

Parashat Yitro

There is a curious calendrical coincidence built into the cycle of the Jewish year. We chant one of the best-known Bible passages, the Ten Commandments, near the date of one of the least-known Jewish holidays, *Tu B'Shvat*. Since supposedly there are no accidents in the timing of Jewish traditions, this coincidence has me wondering if there might be any connections between these two annual events.

Those of you who have heard me speak about our Jewish liturgy might remember that I always discuss the cycle of "Creation - Revelation - Redemption" contained in several aspects of our prayers. That same cycle can be applied to certain aspects of our year-cycle of Jewish holidays, and it is one of the lenses through which we can examine our Bible in general and our *Torah* in particular.

So, this is a logical starting-point from which to look for possible connections between the Ten Commandments, chanted in today's *Torah* Portion, and the Winter holiday of *Tu B'Shvat*, the New Year of the Trees, which occurred this past week.

It turns out that one aspect of connection might be the concept of Creation. To see this, let us examine what *Tu B'Shvat* really is, and then let us look at the Ten Commandments in a different way than we might otherwise conceive of them.

The name "*Tu B'Shvat*" is simply a date - the 15th day of the month called "*Sh'vat*". It happens to be a full moon, and in most years it is one month before *Purim* and two months before *Passover*, both of which also occur on full moons. In Israel, the rainy Winter season is nearing its end, and the almond trees are beginning to blossom.

We think of *Tu B'Shvat* as the "Ecology holiday", a sort of "Jewish Earth Day", which makes sense as a teaching tool for Hebrew School students. However, it is really an economic and taxation turning-point in the ancient Israelite agricultural yearly cycle. The equivalent concept in modern life is the idea of a "fiscal year" for taxation, which may have little relationship to the usual calendar cycle that is familiar to most people.

According to the *Talmud*, here were in fact two fiscal years for ancient Israelite farmers. *Tu B'Shvat* marked the taxation cycle for trees, and the first of *Elul* at the end of the summer marked the taxation cycle for animal herds. Once the Jewish People was no longer living primarily in the Land of Israel and paying tithes to maintain the ancient Temple, these tax cycles became a historical memory.

However, *Tu B'Shvat* was reborn in the Middle Ages as a mystical celebration of Nature, and now it has the dual role of being a holiday celebrating Environmentalism and also the occasion on which we emphasize planting trees in the modern State of Israel. Thus, *Tu B'Shvat* effectively becomes an annual occasion to celebrate Creation in Nature.

Now let us take a different look at the "*Aseret HaDib'rot*", the "Ten Utterances" that we commonly call the "Ten Commandments", which we will chant today in the *Torah*. For most of us, the "*Matan Torah*" or "Giving of the *Torah*" at Mt. Sinai is obviously the main act of "Revelation", the "Theophany" when God appears to Moses and the Israelites. It is also connected with "Redemption", because the Sinai experience happened seven weeks after the Redemption from Egypt.

However, we can also look at the Giving of the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai as the moment when the Israelite slaves were transformed into the "Jewish People" through this encounter with God, and thus we can say that there is an aspect of "Creation" here. Our tradition tells us that the soul of every Jew who will ever live was also standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and this shared formative experience is referred to constantly in our prayers.

By looking at today's *Torah* Portion as a shared experience remembering the Creation of the Jewish People as a distinct religious and cultural entity, we can also account for the coincidence that this occurs within a week of *Tu B'Shvat*, a holiday which celebrates the Creation of the Earth and the plant-life that sustains it.

This way of connecting these two calendrical moments has another important lesson for our lives as Jews. A central theme for how *Tu B'Shvat* is celebrated nowadays is the Biblical value of "stewardship", caring for the Environment as God's Creation and God's gift to humans. If we conceive of God's gift of the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai as the Creation of the Jewish People, we can also perceive the necessity for "stewardship" of that gift, in the form of following these values and rituals and teaching them to future generations.

Shabbat Shalom

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