

On Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the Trees, it is a time-honored custom for Jews the world-over to eat the fruits of Eretz Yisroel. What is the significance of this tradition and what are its metaphysical roots?

FRUIT FOR THE SOUL

THE BODY AS A TOOL OF THE SOUL

Food makes the man." "What you eat today, walks and talks tomorrow." These are the popular slogans of nutritionists who believe that diet exerts a decisive influence over a person's physical well-being. One need not be a health-food faddist to accept that food additives can take their toll on the consumer's health, and that many a hyperactive youngster is simply responding to the high level of blood sugar in his veins, or the chocolate snack he had at recess. As we know, wine can turn man into a beast. And the right foods can make a person healthier, more alert, and more resistant to illness and disease.

Thus, it should not surprise us that the Torah teaches that foods affect people not only physically but emotionally and spiritually as well. *Ramban* in his commentary to *Vayikra* (11:13 and 17:11) takes note of the influence of

Rabbi Feuer is Rav of Congregation Ohr Chaim in Miami Beach, producer of the Mishna Yomit Torah Tapes, and author of the *ArtScroll Tehillim* translation and commentary.

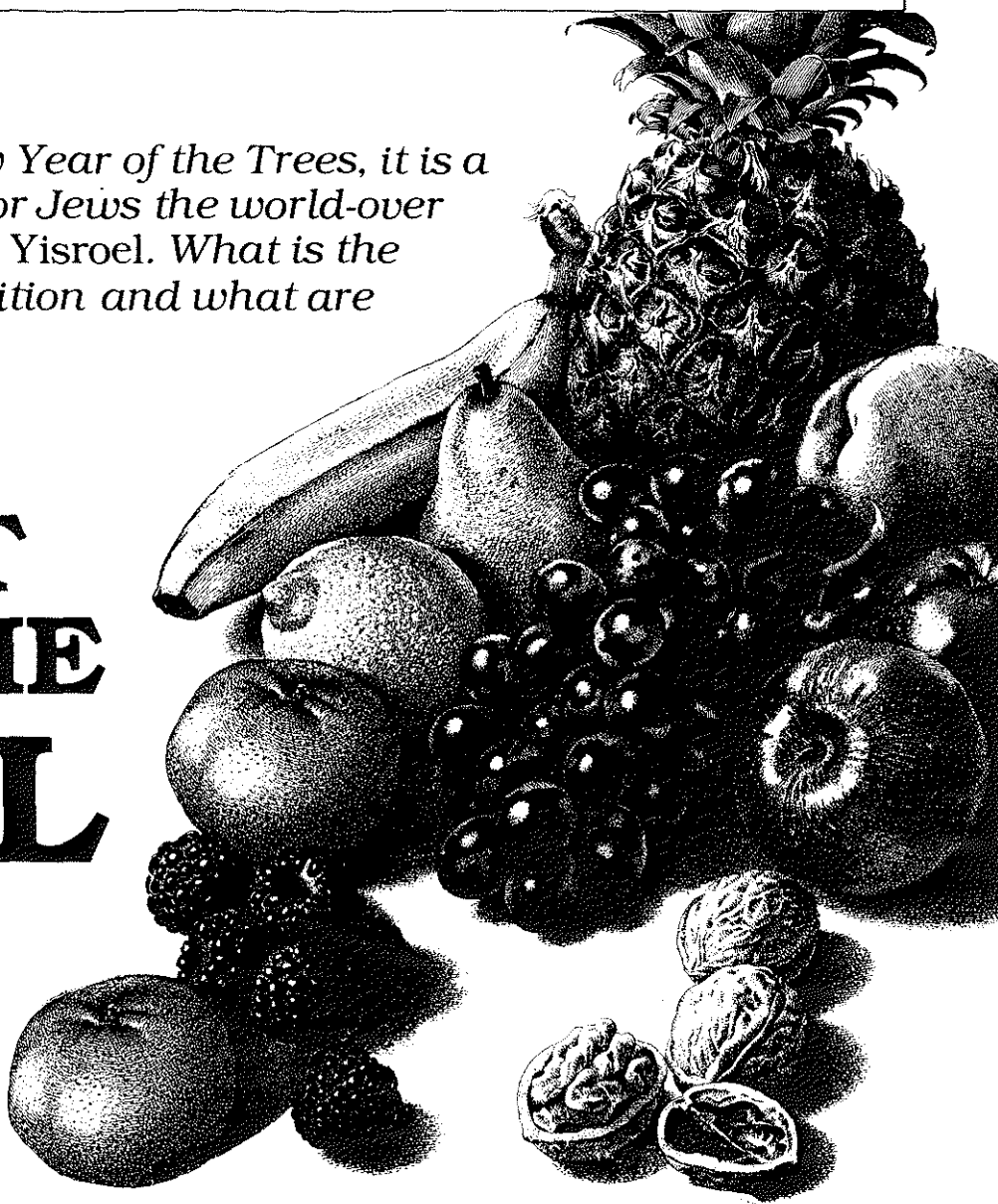
matter on mind. He observes that the Torah prohibits the consumption of beasts of prey because their flesh exerts a corruptive influence over the human personality and arouses cruel passions in the human breast.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch develops this idea further in *Horeb* (Chapter 68). He explains that the body is designed to serve as the instrument of the soul, to implement its goals of holiness and morality. When a Jew does consume them, they render him insensitive to noble and lofty aspirations.

In his essay, S.R. Hirsch classifies foods according to their source, which in turn determines how they affect the person who eats them. It is the Jew's

goal to eliminate — or at least minimize — the animalistic influences inherent in consuming meat. This depends on the type of meat he is eating. For example, blood — which "bears in itself the animal's whole physical being, representing the body in flow" — is to be avoided in almost any form. By contrast, that fat of cattle known as *cheilev* is "nourished by inactivity," and dulls the sensitivity of the soul, making it unsuitable for food....*Cheilev* of wild beasts, however, does not possess this dulling influence and is permitted.

This theme of the interfacing of the dietetics of the body with the dietetics of the soul is developed further by Dr. I. Grunfeld in his classic work, *The Jew-*



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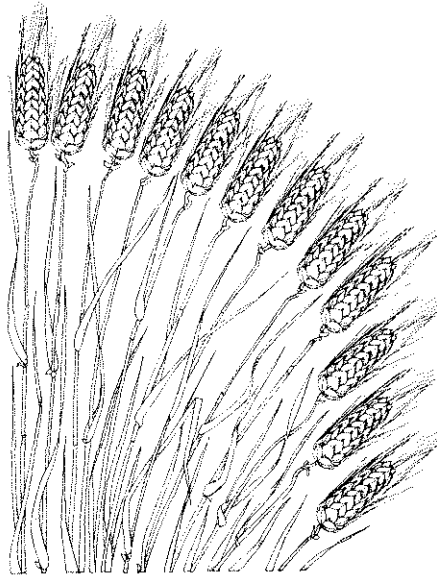
ish Dietary Laws. He cites the words of the thirteenth-century Kabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Recanati (*Taamei Hamitzvos*) who explains: The body is the intermediary between the inner soul and the outside world. It matters greatly whether this intermediary is a willing and pliable servant or not. Just as the craftsman must have the finest tools in order to produce precision work, so must the human soul be housed in a pure body to succeed in its task. Forbidden foods contaminate the soul so that holiness will not flow within the body.

NOT BY BREAD ALONE

The foods that the Torah permits can actually heighten man's capacity for awareness of G-d's presence and enhance his ability to serve his Creator. The *Arizal* explained that every physical object or being owes its existence to a holy spark buried within it. When a man eats, his body extracts the vitamins and minerals in the food, but it is not these that keep him alive, for if a person's soul were to leave him he would be no more animate than rocks and sand. The human soul extracts the spark of holiness within the food and it is these that maintain life by nourishing his soul. "Hashem fed you Manna...that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by that which emanates from the mouth of Hashem" (*Devarim* 8:3) The Divine sparks that stem from the spoken word of the Creator are part of all creation, and thus are found within every slice of bread and morsel of meat that man eats; and it is these sparks that keep man alive.

On Tu B'Shvat we rejoice over the fruits of *Eretz Yisroel*, which are filled with these Divine sparks.

After eating any of the seven species for which *Eretz Yisroel* is praised — foods made from the five types of grain, wine, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives or dates — we recite a special blessing in which we thank G-d: "...for the produce of the field, and for the desirable, good and spacious land that



You were pleased to give to our forefathers, to eat of its fruit and to be satisfied with its goodness."

The *Tur* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 208) cites the opinion of his father, Rabbeinu Asher (the *Rosh*), who deleted this last line because he felt it improper to say that G-d gave Israel the Holy Land so that they should "eat of its fruits." Did Israel yearn for the Holy Land merely to eat delicacies and fruits? *Mitzvos — Divine service — that is why the Holy Land is destined for Israel!*

The *Bach* (*Bayis Chodosh*, commentary on the *Tur* by Rabbi Yoel Sirkis) upholds the original version of the blessing and his opinion is accepted as *halacha*. *Bach* explains: G-d has a reservoir filled with holiness called *Eretz Yisroel shel Ma'aloh* — the celestial *Eretz Yisroel*. It is the Divine Will that this holiness flow earthward for man to absorb. Nowhere is this sanctity more concentrated than in the fruits and grains of Israel, which are so brimming with holy sparks, that tasting them with proper concentration can stir the soul with fresh yearning for the Master of the Universe. And after eating them, one thanks *Hashem* for having bestowed us with the Holy Land, "...to eat of its fruit and to be satisfied with its goodness."

THE GARDEN OF PRINCES

Even within the Holy Land not all locations are alike; there is one district in particular where the fruits' potential for *kedusha* is unsurpassed: Teverya (Tiberias).

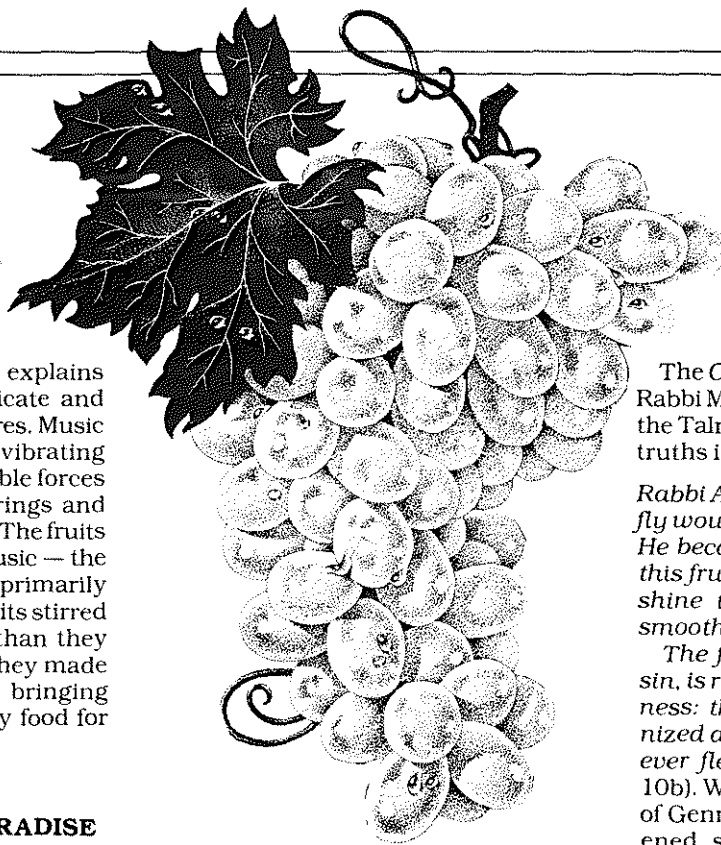
Just as the baby in its mother's womb absorbs its nourishment through its navel, so does every corner of *Eretz Yisroel* absorb *kedusha* from the province of the Tribe of Naftali. On the western shore of Lake Kinneret stretches the lush Valley of Gennosar, with the city of Teverya as its capital. The Talmud (*Megilla* 6a) attributes the name Tiberias to the Hebrew word *tabur* — navel, "for Tiberias is the navel of *Eretz Yisroel*". Moreover, the valley derives its name Gennosar from a contraction of two Hebrew words, *gan sarim* — garden of princes (*Midrash Bereishis Rabba* 88:21).

The Tribe of Naftali, which possesses this valley, was blessed by Moshe: "Naftali is satiated with pleasure and filled with the blessing of Hashem" (*Devarim* 33, 2-3). To this, *Sifri* comments, "Satisfied...and filled with blessing, because of the fruits of Gennosar."

And why was the lake that watered this province called "Kinneret"? Because its fruit are as sweet as the music of the *kinnor* — the harp (*Megilla* 6a).

* The Talmud (*Pesachim* 8b) states: Why don't the rich fruits of Gennosar grow in Jerusalem? So that the Jews who come to Jerusalem for the three festivals should not be able to say, "If we came up only that we might eat these wonderful fruits it would have been worth all of our effort and expense." In other words, these fruits might distract the pilgrims from the main purpose of coming to Jerusalem, which is the Divine service in the Holy Temple.

Tosafos Rabbeinu Peretz (ibid.) quotes Rabbi Shmuel who asks: Why suggest that the Gennosar fruits grow in Jerusalem? Perhaps the soil conditions in Jerusalem are simply unfit to grow such fine produce. He answers: In truth, Jerusalem is the center of the entire globe, for G-d created Jerusalem first and the rest of the earth emanated and spread out from there. By rights, Jerusalem should be the "navel" and the source of blessing and sanctity for Israel's fruits. Since the fruits might distract people from the Temple service, the "fruit center" was transferred to Gennosar, which is now the "Jerusalem of the world of fruits."



Ramban (Shaar Hagemul) explains that music is the most delicate and spiritual of all sensual pleasures. Music is intangible, no more than vibrating airwaves — pulsating, invisible forces which pluck at the heartstrings and arouse the deepest emotions. The fruits of Gennosar were truly like music — the pleasure they afforded was primarily abstract, spiritual. These fruits stirred the heart's yearning more than they stilled the body's craving. They made the heart feel light, never bringing heaviness to the body...truly food for the soul.

A PILGRIMAGE TO PARADISE

Who were the noblemen that visited Gennosar, "the garden of princes," to savor its fruits? — The Torah sages, the aristocracy of Jewish society. The Talmud (*Berachos* 44a) vividly describes how the greatest of Israel's sages would journey to Gennosar to partake of her fruits. (It is quite possible that this took place on Tu B'Shvat.)* However, the Talmudic description of these visits is so extraordinary that it requires deeper study in order to appreciate its true lesson. (The text of the *Gemora* appears in italics followed by an interpretation.)

Rabba bar bar Chana testified: We [yeshiva students] would accompany

* Josephus (*Wars of the Jews*, Book III, Chap. X, 8) reports on the unique climate of Gennosar that wondrously blends the best features of all the seasons at one and the same time. Some fruits need crisp air, others need warmth — yet the climate of Gennosar is fine for both throughout the year. Fruit grows there all the time and they are seldom out of season.

This testimony reflects the blessing of Yaakov who said: Naftali is like a deer run loose, he emits good expressions (*Bereishis* 49:21). How does Naftali resemble the deer? He possesses the Valley of Gennosar where the fruits are quickest to ripen.

Another interpretation: The fruit of Gennosar ripened early: it was luscious and swiftly digested, as is the meat of the deer (see Rashi, *ibid.*, and Rashi to *Sotah* 12a).

It is thus possible that the fruits of Gennosar were ripe on Tu B'Shvat, even though elsewhere the trees were yet bare.

Rabbi Yochanan when he journeyed to Gennosar to eat its fruits. Sometimes we were a group of one hundred, sometimes only a group of ten.... We would eat huge baskets full of fruit, yet no matter how much we ate we would vow, "We ate nothing that made us full."

Did Rabbi Yochanan — author of the Talmud *Yerushalmi* and renowned Rosh Yeshiva — leave the *Beis Midrash* with his students simply to go on an outing — to consume luscious fruit? Obviously not.

Rabbi Yochanan was leading his disciples on a pilgrimage to the source of the Holy Land's blessings. In this spiritual encounter the Rabbi always made certain that he had at least a *minyan* — a quorum of ten men as is required for all sacred rituals. The Rabbi showed his followers how to detect the sparks of holiness embedded in these fruits, and how to extract them.

For those who truly comprehended the sacred character of these fruits, they bore a resemblance to the manna which Israel ate in the wilderness; the food which nourished only the soul while it added neither weight nor waste to the body.

Thus, after consuming large quantities of these fruits, the students could still exclaim: "We ate nothing that filled [our stomachs]... We only came here to satisfy our souls."

The *Gemora* continues (and note, as Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto explains, the Talmud is wont to express spiritual truths in physical terms):

Rabbi Avuhu ate of these fruits until a fly would slip off his forehead. Rashi: He became exhilarated when he ate this fruit. His face took on so bright a shine that a fly would slip off his smooth forehead.

The fly, a symbol of impurity and sin, is repelled by men of intense holiness: the Prophet Elisha was recognized as a holy man, "because no fly ever flew over his table" (*Berachos* 10b). When Rabbi Avuhu ate the fruits of Gennosar he experienced a heightened spirituality which brought a sheen to his "forehead." His wisdom and holiness were so intense that they repelled the dark forces, symbolized by the fly.

And yet another incident recorded in the Talmud:

Rav Ami and Rav Assi ate until their hair fell out.

Perhaps this can be understood in the light of the commentary of *Maharsha* to *Babba Basra* 16a, where he makes a fascinating observation: man is the only creature that has hair on his head that is constantly growing. Moreover, only the hair of the head grows steadily, not the hair on the rest of man's body. *Maharsha* explains that hair represents *chomer* — the unrefined, earthy nature in man. The head, however, represents man's self, the antithesis of coarse *chomer*. The lofty soul repels the *chomer* and this is symbolized by the hair on the head constantly being rejected, so to speak, by the head. Thus expelled, new hair continues to grow.

When the rabbis ate the fruits of Gennosar their souls responded with such intensity that they simply cast off all of their hair along with their mundane, earthy tendencies.

The fruits of *Eretz Yisroel*, then, are a storehouse of spiritual energy that can be harnessed for inner growth, and Tu B'Shvat is the day designated for celebrating this sacred gift.

The fruits of Eretz Yisroel are so brimming with the sparks of holiness embedded in them by the Creator, that tasting them with proper concentration can stir the soul with fresh yearning for the Master of the Universe.

SPARKS IN THE SYRUP

One wonders why the fifteenth day of Shevat is the New Year for trees. Our Rabbis explain that on this day the *saraf* — sap — begins to rise inside the trees, the first step in the long process of producing a ripened fruit.* Outside, freezing winds howl, for the fifteenth of Shevat is called "the cold of winter" (*Babba Metzia* 106b); yet inside the tree, the first warm fluids of springtime begin their upward flow.

There is also a spiritual dimension in this sap, for the word *saraf* literally means "fire" or "burning energy," alluding to the sacred sparks contained in abundance in the fruits of the Holy Land. These sparks can ignite the responsive soul with a burning desire to rise ever higher and closer to G-d. *Tu B'Shvat* is the day when G-d begins to deposit the first sacred sparks into the trees from where the fruits of the coming year will emerge.

The revered Chassidic master, Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, writes in his classic work, *Bnei Yissos'chor*: We have a tradition from our teachers to offer special prayers on *Tu B'Shvat* that G-d provide us with a perfect, beautiful esrog. On this day the *saraf* begins its rise, and the outcome depends [not on agricultural or botanical conditions, but] on a Jew's spiritual merits. Pray fervently on this day...and your prayers will literally bear fruit.

BLESSINGS BY THE BUCKETFUL

One would expect a "New Year" to occur on the first day of a month rather than at its middle. In this case, however, the date — the fifteenth — is appropriate, for the number fifteen alludes to the fifteen levels of sanctity and wisdom a man

* See Rashi to Rosh Hashana 14a.



must scale to reach the pinnacle of holiness. In the monthly lunar renewal, which symbolizes man's perpetual quest for spiritual rejuvenation and growth, the moon is at its fullest on the fifteenth day of its cycle. (See *Artscroll Tehillim*, Vol. V, pg. 1499-1501 at length.)

King David composed fifteen *Shir HaMa'alos*, Songs of Ascent (*Tehillim* 120-134) which correspond to the fifteen steps that rose up to the inner courtyard of the *Beis HaMikdash*. The *Kohanim* (priests) sang the Songs of Ascent on Succos during the *Simchas Bets HaShoeiva* celebration, when they drew a bucket of water that they carried up the fifteen steps to use as a libation. The drawing of the water symbolized Israel's yearning to be drawn up and lifted closer to G-d's embrace. And

our Rabbis observed: From that celebration they did indeed draw up [buckets of] *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit).

Appropriately, the *mazal* — the unique celestial sign — that influences the month of Shevat is the bucket (*Mazal Dli*), for in the month of Shevat the *saraf* and its holy sparks rise up within the fruit tree just as buckets of water are drawn up from a well.

THE REFRESHING PAUSE

We live in the "fast-food generation," where the serving and consumption of meals correspond to the maddening pace of our lives. We are constantly urged to go faster, always on the run: "Grab a bite!" "Chopp a nosh!" "Speed it up!" "Make it in a flash!"

The whirlwind of activity leaves us breathless and senseless...hollow, burnt out before our time. Life in the fast lane means an abundance of pressure and little time for reflection.

Chazal advise us to slow down — especially before we eat. In Talmudic times people did not merely sit for meals, they actually reclined and lounged on sofas. They loosened their belts (*Shabbos* 9b) and slipped off their shoes.

Food is life. Food is fuel. Food is fire — calories for the cells, holy sparks for the soul. We must teach ourselves how to savor food's spirituality, to extract its holy energy by contemplating the Divine Source of all food, and by leading our lives in a manner that does credit to the sacred sparks that we absorb into our bodies from the foods we eat. The fruits of *Eretz Yisroel* are special, of course, because they are replete with sacred power. But all food contains some measure of spiritual energy.

On *Tu B'Shvat* we pause to celebrate the sanctity of food. If we use this pause well, it has the power to refresh our souls the whole year round. ■