

"MAN AS TREE"

It is a strange thing, and probably a measure of our exilehood, to be celebrating Tu Bi'Shevat in the dead of winter, when the remains of an old snowfall are covered with the soot and grime belched forth by chimneys dedicated to technology and the artificial rather than the natural. Yet this is the day, according to the Mishnah, that begins the new year for trees; that is, today is the first day of a new calendar year for the calculation of payment of the tithes and for the other laws of Judaism relating to agriculture. And therefore, despite the inclement and inappropriate climate, this is the right time for a discussion of the relationship of man to, and his kinship with, Nature.

The relationship of man and Nature may sound abstract, utterly inconsequential and impractical. Yet it is this which defines the whole outlook of a man upon his life and has, therefore, the broadest ramifications.

~~In our literature~~ We find two tendencies. On the one hand, there is a group of Nature-lovers who see in the return to Nature a great ideal. Ancient mythologies, and modern science as well, consider man as a part of Nature. In our <sup>more recent</sup> literature, Nature-worshippers ~~who~~ find a strong distaste for man's interference in the natural order. These authors see man as one who violates, defiles, and deforms Nature, who pollutes the atmosphere and poisons the sea, who desolates wild life and who must be protected against by programs of conservation.

On the other hand, there are those who see man's uniqueness in his divorce from Nature. Thomas Hardy put it this way: "Man begins where Nature ends; Nature and man can never be friends." And in the most recent issue of Saturday Review (February 5, 1966), Eric Hoffer maintains that the great undeclared war, the contest between man and nature, is "the central drama of the universe." From his own highly varied experiences, from that of longshoreman to philosopher, he finds that Nature is inhospitable and ill-disposed. It is Nature, after all, that is responsible for floods and fire, tornadoes and typhoons, pests and plagues, volcanoes and avalanches, hunger and hailstones. The meaning of history is humanization, and humanization occurs when man breaks away from Nature, from the rest of the order of creation, and becomes something special.

What is the judgment of Judaism on this question of the relationship of Man and Nature? Apparently it embraces both contradictory views. On the one hand, we read of man as the culmination of the creation of the natural world, but nevertheless an integral part of the work of the six days of creation. Numerous Psalms sing songs of praise for Nature and man's part in it. Ha-shamayim mesaprim kevod el -- the heavens declare the glory of G-d... We are commanded to practice mercy and compassion not only towards other humans, but even towards the animal kingdom; hence the prohibition of tzaar baalei hayyim, causing pain to living beings.

Furthermore, we are even told to have special concern for non-animal life. It is a violation of a biblical commandment to destroy a fruit tree, even if this is necessary to defend oneself in war.

By extension, it is forbidden to destroy any part of Nature:

bal tash'hit, we must never be destructive even towards vegetable life. That is why when American forces several weeks ago poisoned the crops of the Viet Cong, this was reprehensible to Biblical morality. The reason for this concern with the vegetable kingdom is because man must see himself as a part of Nature; ki ha-adam etz ha-sadeh, "for man is as a tree of the field!" So too the prophet Isaiah, in his vision of the great Messianic future, foresees man living at peace once again even with wild beasts, for man will be re-integrated into the rest of Nature.

On the other hand, only man, of all created things, possesses the "image of G-d." Upon his creation, man is commanded: ve'khivshuha, to conquer and vanquish the natural world. After Adam was expelled from Eden, G-d decreed that henceforth there will be enmity between man and the serpent, a constant struggle between the human and the animal kingdom. The brothers Jacob and Esau represent two different types. Esau is "the man of the field," the one who is identified with Nature, whereas Jacob is "the dweller of tents," the man who builds a career of humanity apart from and above Nature; and it is Jacob who is favored over Esau. Indeed, the very survival of the people of Israel is, as it were, a defiance of natural law which long ago would have demanded our disappearance.

How, then, does Judaism view man? Is he a creature of Nature, or is he its adversary?

The answer is that Judaism views man neither apart from, nor

as part of Nature. The relation is conditional. Let me explain.

Originally, according to the Bible, man was at peace with Nature. His very name indicates his kinship with the natural world. He is adam, and the earth is adamah. (It is true that he is not only part of material nature, for he also has a divine side to him, a soul. Thus Ramban explains the statement, "Let us make a man in our image," in the plural; for here G-d addresses the earth or nature, and, as it were, announces a cooperative venture in the creation of man, who is a product both of physical nature and of the spirit of G-d Himself.) Thus man, at one with Nature, is placed in the Garden of Eden and instructed l'avdah u-le'shamrah, to watch over it and develop it. But then man sins. And sin is considered by the Torah to be not only an act of rebellion against G-d, but also a rejection of G-d's world, a crime against Nature. Therefore, punishment for sin is the rejection by Nature of man. That is why Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. The earth itself suffered because of man's sin: arurah ha-adamah ba-avurekha, "accursed be the earth because of you." The earth will no longer bestow its bounty upon man: ve'kotch ve'dardar tazmiah lakh, "thorns and thistles will it grow for you." When Cain murdered Abel, G-d declared that the voice of the blood of the murdered brother cries out from the earth, and the punishment for Cain is na ve'nad; exile; for Nature will allow him no rest upon it. So, when an entire generation sins, their punishment is their defeat by Nature: the flood waters come and destroy mankind. The estrange-

ment between man and Nature is now complete.

But, under such conditions, man could never survive. In order to avoid a death struggle between man and Nature, G-d formulates the great covenant between the two. This is the covenant of the children of Noah. The covenant assures that a flood -- in other words, Nature or natural phenomena -- will never again rise up against mankind to destroy it. This means, therefore, that a distance has been created between man and Nature: there will be neither struggle nor peace, neither victory nor defeat. Man and Nature will go their separate ways in a perpetual cold war.

However, this condition is intolerable. Man must have some relationship with Nature which gave birth to him. Therefore we read of two more covenants. The first is the covenant of Abraham. One people is now opted from mankind to have a special relationship with one part of Nature: the people of Israel with the Land of Israel. When Abraham was told that his children will return to the land of Canaan, this meant that a part of mankind will return and reconciled with a part of Nature.

The second is a far more exhaustive, inclusive, and comprehensive covenant. It is the covenant of Torah, sealed at Sinai, with Moses and the Children of Israel. According to the terms of this covenant, not only will one people have a relationship with one piece of land, but through Torah man is reconciled with all the world, with all Nature! By means of Torah, by means of living in accordance

with the will of G-d, through the exercise of man's spiritual vocation, he returns to Nature, neither to vanquish it, nor to be vanquished by it. Rather, the function of man is now the sanctification of Nature. Man is not the conquerer of Nature, but the one who transforms it so that Man and Nature, in concert, can rise to the highest levels towards G-d. No longer is the ideal kibbush ha-teva, the conquest of Nature, but kiddush ha-teva, the sanctification of Nature.

How does one sanctify Nature? A simple illustration is the blessing we recite over food or other natural pleasures or benefits. When we eat bread and recite the ha-motzi first, we are returning to Nature and establishing a relationship with it on the basis of the divine Will. When we pluck an apple without a blessing, we are imposing ourselves upon Nature; if we first express our gratitude to G-d, borei peri ha-etz, who creates the fruit of the tree, then, because of Torah, we are at peace and in harmony with the great natural world. So too, for instance, the mitzvot of lulav and shofar, whereby we take hold of natural products and with them sanctify all of life. Such too, is the reason for the sacrifices; for man relates to the animal kingdom by means of Torah.

The Kabbalah speaks of everything that exists possessing within it a "spark", some element of divinity which gives it its existence. It is only through these nitzotzot (sparks) that any object can exist. What is the function of man in the world? The Kabbalah answers: haalaat ha-nitzotzot, the elevation of the sparks, the ~~orientation~~ orientation by man towards Nature in a manner that will elevate it,



that will sanctify it, that will transform it in accordance with the divine Will.

This, precisely, is what we mean by a new reconciliation of man with Nature according to Torah. Man and Nature are not locked in contest, but co-actors in the cosmic drama of sanctification and redemption.

There is an ancient and beautiful tradition that on Tu Bi'Shvat a Jew ought to pray to G-d for the privilege, some six or seven months hence, of obtaining a good and beautiful ethrog on the holiday of Sukkot. The distinguished Hasidic writer, the author of "Benei Yisaskhor," maintains that this tradition is hinted in the very Mishnah which describes the various "New Years." In enumerating these various beginnings of different calendar years, the Mishnah throughout uses the plural, except where it discusses Tu Bi'Shevat to which it refers as rosh ha-shanah la-ilan, the "New Year for the tree," rather than the more acceptable rosh ha-shanah le'ilanot, the "New Year for trees." Why the singular la-ilan? Because, he answers, the reference is specifically to "the" tree -- the ethrog! It is not Nature as such which we consider on Tu Bi'Shevat, but Nature as expressed in that fruit which is pre-eminently the object with which we perform a great and beautiful mitzvah! It is through the mitzvah that we relate to Nature. It is through the ethrog that we find ourselves at home in the whole kingdom of the world of trees. Nature, indeed all the world, becomes sympathetic to man only when man becomes truly human through the divine Torah. Just as

man became the enemy of Nature by sin, so he becomes the friend of Nature through mitzvah.

On Tu Bi'Shevat, therefore, man approaches Nature in a new way. For man has a choice: if he lives according to Torah, he returns to Nature with human dignity, and he redeems it/himself<sup>and</sup>. If not, he returns as the victim of Nature, as just another part of it, claimed by it, overpowered by it, and ultimately devoured by it.

From this point of view, technology need not be considered as something alien ~~for~~<sup>to</sup> the spirit of man and a burden imposed upon Nature. On the contrary, if man lives according to Torah, to the Will of G-d, technology becomes the sacred instrument whereby he consecrates Nature.

Ki adam etz ha-sadeh. When man returns to the world with Torah, he is as the tree of the field. This is the condition of his happiness and his good fortune. As David put it, **בְּצִיֵּן כִּתְמָר יִבְרָח**, the righteous -- he who lives according to Torah and mitzvot -- will flourish like a palm tree, he will grow like a cedar of Lebanon. That is why the Rabbis too, in Pirkei Avot compared the good man to a tree. Just as a tree has roots and fruit-laden branches, so man has, correspondingly, piety or fear of G-d: ~~his~~ his roots -- and wisdom and the study of Torah: his fruit and branches. Man must assure himself of both if he is to be a true "tree" of G-d.

However, there is a time when man is equated with Nature in an un-complimentary fashion. Thus we read in Psalm 103:

**אֲנוֹשׁ כַּחֲצִי יֵאֵיךְ בְּצִיֵּן פֶּשַׁע בֵּן יִצְיָק כִּי יוֹאֵל עֲזָרָה 12**  
**וְאֵלֶיךָ וְלֹא יִכְרַע עֹד מִקֶּוֹם**



"As for man, his days are as grass; as the flower of the field so he flourishes; for soon a wind passes over it, and it is gone, and even the very place thereof shall recognize it no more." When does this happen? When there is no Torah, when man abandons his spiritual dignity, when he thinks he can live as a human being without Torah. Then he becomes not a tree -- but a vegetable.

This ought to be, pre-eminently, the teaching of Tu Bi'Shevat for us. We are a part of the world, and we should reintegrate ourselves into Nature. We can do so in one of two ways. We can either be trees -- or vegetables. If we live a life of Torah, then we are at home in the world, and we are like trees. Without Torah, however, we merely vegetate.

This is why I must express, in all frankness, my disappointment with some of our own Orthodox people, even of this congregation. I refer especially to young people, to our men and to our women, perhaps more even to the women who have more time to spare. We are by and large a generation that is sophisticated, cultured, college-trained. We should have at least gotten from our academic background the desire to continue our education by ourselves, not to freeze our minds once we receive our degrees. Certainly, if we are going to be intelligently Orthodox, then we know that to be Orthodox means not only to observe the Shabbat and pray every day, but, far and above this, to study Torah. If we are not going to study Torah every day because it is a mitzvah, then at least it ought not to be too much of

a burden to attend a class in Torah once a week, if only out of intellectual curiosity. If we do so, we have a chance of being what we have called a "tree": upright, rooted, productive, fruitful, and creative individuals. But if we fail to observe even this minimum, then we vegetate spiritually, we become religious "vegetables". Certainly, we have time for Torah, we must have time for Torah. If we have time for so many other activities from bridge to guitar lessons, from tennis to gymnasium, we should have at least sufficient time to develop and grow and fulfill our own spiritual image.

May Tu Bi'Shevat lead us to that understanding and to that creative task. Then, in the words of David, וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ לְאֵלֵינוּ בְּזֵמְנוֹ  
נָחַם אֵלֵינוּ כִּי יָבִין יְהוָה בְּזֵמְנוֹ

we shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, which gives its fruit in its time, and whose foliage never withers.