעִבֹד אֶת הָאָדָמָה: ...⁹וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱלֹקִים מִן הָאָדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נִחְמָד לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל...¹⁵וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם וַיְנַחֲהוּ בְּגֵן עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ: ¹⁶וַיֹּצֵא ה' אֱלֹקִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מְכַל עֵץ הַגֵּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל: ¹⁷וּמִעֵץ הַדֵּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ...

Bereishit 2:5,9,15-17

⁵No shrub of the field was yet on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no human to till the ground.... ⁹And God caused to sprout from the earth every tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food.... ¹⁵And God took the human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to guard it. ¹⁶And God commanded the human, saying: "From every tree of the garden you may surely eat; ¹⁷but from the tree of knowledge of good and bad you must not eat."

Adam arrives in a garden already filled with trees. There aren't any crops yet, they depend on human labor. But the trees are simply there.

It is therefore no surprise that trees become objects of appropriation and entitlement.

Human nature tends to claim and consume whatever feels automatic. God seems aware of that tendency. Permission is given ("From every tree you may surely eat"), but a boundary is drawn ("but from the tree of knowledge... do not eat"). Yet Adam and Havah see that the tree is "good for eating," forget the tree's Creator, and eat its fruit.

To repair that mistake, Adam and Havah are sent out of the garden and into the world of grain, the world in which nothing is taken for granted: "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat

bread” (3:19) The human’s name is engraved on wheat from start to finish. It is no accident, then, that in our Mishnah, the first of Tishrei—the New Year for the human being—is also the New Year for vegetables, crops that humans have to replant every year.

The truth is that, even with people—with all the drama of human birth—it is remarkably easy to forget that people are not a given, that every person has a mother who carried them and raised them, and whose heart breaks when they are harmed. Forgetting this is what enables us to use and estrange ourselves from one another. If that is true for human beings, what chance do the trees have?

But then comes Tu Bishvat, inviting us to celebrate a birthday for a tree. To repair the sin of the Garden, to remember that the tree is not a given. And the Torah says: “כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה - for the human is a tree of the field” (Deuteronomy 20:19).⁷ On a deep level, the way we treat trees will always impact the way we treat our fellow human beings.

It is easy now to understand why the new year for trees takes place in the middle of winter. It does not mark the bursting bloom of spring (the almond’s tree flowering, which became the mark of Tu Bishvat, is an exception), but rather the moments that the winter rains evoke new life, deep under the frozen ground. Tu Bishvat becomes a reminder: there are beginnings in this world that unfold out of sight, but they are no less real. With a little faith, attention, and curiosity, we can learn to trace things back to their roots, and establish with them a relationship of honor, fitting for the wonder that they are.

And if we do that we might just find our way back to the Garden.

⁷ In context, this verse seems to actually be a rhetorical question, distinguishing the trees that belong to an enemy from the human enemies (see comments of Rashi, Eben Ezra). But different readers have taken it to draw a comparison between people and trees, see Ta’anit 7a, Zohar Vayikra 24a, Pri Tzadik Shemot Tu Bishvat, and see Natan Zach’s poem “כִּי הָאָדָם עֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה.”

