



## The Gestation of a Tree

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### **Tu Bishvat 5783**

In the Mishnah, Beit Hillel is the first to mark the fifteenth of Shevat, calling the date the “new year for the tree.”<sup>1</sup> In English today, many American Jews refer to this date as “the birthday of the trees.” This linguistic transition from “new year” to “birthday” is partly drawing on the traditional language of Rosh Hashanah in Tishrei as “*yom harat olam*,” which can translate as “the birthday of the world.” But describing Tu Bishvat as a birthday can also help us understand the original intent of the holiday: tracking the growth of the trees.

How might we understand the slow growth of a tree—from seed to plant to flower to fruit—as a birth? It is especially confusing to think of this date as a “tree birthday” because, although Jewish law does require us to track the years from first planting until year four, we actually count them from Rosh Hashanah in Tishrei.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps there is another way of understanding a birthday, not as the day on which one was born, but as a day on which one gives birth. Perhaps this holiday is not the birthday of the tree, but of the fruit.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosh Hashanah 1:1: “בְּאֶחָד בְּשָׁבָט — רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה לְאֵילָן כְּדִבְרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי. בֵּית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים: בְּחֶמֶשֶׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ.” / On the first of Shevat is the New Year for the tree; in accordance with the statement of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel say: on the fifteenth of.”

<sup>2</sup> Earlier in Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1: “בְּאֶחָד בְּתִשְׁרֵי רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה ... לְנִטְיעָה.” / On the first of Tishrei is the New Year... for planting...”



Tu Bishvat is a winter holiday, celebrated when there are no fruits to be seen. We might have expected to notice and celebrate trees in the springtime. In fact, in the month of Nissan, the spring month of Pesah, we do have a once-a-year blessing we get to recite upon seeing the first flowering tree of the season.<sup>3</sup> Why not celebrate a tree-new-year then? Why not throw our tree-parties when the trees are in full bloom?

The answer lies in the purpose of this new year. Tu Bishvat helps us know when to tithe and eat from our fruit trees. The holiday functions as a transitional date: everything that grew before now is from last year, everything from here on will be next year's produce. This kind of date has to come in winter, when everything is most fallow and quiet. Marking the new year now makes it easy to distinguish between crops from one season to another. Were we to mark this date during harvest time we would find ourselves asking: Was this apple here yesterday? Does that tiny green bulb yet count as a new fruit? It would be nearly impossible to know which fruits belonged to each year, because growth is a slow, unfolding process.

The Talmud in Masekhet Bekhorot (a tractate that discusses laws surrounding firstborn animals and people), offers a long *baraita* that plays with the image of gestation, noticing that this period of time is different for different kinds of animals. To help us understand the process for animals, the text calls on our understanding of trees. In this passage, each animal has a counterpart in a specific type of tree. What each pair of trees and animals has in common is gestational length. For each animal, this is the time before the baby animal is born. For the corresponding tree, this measure marks the time between budding of the flowers and ripening of the fruit.

Even for our Rabbis, whose understanding of biology doesn't line up with what we know today about plants and animals, the real purpose of this passage is to offer us an extended

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<sup>3</sup> See Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 266:1.



metaphor about change and growth. The rabbis show their love for the diversity of our world by taking the time to notice *all* the different species of animals and trees. The careful noticing of the details in subtle differences between species reflects an affection, an attention to the world around them, and offers import to the moment when trees bear fruits:

### Talmud Bavli Bekhorot 8a

### תלמוד בבלי בכורות ח.

The Sages taught:

ת"ר

A chicken after twenty-one days,

תרנגולת לעשרים ואחד יום

and corresponding to it among trees is the almond.

וכנגדה באילן לוז

A dog after fifty days,

כלב לחמשים יום

and corresponding to it among trees is the fig.

וכנגדו באילן תאינה

A cat after fifty-two days,

חתול לחמשים ושנים יום

and corresponding to it among trees is the mulberry.

וכנגדו באילן תות

A pig after sixty days,

חזיר לששים יום

corresponding to it among trees is the apple.

כנגדו באילן תפוח

A fox and all types of creeping animals—six months,

שועל וכל מיני שרצים ששה חדשים

and corresponding to them among trees is grain.

וכנגדם באילן תבואה

Small kosher livestock give birth after five months,

בהמה דקה טהורה לחמשה חדשים

and corresponding to them among trees is the grapevine.

וכנגדן באילן גפן

Large non-kosher livestock after twelve months,

בהמה גסה טמאה לשנים עשר

and corresponding to them among trees is the date palm.

חודש

[Large] kosher after nine months,

וכנגדו באילן דקל

and corresponding to them among trees is the olive.

טהורה לתשעה חדשים

The wolf, lion, bear, leopard, and the hyena, elephant, monkey,

וכנגדה באילן זית

and the long-tailed ape after three years,

הזאב והארי והדוב והנמר והברדלס

and corresponding to them among trees is the white fig.

והפיל והקוף והקיפוף לשלש שנים

A viper after seventy years,

וכנגדן באילן בנות שוח

and corresponding to it among trees is the carob. For this	אפעה לשבעים שנה
carob, from the time of its planting until the time of the	וכנגדו באילן חרוב
ripening of its fruit is seventy years, and the length of its	חרוב זה משעת נטיעתו עד
gestation is three years.	שעת גמר פירותיו שבעים שנה וימי
A snake after seven years,	עיבורו שלש שנים
and for that wicked [animal] we have not found a	נחש לשבע שנים
counterpart.	ולאותו רשע לא מצינו חבר
But some say: <i>mukhsasim</i> figs.	ויש אומרים מוכססים

This text celebrates the biodiversity of animals and trees, appreciating the nuance and distinct beauty of each. The mention of each animal and tree brings with it images of when they show up in our lives and in our texts. The chicken is first to lay eggs and is analogized to the almond tree, famously the first to flower in Israel (and star of a popular Hebrew Tu Bishvat song). The low-to-the-ground golden fox reminds us of grain. The large kosher animals parallel the peaceful and empowering (through oil) olive. Through beautiful and creative associations of the symbols of our real and ritual world, this *baraita* explicitly ties trees to actual birth, creating a parallel between the gestation periods of all kinds of living creatures to the process of trees bearing fruit.

Through this lens, Tu Bishvat truly can be a holiday that marks not the age of the tree (as the name “birthday of the trees” might suggest), but the seemingly dormant pause in the tree’s life before the fruit appears—a celebration of the gestation that allows us to mark the change we will see in the imminent “birth” of fruit.

Other festivals can play this role, too. Each holiday offers us an opportunity to reflect on our lives and the world, calling our attention to what is different year to year. Like looking for new fruits, we can use holidays to notice significant changes we might otherwise miss. Last winter



looked very different for the world in many ways. As each holiday approaches, we remember last year at this time and several years ago, and the comparisons help us notice our growth. We remember the Exodus from Egypt in our daily prayers, but still stop once a year on Pesach to mark redemption. We mourn the loss of the Temple through daily routines, but fast and sit on the floor on Tisha B'Av. We appreciate the gift of fruits all year through blessings recited over food, and yet Tu B'shvat turns our attention to fruits on a particular day.

Our sages' beautifully woven metaphors illustrate the relationships between animals and fruit, but the power of gestation, birth, and slow growth also applies to people. We, too, mark our changes and growth on an abstract moment in the calendar. Birthdays are single dates that we mark to help us track the progression of our lives. When small children wake on their birthday and declare, "Today I am five," we smile, knowing there was no magic transformation from the previous day. We don't age any differently on our birthday from every other day of the year. And yet, the date is significant because of the way we use it.

Growth is gradual, so slow in fact that it cannot be tracked in real time. We need an annual date as a marker of a specific moment, before and after seasons of change. Like all birthdays, Tu B'shvat invites us to celebrate, to notice the beauty in slow growth, and to appreciate the potential of what is yet to be born.

