

THE TREE OF LIFE, by Rabbi Tom Heyn, February 2012 for BAJC Newsletter

February in Vermont hardly feels like the time to celebrate the birthday of trees. Our oxygen-producing friends are usually bare or covered with snow during this time of year when, in slightly warmer climates, their sap has begun its upward flow. In the Land of Israel, this was the time when our ancestors instituted a Jewish arbor day known as *Tu b'Shevat*.

The word *Tu* is comprised of the Hebrew letters that signify the 15th day of the Hebrew month in which this holiday occurs. The date was chosen for the purpose of calculating the age of fruit-bearing trees. For land owners, this was important to know as they were required to bring their fourth-year fruit crops to the ancient Temple as a tithe (Leviticus 19:24.) After the destruction of the Temple, however, *Tu b'Shevat* came to serve other religious purposes.

For many Jews in the Diaspora, it became an occasion to strengthen our connection to the land of Israel and its bounty by eating from the seven species (*shivat haminim*) of fruits and grains described in the Torah as being abundant in the land of Israel (Deuteronomy 8:8.) It later became an occasion to raise money and support for planting trees in Israel and, more broadly, to call attention to global environmental concerns.

Bolstering the spirit of all these activities, it was the kabbalists who began observing *Tu b'Shevat* in the 16th century as an occasion to “re-fruitify” our world from the divine Tree of Life. They developed a ritual similar to the *Pesach* (Passover) seder focusing on the spiritual significance of fruits and of the *shivat haminim*. This custom spread initially in Sephardic communities but, in recent years, has become much more widely practiced.

Their seder makes use of four cups of wine and different kinds of fruits to symbolize four worlds through which they envisioned the Divine energy to flow. In descending order from the spiritual to the physical, these worlds represent stages of development as well as planes of existence. The kabbalists understood this hierarchical sequence as a universal pattern replicating itself in both the macrocosm and the microcosm. That is to say, their metaphorical language of descent and ascent came to serve as a framework in which all of creation, evolution, and the spiritual work of return could be explained.

The Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Yehuda Loewe, 1526-1609) wrote that a human being is like a tree or, more precisely, like an upside-down tree. He said that while a tree has its roots in the ground, a human being's roots are in heaven. From this statement, and from the writings of other kabbalists as well, we can begin to understand how we, as human beings, might serve as conduits of the Divine energy as it flows from higher worlds down into the world we see and touch. We can begin to understand that we, as human beings, have the privilege and responsibility to participate in this process consciously.

The same energy that was present in the Big Bang continues to flow through us, becoming aware of itself in the awakenings of our own self-awareness. In other words, the human being becomes a vessel through which the universe is coming to know itself. The interior of the cosmos is awakening to itself within you and responding to its own highest aspiration which is ultimately to become more conscious.

The fact that we can recognize in our aspirations the stirrings of this evolutionary impulse is quite profound. The fact that we can consciously participate in this process is even more amazing, especially considering that it's taken fourteen billion years for evolution to bring life to the point where such a thing is possible.

The kabbalists came to understand this amazing fact through their elaborate systems of myth, metaphor and symbolic ritual. How we might improve on their ways of understanding is yet to be seen. Until then, we would do well to study, practice and learn from them, comparing their insights to those we gain from the study and practice of other disciplines.

The image of a tree with its roots in heaven stands as a powerful symbol of our connection, as human beings, to ever-higher worlds -- both seen and unseen. And the image of our Torah as a 'Tree of Life' stands as a powerful reminder that what our ancestors knew and cherished in their day remains true to this day: that the love, energy and intelligence which flows through us, having created, sustained and enabled us to reach this season, comes from a hidden source which has no beginning and no end.