



Shalom friends,

I wanted to share with you some thoughts that came out of a study session we did in Jerusalem last week with Nesiya Alumni from summers 2014, 2011, and 2010, on the theme of Tu B'shvat.

Of the many things we explored together, one was the source of the holiday of Tu B'shvat. The first mishnah in the tractate of Rosh Hashanah states that there are four different "Rosh Hashanahs" and goes on to list different dates that are recognized as the starting dates for different technical things such as: counting the calendar year, the holiday cycle, a king's reign, tithing of vegetables, tithing of animals, and lastly, for trees. The simplest understanding is that this date of Tu B'shvat is the legal cut-off for the tithes that one separates from fruit. It's a kind of "April 15"/tax-day for tree fruit. The idea is based in the prohibition from 'paying' those taxes with fruit from the wrong year, so we need a cutoff, and the middle of winter made sense 1800 years ago because there would be no confusion as to which year a particular fruit is from, since in those days (before citrus came to Israel!), the trees were devoid of fruit at this time in the middle of winter.

There is an idea that goes beyond the technical taxation significance of Tu B'shvat and takes it to a deeper and more spiritual place. Certainly for those that live in Northern Climates when Tu B'shvat is always in the snowiest part of the year, but even in Israel, this date sees the trees looking lifeless and empty--yet we celebrate their birthday! Our Tradition teaches us that the significance of this date is that most of the winter rains have already fallen, and deep down inside the core of the tree, the sap is beginning to flow--rising up and starting to move. When everything outside looks bleak and barren, the Jewish calendar is instructing us to look past the surface, and to see what potential is bubbling up deep down inside. Tu B'shvat calls us to look deeper and see the potential.

Let's go a step deeper. The Mishna that we mentioned above that lists Tu B'shvat as the new year for the trees actually teaches that there is a disagreement about the date of Tu B'shvat. One major school of scholars, Beit Hillel, say that it should be on the 15th day of the month, but the rival school of Beit Shammai says that it should be on the 1st day of the month! We have to ask ourselves, what are they arguing about?! Do they disagree about which day is actually the date that most of the rains having fallen already? That couldn't possibly be. And why would it be so significant to disagree over two weeks? This is very strange.

When we look into what these two dates might signify, we can begin to suggest a way of thinking about this. Since Tu B'shvat draws our awareness and consciousness to the rhythms of the natural world, let's look at the difference in nature between these two dates. The first of the month is when there is a tiny sliver of a new moon, and the 15th is when there is a full moon. And that just may be the difference. Beit Shammai, who always tends to be much more incisive and rigid in his ruling, intends that from the first sliver of the moon, from the first sign of growth, that is already enough to signify the beginning of something new. Beit Hillel however, usually a little more soft and inclusive, waits for the moon to be full, seeing that there is already a significant start before declaring that something new has indeed begun.



Today is right in between these two different dates. When I look at where we are with Nesiya, I deeply connect with both ideas. Sometimes I feel that we have just begun to renew the organization and tap into our deep potential and that our most recent achievements (including last summer's program and this year's fundraising campaign) are the tiny sliver of the new moon - placing us in Beit Shammai's camp. In addition, however, as Nesiya grows into its 30th year, I look at how amazing and full last summer's renewal was and I recognize how our 22 young people participated on Nesiya's successful summer program and the hundreds of friends and supporters that embraced our renewal process and I acknowledge that we have already come so far - putting us strongly in Beit Hillel's camp.

Either way, the successes thus far in the renewal of Nesiya are formidable - and the potential is astounding! Join us as we look with Tu b'shvat eyes at what can continue to be with Nesiya - even, if on the surface, it appears that we are just beginning!