Parshat B'shalach:
From Hatchlings to Saplings: Shabbat Shira and Tu Bishevat

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The proximity of Shabbat Shira, a designation evoking the Torah's tuneful celebration of the Israelites' safely crossing the Red Sea, and Tu Bishevat, the new year of the trees, invites us to consider subtle linkages between these two apparently coincidental liturgical occasions.

The Exodus from Egypt initiates a period of special intimacy between God and the people who are being redeemed—but it is an intimacy born of abject, unremitting dependency. The chapters following the triumphant Song at the Sea detail divine provision for immediate physical needs: the sourcing of potable water (Exodus 15:25) and edible food (Exodus 16:8, 11, 13-14). This moment-to-moment parental care, protracted throughout the decades of desert wandering, bespeaks a kind of national infancy. However long it extended, this stage was always meant to give way to subsequent maturation as far as the Sages were concerned. Surely the nation would grow up and attend to its own needs, as Leviticus Rabba (25:5) insists:

> The hen, when its young are tiny, gathers them together and places them beneath its wings, warming them and grubbing for them. But when they are grown up and one of them wants to get near her she pecks it on the head and says to it: 'Go and grub in your own dunghill!' So during the forty years that Israel were in the wilderness the manna fell, and the well came up for them, the quails were at hand for them, the clouds of glory encircled them, and the pillar of cloud led the way before them. When Israel were about to enter the Land, Moses said to them: 'Let every one of you take up his spade and go out and plant trees.' Hence it is written, 'When you shall come into the land, you shall plant' (Lev. 19:23).

The rabbis imagine God as that archetypal maternal caregiver: the mother hen. The avian parent, like the divine one, circumvents human language to express her love through the provident actions of guardianship. Even her eventual harshness in pecking her hatchlings is meant to prod them toward the independence of which they are newly capable. The God of Israel will eventually offer a revelation in human language, but long before that, the Holy One sets about meeting the people's immediate needs for sustenance, protection and direction. The activity that will eventually signal their maturity, their *arrival* in the Land, will be the planting of trees, the token of an adult nation's active participation in sustaining itself.

The new phase in the relationship, symbolized by planting fruit trees, might be imagined as the collaborative one between a loving parent and an adult child. For the parent, this entails some stepping back, some letting go, and watching how things fructify. For the child, it involves assuming responsibility and taking on the dignity that responsibility confers. Just as children might become parents and pay forward some of the nurturance the have received, so too the Israelites now become farmers and enter into their own sequence of intensive care and then a necessary stepping back from their seedlings.

Robert Frost brings to life the pathos of this surrender in the poem "Good-by and Keep Cold," where a farmer frets over the manifold harms that might come to his orchard over the winter (rabbit and mouse, deer and grouse), while he must be away on "business with different trees." Even more damaging to the fruit, though, would be a sudden thaw:

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No orchard's the worse for the wintriest storm;
But one thing about it, it mustn't get warm.
"How often already you've had to be told,
Keep cold, young orchard. Good-bye and keep cold.
Dread fifty above more than fifty below."

At the moment of the Exodus, this eventual agricultural independence is just the glimmer of a dream to the newly liberated people. But the coincidence of Tu Bishevat, the rabbinic new year of the trees, with this first glimmer, is an invitation to imagine what lies ahead. In deepest winter, the sap begins to run in the veins of trees that will blossom only in spring and produce fruit in late summer. At the time of the nation's dependent infancy, the divine Parent articulates the expectation of eventual self-sufficiency ("you shall plant"). And when that self-sufficiency eventually comes, the nature of God's intimacy will shift to recognize the enhanced agency of the people living in their land, tilling their soil. They will plant their seeds, prune their trees, wait for the fruit, and supplicate God with the enduring affection and yearning of a child, but also the newfound dignity of an adult—as Frost's farmer does:

I wish I could promise to lie in the night
And think of an orchard's arboreal plight
When slowly (and nobody comes with a light)
Its heart sinks lower under the sod.
But something has to be left to God.

Darshanit Dr. Miriam Udel is associate professor of German Studies and Jewish Studies at Emory University, focusing on modern Jewish literatures and cultures, especially Yiddish. She holds a BA in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and a PhD in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. She's studied at Midreshet Lindenbaum and MaTaN and directed Drisha's Dr. Beth Samuels Summer High School Program. Her first book, Never Better!: The Modern Jewish Picaresque (University of Michigan Press, 2016), won a National Jewish Book Award. Her anthology of Yiddish children's literature, Honey on the Page, will appear with New York University Press in October 2020.