



February 17, 2024



Parshas Terumah

8th of Adar 1 5784

The Longevity Trees

I once found myself in the famous Muir woods in northern San Francisco. In these woods live trees that grow hundreds upon hundreds of feet tall, and some have trunks wide enough to drive a car right through them. A truly majestic, spectacular sight. After a while, I bumped into a park ranger, and we struck up a conversation. I asked him how old these trees were. He said some of them were well over two thousand years old! I was blown away.

He continued and said, "Trees are the only living creatures on earth that, barring disease or natural disaster, will never die. All living specimens have a preprogrammed end to their lives. Even if they managed to avoid sickness, predators, and natural elements, they still die. Not so with trees. The tree will live on."

As the park ranger was walking away, I couldn't help but wonder what makes the tree so different than any other living animal, plant or specimen. What is it about the tree? Why did Hashem choose the tree, of all the animals and living organisms, to grant it such phenomenal longevity?

I believe the answer lies in this parshah.

Supply Shortage

The parshah begins with an architectural dilemma. The Jews are instructed to build a largely wooden Mishkan in the middle of a desert. If you've ever been to a desert you know that there is barely enough life for a blade of grass to grow, let alone hundreds of enormous cedar trees. Where did the wood come from? Rashi, quoting a Midrash Tanchuma, explains that when Yaakov went down to Mitzrayim he brought with him saplings and planted them there. Upon his deathbed he instructed his children to bring these trees out with them into the desert when they left Egypt. These are the trees from which the Mishkan was built.

What an absolutely spectacular lesson. Yaakov hasn't seen his son for 22 years. One would think he would run down to Egypt in a flurry of euphoria. One would think he would drop everything and anything to see his long-lost son. Yet, he remains calm, sees the big picture, and brings along saplings that will one day build the Mishkan. Out of his sheer unwavering love of Hashem and his mission in this world, not a moment goes by without him thinking about how he can contribute to further that mission. He does whatever he can do. From the biggest of the big to the smallest of the small. Merely bending down and picking up a few saplings wasn't insignificant enough for Yaakov.

What is most amazing is seeing what came out of those few little saplings. Innocent little saplings that took Yaakov a whopping fifteen seconds to put on his lap on the way down to Mitzrayim, wound up being the very walls of the Mishkan! The holiest building on the face of the earth. Yaakov's genuine love of mitzvos propelled him to seek them out, even in a moment of extreme personal joy. His pure, unadulterated love for mitzvos blossomed into the very trees from which the Mishkan was built.

When we demonstrate to Hashem that we don't just do His mitzvos; we **love** his mitzvos, we are sending a loud message heavenward: we love Hashem. And He, in turn, loves us. "*Ein HaShechinah Sheruya Ela Mitoch Simcha Shel Mitzvah* (Shabbos 30b)." Hashem lives with us when, and only when, we live with love of Him and His mitzvos. The very foundation of the Mishkan was infused with pure love of mitzvos, and it is a lesson to infuse our homes with the same.

Grab The Instrument On The Way Out

Many people have the custom to say *Al naharos bavel* before they bentch during the week. In it we say something puzzling. "We sat at the rivers of Babylon" – crying for Yerushalayim that was just destroyed. "*Al aravim besochah talinu kinoroseinu*" – upon the trees we hung our harps.

Let's take a step back for a second. These Jews just narrowly escaped the utter destruction of the Bais Hamikdash and the city of Yerushalayim. Why did they have musical instruments on them? Why were they walking with their harps? If you were to wake up in the middle of the night to the smell of smoke you would run out of your house as fast as your legs could go. You wouldn't come out carrying your tuba. Why did these Jews bring along their harps? Reb Aron Pernikoff gives a beautiful answer. He says that these Jews knew the secret moving forward. They knew that Hashem brings His Presence down on this world only to people infused with simcha, to people who exude happiness and joy. "*Tachas asher lo avadeta es Hashem ... b'simcha.*" The destruction of the Bais Hamikdash came about due to lack of joy; hence, the rebuilding of Hashem's home on earth must be with joy. The instruments were our tools to bring that joy.

After searching high and low for what distinguishes trees from the rest of nature, I decided to look in a holy sefer known as Perek Shira. Perek Shira is an ancient sefer which consists of a list of pesukim that encapsulates each and every plant, animal and creature on the planet. It is the spiritual DNA of those particular creatures. What I found shocked me. The pasuk for the tree is, "*Az yeranenu atzei haya'ar*" (Divrei Hayamim 1, 16, 23). The trees rejoiced, for Hashem came down to earth. In the entire Perek Shira, the only reference to a creature that gets up to sing purely out of love of Hashem's existence on earth is regarding the tree. The trees' spiritual DNA is one of standing tall and swaying in song, singing the song of Hashem. Hence, perhaps, they were given longevity. They rejoice for Hashem, so He grants them the long and fruitful ability to do so.

In Tehillim there are times when a paragraph starts *Mizmor l'David*, and other times it starts *L'David mizmor*. Is there a rhyme and reason? Or is it all random? The Gemara in Zevachim explains that any time Dovid felt Hashem's Presence close he would say *L'David mizmor*. But when Dovid felt that the Presence was far off, that there was a disconnect, that Hashem was for whatever reason staying away, he would muster up his concentration and tell himself, "sing, Dovid, sing." He would push himself to sing, for it is the only way to bring Hashem close.

We are all on the road of life. Some people walk the road, others dance it. If we live our lives not merely doing mitzvos, but thrilled while doing so, we, too, can merit having Hashem in our lives. If we looked at mitzvos the same way Yaakov did, we, too, would bring Hashem into our lives. The story of Yaakov reminds us that even the smallest looking mitzvah can one day turn out to be the very walls of the Mishkan.

Some people look at their homes as just that: homes. Others look at it as a Mishkan. A place that permeates holiness. A place that is infused with happiness. A place where Hashem feels welcome.

Man is compared to a tree (Devarim perek 20, pasuk 19). In what way? Perhaps the same way a tree can live forever, so, too, a righteous, joyous, God-fearing man lives forever. The impact he has on himself, his family, and the world around him lasts forever. He lives for infinity. His mitzvos become concretized in a modern day Mishkan that shines forever. Like the tree, we have deep roots that take nourishment from those that came before us. Like the tree, we have a strong backbone. Like the tree, we are forever growing upward. But most importantly, like the tree, we softly sway back and forth singing the praises of Hashem. Therefore, like trees, we live for eternity.