My Most Favorite Ashkenazi Tradition

TAX SEASON

Tu Bishbat is not a religious holiday and is not mentioned in the Tora. The rabbis chose this date 2,000 years ago for purely technical reasons related to the computation of tree years. It is a technical Halakhic date, a cutoff used for commandments such as “ma’aser,” or tithing, and “orla,” the prohibition of eating the fruits of the trees during the first three years. On the 15th of Shebat, the trees are simply one year older. The Tora or the rabbis in the Talmud never mentioned any other spiritual or religious meaning on this day. And obviously, Tu Bishbat was relevant exclusively for trees growing in the land of Israel, and to know, for example, when to bring certain fruits to Jerusalem or the Bet HaMiqdash, the Temple of Jerusalem. Therefore, once we Jews lost our Bet HaMiqdash and were exiled from Israel, Tu Bishbat was forgotten.

THE RENEWAL OF THE LAND

In the 16th century, thousands of Jews escaping the Spanish Inquisition arrived in Turkey. Then they moved to Eretz Israel, establishing a Jewish colony in the city of Safed (Tzefat). This city soon became the most important Halakhic center in the world. Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575) wrote the Shulchan Arukh, the halakhic code still accepted by all Jews in the world, in Safed. Mystic literature, or Kabbalah, also flourished in Safed through Ari HaQadosh (1534-1572) and his disciples. For these Jewish sages who lived in Israel, the 15th of Shebat now had special significance. Kabbalistic rabbis formulated a “Seder” or Tu Bishbat ceremony, like the one we do on the night of Rosh Hashanah, to praise HaShem for the land of Israel that He granted us, and which we were now

miraculously inhabiting again. This new Tu Bishbat ceremony consisted of eating a variety of fruits. In addition, following the model of the Pesach Seder, they also drank four cups of wine, from lighter to darker colors: white; pink; Cabernet, and Syrah to represent the four seasons of the year.

FROM ISRAEL TO THE REST OF THE WORLD

Since then, the tradition of having some type of "se'uda" or fruit meal spread throughout the Jewish world. The most prized are those fruits that the Tora mentions when it praises the land of Israel: "a land of wheat and barley, grapes and figs, pomegranates, olives, and honey (dates)" Deuteronomy 8:8. For the Jewish world, Tu Bishbat now represented a new concept. Through these fruits, Jews reconnected with our beloved land. Today we would say that Tu Bishbat is a "Zionist" commemoration.

Sephardic Jews in Turkey, Morocco, Syria, Iran, etc. celebrate this date by eating figs, dates, grapes, olives, and pomegranates: fruits that could be found in those geographic areas. In Ashkenazi communities, Tu Bishbat was also celebrated. But, unlike the Mediterranean coastal areas, neither figs nor dates grew in the cold north of Europe. And it was impossible to import these fruits from the Holy Land. But the Jews of Europe did not give up. How would they remember Erets Israel if they couldn't taste one of these fruits? And then, someone came up with the idea of the carob tree! Although the Tora doesn't mention carob as a fruit of Israel, the Talmud tells us the famous story of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, who survived for 12 years in Meron, an area near Safed, eating carob. In some way, the Jews of Europe managed to import dried carob pods from the land of Israel: "in the times before fast transportation and refrigeration, the hard and dry texture of the carob made it one of the few fruits grown in the land of Israel that could withstand the long-distance journey [to Europe] without deteriorating". (See here)

ROCKS WITH THE TASTE OF HONEY

When I first heard this story, I was moved to tears! Although Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai survived thanks to this tree, the Gemara classifies carob as “food for animal consumption” (□□□□ □□□□). Carob seeds are *hard as rocks, and difficult to bite, and if you haven’t broken all your teeth trying to bite, you’ll discover that these seeds produce a floury substance that smells like spoiled cheese*. However, for European Jews, these tough seeds were exquisite because they came from the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the land of the Temple, the promised land. Love and passion for Israel transformed the inedible carob seed into the most delicious fruit in the world!

The custom of eating fruits on the 15th of Shebat continues to this day. Many of us, who still live outside of Israel, have the incredible privilege of going to a local supermarket and buying Israeli wine, honey, cheese, cookies made with Israeli flour, and fruits that come directly from our beloved land. The beautiful Ashkenazi custom of eating carob on TU BISHBAT continues to this day!

Wherever you are this TU BISHBAT, eat fruits that remind you of Israel, feeling the beautiful taste of our beloved land. Or visualize yourself as a 17th-century European Jew savoring in the bitter carob seeds, the milk, and honey of our beautiful land.