



Tu B'Shvat

The Secret of Male & Female Symmetry

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One of the least known of Jewish festivals is Tu B'Shvat – the 15th day of the month of Shvat. Since ancient times, Tu B'Shvat has been known as the New Year of the Trees. Through the ages the significance of this day has been expounded upon and observed especially by Hassidim and kabbalists. Outside traditional circles, however, it had been obscure until it was revitalized in the last century and reincarnated in modern day Israel as the secular Arbor Day – a day dedicated to the planting of trees.

The Talmud in tractate Rosh HaShanah tells us by this point in winter the majority of the rainfall to come during the year has already arrived and the trees have begun to grow. One of the customs is to increase the consumption of different types of fruits on this day," in honor of the significance of the day to trees and their fruits". This is a custom which many people keep nowadays, using fruits which the Torah mentions in conjunction with the land of Israel: grapes, figs, pomegranates, and dates".¹ What is strange is that Tu B'Shvat takes place in the dead of winter when there is really no fruit yet on the trees at all. To answer that "*Sof maaseh b'machshava techila*"-- "The final act is in the initial intention" or that we go after the inception of an act is not sufficient from a deeper perspective. What is the kabbalistic connection between Tu B'Shvat and trees?²

Ritualized observance of Tu B'Shvat goes back to the 17th century among Sephardic communities where Kabbalah was openly studied. A Tu B'Shvat Seder loosely modeled after the Passover Seder was composed.³ The ritual involves amassing all the different species of fruit and grains, organizing them according to their kabbalistic hierarchy (ratio of qlipa/shell to pri/fruit in each of the four spiritual dimensions), meditating upon their different significance and then invoking the appropriate blessing and consuming them. Red and white wines are also used.

Recently the ancient Tu B'Shvat Seder has been embellished and made available to the English public. Along with this there is also an ever growing genre of writings and *drashes*

¹ Shulchan Aruch, Magen Avraham

² Additionally, it can be said that spiritually Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for Trees, comes during a "dead period" of the festivals. The high of the High Holidays is far behind, and the intense preparations for Pesach have not yet begun.

³ Pri Aitz Hadar (Fruit of the Majestic Tree). This small work was originally part of a larger Kabbalistic work, "Chemdat Yamim, which according to some was written by a follower of Shabbatai Zvi, although there is virtually nothing in the *seder* that is questionable.

(sermonettes) surrounding Tu B'Shvat about the Torah's comparison of man to a tree⁴ as well as the Torah's comparison of *Torah* to a tree⁵. Additionally the mystical significance of fruit and vegetation and the spiritual mechanics of eating and blessings is expounded upon. Even the "Tu B'Shvat Seder" and all the interesting and sweet ideas, however, are not yet penetrating to the hidden light of Tu B'Shvat.

As "mystical" as Tu B'Shvat can appear to be on the outside there is an astounding secret that lies buried within the fruit. Tu B'Shvat contains the seeds of an unexpected fruit that holds a key to understanding the Torah's mystery of gender -- masculine and feminine energy.

Paradoxically, to understand the little known significance of Tu B'Shvat we need to understand its relationship to an even lesser known Jewish festival: Tu B'Av -- the 15th day of the month of Av. It is recorded in Mishnah Taanit that in ancient times there were no holidays as joyous for the Jewish People as the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. Only in the last few decades has this day also been resurrected from its ancient heritage and become popular among Jewish women's groups of all denominations. This day is even known in modern, secular Israel as the Festival of Love!

It is significant that in the last generations both these "minor" festival days have returned to Jewish consciousness and that they have similar names. On both the Fifteenth of Shvat and the Fifteenth of Av we observe a partial festival; we don't say "Tachanun," a daily plea for Divine mercy, on the day itself, nor even in the Afternoon Service of the day preceding the fifteenth, similar to a full-scale festival. Bride and groom also do not fast, as they normally would, if the fifteenth is the day of their marriage.

These shared traditions, however, are just the beginning of the two "Tu" connections. Truthfully, they share a profound cosmological connection with each other. In this chapter some of hidden symmetries between the two will be explored with an emphasis on Tu B'Shvat, the secret of the sacred masculine. (The feminine aspect and the source of the great joy of Tu B'Av experienced by the Jewish people in the past and its significance to women is developed more extensively in my chapter, *The Marriage of Tu B'Av and Tu B'Shvat*.⁶) As we will see below from a *Torah-graphical* perspective the pivotal teaching is that each festival cannot be fully understood without juxtaposing and interfacing one with the other. When viewed from this perspective Tu B'Shvat and Tu B'Av are keys to an authentic Biblical understanding of the paradoxical nature of masculine and feminine energy.

"The female surrounds the male"

⁴ - "A person is like the tree of a field..." (Deut. 20:19), "For as the days of a tree shall be the days of my people." (Isaiah 65:22), "He will be like a tree planted near water..." (Jeremiah 17:8)

⁵ "Torah is a tree of life for all who grasp it." (Proverbs 3:18)

⁶ "There were no holidays so joyous for the Jewish People as the Fifteenth of Av and Yom HaKippurim, for on those days, daughters of Yerushalayim would go out dressed in borrowed white clothing (so that they would all look the same). The King's daughters would borrow from those of the High Priest. Daughters of the High Priest would borrow from the Assistant High Priest's daughters; daughters of the Assistant would borrow from the daughters of the Priest designated to lead the People in times of War, the Kohen Anointed for War's daughters would borrow from the daughters of the Ordinary Priest. And the daughters of the rest of the Jewish People would borrow from each other, so as not to embarrass those who didn't have."⁶ "And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out and dance in the vineyards located on the outskirts of the city. And everyone who didn't have a wife would go there." "And what would they say?" "Young man, lift up your eyes and choose wisely. Don't look only at physical beauty - look rather at the family - 'For charm is false, and beauty is vanity. A G-d - fearing woman is the one to be praised...' (Mishlei/Proverbs 31:30)".

In the Kabbalah there are two modes of divine energy that appear on many levels. They are known as “straight”, “linear” or “erect” light and “round”, “curved” or “returning” light, light being a metaphor for two potencies within the Ain Sof. Linear light (*ohr yashar*) is masculine-like Divinity and curved light (*ohr chozer*) is feminine-like Divinity. (They are also manifestations of the divine forces known as the *hasadim* and *gevurot*).

A verse in Scripture “The female surrounds the male”⁷ reflects this spiritual law of creation. Any reference to surrounding, enclosing, encircling is reflecting feminine-like energy. When Tu B'Av and the historical events that occurred on that day are analyzed a recurring element of feminine energy is revealed at its core. “And the daughters of Jerusalem would go out [on Tu B'Av] and dance in the vineyards located on the outskirts of the city [i.e. “surrounding” the city]. And everyone who didn't have a wife would go there.” The dance that was performed was a *machol*, a circle dance. This is a dance of the surrounding divine feminine energy that encircles the masculine as reflected in the verse “The female surrounds the male”.

That which is encircled in the middle is the male aspect. Similarly, wherever a Scriptural reference is made to standing (as opposed to sitting), arising and linear movement this is reflecting masculine-like energy. An example of masculine spiritual energy is the Sefer Torah -- the physical scroll of the Five Books of Moses. When the Sefer Torah is wrapped up it reflects the straight, upright light of Divinity – the masculine aspect that radiates outward.⁸ This quality is captured in the verse that is chanted when the ark is opened and the masculine light of the Written Torah (as opposed to the feminine light of the Oral Torah) is removed for public readings, “*Arise, O Lord and disperse Your enemies*”. When the Torah is returned another verse is recited “Torah is a tree of life for all that grasp it.”⁹ The association of the “tree of life” with the Sefer Torah is more than a poetic metaphor. The tree, its structure and its growth process is specifically masculine energy.

As Tu B'Av is to the mystery of the curved and circular energy of the feminine, Tu B'Shvat is the rectilinear potency of the masculine. In the dead of the winter on the 15th of Shvat, although there is no fruit apparent, the sap deep within the trees begins to rise throughout their limbs. More than a metaphor for the blood of the tree a deeper teaching is that the sap is the *zerah*, the sacred masculine seed¹⁰ Once this key is supplied the secret of Tu B'Shvat and the Jewish men's movement becomes apparent.

A custom alluded to in the Mishna tells us about the New Year for Trees. The Mishna calls the New Year “*Rosh HaShana L'Ilan*,” -- The New Year for *the* Tree. Why does the Mishna refer to “tree” in the singular rather than in the plural? Why wasn't the New Year called “*Rosh HaShana L'Ilanot*,” The New Year for Trees? The answer is related to a tradition that on Tu B'Shvat, we should pray that for next Sukkot we should be able to acquire a beautiful and kosher Esrog, so we can fulfill the commandment of taking that one of the Four Species to the fullest. This is alluded to by the Mishna's use of the word “tree” in the singular: *The* tree that we need in order to fulfill a commandment begins its new year, and in order to assure that we can obtain the fruit of *that* tree, we should pray for it on this day.¹¹

⁷ Jeremiah

⁸ This is even more apparent in the Sephardic Sefer Torah that is contained in a cylindrical case that opens vertically and sits upright both in the ark and on top of the reader's platform.

⁹ Another connection between male energy and planting is from Yoma 38, “The Holy One, blessed be He, saw that the Tzaddikim [=upright=yesod] are few, therefore He planted them throughout all generations, as it is said: For the pillars of the earth are HaShem's, and He has set the world upon them.

¹⁰ Another allusion to the connection with the masculine is that the month Shvat is spelled the same as Shevet - stick, rod, staff.

¹¹ B'nai Yesaschar, a classic Hasidic work.

In Leviticus 23:40, the Esrog is described as *pri aitz hadar* -- "fruit of the majestic tree." The Esrog is the most spiritual of all trees, as its fruit and bark both have fine taste and smell. The Mishna's reference to the New Year of the Tree can also be seen as an allusion to the equation between the concept of the tree and the tree like qualities of the human structure. The Ten Sefirot are a tree like structure, which are also an adamic/human form with the ten emanations corresponding to the ten limbs of the body. It is this divine tree, the supernal image of man that is emerging on Tu B'Shvat in the mystery of the masculine.¹²

Furthermore, the esrog fruit, *pri aitz hadar*, is specifically associated with masculine energy. Although it is virtually impossible to picture the higher dimensional Tree of Knowledge, it is possible to understand some of the esoteric elements that are contained within it. "What fruit was the Tree of Knowledge?" ask the sages. "It was wheat" from one perspective, "It was grapes" from another and "It was figs" from still another.¹³ From a fourth perspective, however, "It was an esrog".¹⁴ Are the sages in disagreement? No. Rather, the sages are alluding to a common spiritual pattern throughout the Kabbalah, the triune sefirotic structure of chesed, gevura and tefferet. The initial letters of these three substances "wheat", "grape" and "fig" in Hebrew are *chet*, *gimmel* and *tav*— the same three initial letters for *chesed*, *gevurah* and *tiferet* – right, left and middle. The esrog is the fourth pillar in the constellation, the yesod-malchut continuum.

Now, there are two modes of malchut, when it is separate, in and of itself and when it is attached to the body of the other sefirot. When it is viewed as a separate entity it is totally feminine. When it is attached to the body it is called the *ateret hayesod*, the crown or corona of the male yesod and it is now part of the larger masculine structure. This is apparent in the mitzvah of taking the lulav. In order for the entirety of the Four Species to be complete the esrog must be held together with the lulav, the yesod. The esrog has a paradoxical nature: Although it is feminine in form it is part of a larger masculine structure. The Tree par excellence representing Tu B'Shvat is the esrog.

What is in the essence of Tu B'Av that exudes so much feminine energy (based on the chapter detailing Tu B'Av) and what is in the essence of the day of Tu B'Shvat that exudes so much masculine energy?

"Male and Female He created them"

There is a cosmological principle that everything comes in pairs.

The Midrash states¹⁵, "Said the Holy One to Yisrael, 'My children, all that I have created I created in paired units (*zugot*). Heaven and earth are a paired unit. The sun and the moon are a paired unit. Adam and Hava (Eve) are a paired unit. This world and the incoming world (*olam habah*) are a paired unit...". Likewise, the Talmud states¹⁶, "All that the Holy One created in His world He created male and female, even the Leviathan...".

Kabbalah views everything in terms of an Adamic-like structure, i.e., comprised of a constellation of parts arranged in symmetrical form. Thus, everything has a "head", "torso", "feet", left side, right side, front and back. This is the meaning that "Man/Adam is made in the image of God". All spatial objects have this form. Time, that unmovable and mysterious river that runs through reality is no different. It also has a cosmic form and it too comes in pairs.

¹² The magnum opus of Ari zal's Kabbalah is also named Eitz Chayim, Tree of Life.

¹³ Berachot

¹⁴ Midrash Rabba

¹⁵ Midrash Rabba VaEthan - 31

¹⁶ Baba Bathra 74b

The Jewish months are 12 in number but in Torah reality they are viewed as a structure of six pairs that are back to back with each other.

Nissan	Tishrei
Iyar	Cheshvan
Sivan	Kislev
Tammuz	Tevet
Av	Shvat
Elul	Adar

The first of Tishrei is Rosh HaShana (lit. Head of the Year), it is the head of the right side that is aligned with the masculine principle. Nissan, in which occurs Passover, is the head of the left side which is aligned with the feminine principle. There is much to be explored here, but what is interesting to note is that the months of Av and Shvat come as a pair. The full moon (the 15th of the month) of Tu B'Av and Tu B'Shvat, are masculine and feminine twins with each other!

Furthermore, when the *chagim*, the Jewish festivals, are superimposed upon the adamic form of the seven, lower sefirot an amazing symmetry forms before our eyes.

Lower Seven Sefirot of “Festival Man”

Gevurah (Power)
left arm/hand
(2) Rosh HaShanah,
Yom Kippur, Succot

Chesed (Lovingkindness)
right arm/hand
(1) Passover

Tiferet (Harmony)
Torso
(3) Shavuot

Biblical in origin

Rabbinical in origin

Hod (Splendor)
left kidney/gonad/leg
(5) Chanuka

Netzach (Eternity)
right kidney/gonad/leg
(4) Purim

Yesod (Foundation-Channel)
reproductive organs
(6) Tu B'Av /Tu B'Shvat

Malchut (Kingdom)
Mouth of reproductive channel,
Microcosm revealing the sum total of the sefirot from above
(7) To be revealed in the Messianic Era

There is a kabbalistic logic as to why each festival is located and aligned with each particular sefira. Relevant to our investigation, however, is that the twins of Tu B'Av and Tu B'Shvat correspond to the reproductive center of the "Festival Man" keeping in mind that the "festival" structure of time is both male and female as that is the original divine form.

The field of embryology teaches us that up until seven weeks of gestation the embryo is asexual. It has no gender yet; rather its developing sexual organs are potentially both male and female. When the Y-chromosome instructs it to become male the rudimentary organs begin to protrude outward to become the male reproductive system. Conversely, when the X-chromosome instructs it to become female the rudimentary organs begin to invert inward to become the female reproductive system. Consequently the male and female organs are said to be homologous to each other, i.e. they are similar in structure and origin, though not necessarily in function, as the wings of a bird and the hands of a human being.

Using this model, it follows that Tu B'Av and Tu B'Shvat are spiritual homologues to each other in the yearly cycle of time. That they are both located in the reproductive center of the sefira, adamic structure is precisely so. Because of this, Tu B'Av exudes an aura of romance, reproduction and feminine energies both in its origins and even in its rebirth in our generation. As Tu B'Av is to the mystery of the curved and circular energy of the feminine, Tu B'Shvat is the rectilinear potency of the masculine. In the dead of the winter on the 15th of Shvat the sap of the trees begins to rise throughout their limbs. Penetrating into the mystery of time, passion, marriage and birth are taking place.¹⁷

One of the classic talmudic "disputes" is the question as to when the world was created. One perspective maintains it occurred in Tishrei and the other maintains it occurred in Nissan. Both views are correct. Tishrei is when we observe Rosh HaShana, the New Year and the creation of the world. Nissan, however, is also a New Year and it is on the 15th of Nissan that we observe Pesach (the essence of Pesach actually begins on the 1st as per a passage in the Haggadah). Using the diagram above we can begin to understand that, once again, the sages are not arguing but rather one is reflecting the masculine side of the world's creation and the other the feminine side. Both are true and necessary.

Bear in mind that it is actually the masculine and feminine aspects of the world along with Adam and Eve that are being created on the Rosh HaShanah new years of both Tishrei and Nissan. Both Rosh HaShanahs are coinciding with the creation of Adam. The creation of the respective masculine and feminine worlds came into existence 5 days earlier. Looking at the relationship of the 6 months of the right side to the 6 months of the left side it will be observed that the world was actually created on the 25th of Ellul and the 25th of Adar respectively. Tu B'Shvat, the 15th of Sh'vat appears exactly 40 days before the 25th of Adar when the "feminine" side of the world was created. Tu B'Av, the 15th of Av is exactly 40- days before the 25th of Elul when the "masculine" side of the world was created.

Forty is a special value throughout Torah but here it has an additional significance. The Talmud teaches that 40 days before physical conception takes place it is "announced in heaven" the basic characteristics of the soul that is about to come into the world. What the gender of the

¹⁷ Fruit for thought: The Mishna tells us that the school of Shammai maintained that the new year for trees is not on the 15th day of Shevat, but rather on the first day of the month of Shevat. We currently follow the opinion of the school of Hillel, and observe the New Year for trees on the 15th of Shevat. In the messianic era, as known, the world will switch over to Shammai's perspective (which is kabbalistically on a higher level). What then is the Torographical homologue between the first of Av and the first of Shevat?

soul will be is also determined 40 days before.¹⁸ Thus, 40 days before the female side of the world comes into existence (the process is always recurring as it states “He renews the creation everyday”) the erect, expanding energy of the masculine tree is releasing its sap and the seed essence of the tree begins rising. 40 days before the male side of the world comes into existence the containing, curved energy of the feminine dance is generating its circle. Tu B’Shvat and Tu B’Av are the vortex of the cosmic yesod of the world. 40 days before the birth of the world the divine hormones are released into the phenomenon of time to orchestrate the sacred Hebrew calendar.¹⁹

The union of Tu B’Shvat and Tu B’Av in the future (i.e. on a higher dimension) is revealed in a formula of the sages: “In the future the Holy One will make a circle dance for the righteous tzaddikim and each one will point with his finger [to the middle] and declare, This is our God... !” The *tzaddik* here is the yesod of mankind as is known from the formula “The tzaddik is the yesod/channel of the world” (Psalms). The feminine energy of the circle dance is obvious. The pointed finger, however, is a code for masculine energy. Both are now united forever in the cosmic dance of eternity. “And the one who understands will understand”.

¹⁸ “Rav Yehudah has said in the name of Rav: Forty days before the creation of a child, a Bat Kol issues forth and announces...” Sotah 2a

¹⁹ There is an obvious question that requires more exploration: Why are masculine hormones stimulating the birth of the feminine and vice versa? One answer is the kabbalistic principle that going to the extreme of anything will produce its opposite.