YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Beshalach – Tu Bishevat**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

**The Olive Tree, Tu Be-Shevat, the People of Israel, and Torah Study**

Translated by David Strauss

The *Midrash Rabba* states at the beginning of *Parashat Tetzave:*

“And you shall command” (*Shemot* 27:30). This is what is written: “The Lord called your name a leafy olive-tree, fair with goodly fruit” (*Yirmeyahu* 11:16). Were Israel called only by the name olive? But surely Israel were called by the names of all the good and praiseworthy trees… Rather, just as the olive is marked out for shriveling while it is yet on its tree, after which it is brought down from the tree and beaten, and after it has been beaten is brought up to the vat and placed in a grinding-mill, where it is ground and then tied up with ropes, and then stones are brought, and then at last it yields its oil, so it is with Israel: The heathens come and beat them about from place to place, imprison them and bind them in chains, and surround them with officers, and then at last do Israel repent and the Holy One, blessed be He, answers them.

The *midrash* likens the people of Israel to trees. Of all the trees, Yirmeyahu chose to emphasize Israel's resemblance to the olive tree. But the freshness of the olive is only imaginary. How much torment must the olive undergo before it yields its oil! What a long process it must go through until it produces its first drops! The finer the oil, the longer and the more difficult the process the olive must undergo. The development of the people of Israel is similar to that of the olive – long processes and small steps.

This feature is found at the moment of the birth of the patriarch Yaakov, after whom the entire nation is called. Esav, the moment he is born, is "all over like a hairy mantle," fully developed. Yaakov's name, which is in the future tense, attests to the fact that the role that he will play is in the future and that a long process awaits him. Even when he struggles with the angel and overcomes him, the name he receives then, Yisrael, designates for him further struggles.

Every tree undergoes a long process. Even after it produces fruit, there is *orla, reva'i*, *teruma* and *ma'aser.* A long time passes until a person eats of his fruit. The *gemara* in *Ta'anit* (23a) relates that Choni Ha- Me'agel saw an old man planting a carob tree so that his grandchildren would derive benefit from it when its fruit would be ready in another seventy (!) years. R. Kook explains: "The desire to plant trees stems from the desire to benefit future generations, which stands out in its intensity in the carob tree" (*Megged Yerachim* for the month of Shevat). Nevertheless, when Choni Ha-Me'agel wakes up seventy years later, the grandchildren of that old man eat of the fruit of that carob tree, which have grown in the meantime. This is not the case with the olive tree. Without toil and effort on the part of man, there will be no pure and refined olive oil. Only with man's actions – and after a process that is not only long, but also difficult and tiring – will the olive yield its oil.

This is the way of the people of Israel. The people of Israel experience 480 years until the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is built, during which time they have the ten plagues, the parting of the Sea of Suf, the exodus from Egypt, the complaints, the giving of the Torah, the sin of the golden calf, the building of the *Mishkan*, the journeys, additional complaints and other sins, entry into the land, wars, land, judges, Shaul, David and Shelomo (I *Melakhim* 6:1). But then: "For as the days of a tree shall be the days of My people" (*Yeshayahu* 65:22). When a tree reaches maturity, it can live for hundreds of years. The same is true of the people of Israel.

Tu Be-Shevat is the new year for trees. There is an internal awakening of the resin inside the trees, but there is still no fruit. In Shevat, a tree wakes up from its winter dormancy. At this stage, hard work is needed on the part of the tree if it is to produce fruit. The fruit will appear only later, in Nisan. Most trees (with the exception of the almond) start a hidden process in Shevat, which will reveal itself in all of its glory in Nisan, the time of Israel's redemption. Before entering the land of Israel, Moshe must prepare Israel spiritually for their entry. When? "In the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first day of the month… Moshe took upon himself to expound this law" (*Devarim* 1:3-5) – the first day of Shevat.

From the individual as well, just as from a tree and from the nation, a great deal of investment is required in order to bring forth fruit, and at the same time – between Tu Be-Shevat and the month of Nisan, the time of Israel's redemption. We find in the *gemara* (*Ta'anit* 5b) that R. Nachman likened R. Yitzchak to "a tree, the fruits of which are sweet, its shade pleasant, and a stream of water flowing beneath it." The *gemara* explains that these traits represent Torah, wealth, and children. Perhaps the analogy can be understood differently. Sweet fruit refer to the principles of the Torah that a person studies and toils over. His fruit are intended to benefit others, in the sense of "to learn and to teach." Pleasant shade, the aura around the tree, refers to the virtues and good deeds that must surround the study of Torah. The stream of water is the source of continuity and renewal, the need to not sit on one's laurels and to always to invest in and nurture the tree through Torah study. Without this investment, the tree will die.

 During this period, when the tree harnesses all its forces and all its efforts to bear fruit, it is incumbent upon us as Torah scholars to toil and invest in order to continue to bear fruit, to provide shade and to drink from the stream of water.