

FB LIVE - SHEVAT

The 11th Hebrew month of *SHEVAT*

Do you sometimes feel as though your life is hidden, maybe even dormant? Well, I hope you will be encouraged by this month's theme and the lives of the "hidden women of the Bible" we will be exploring.

Blessing: May it be Your will, O LORD, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that You inaugurate this month of *Shevat* upon us for goodness and for blessing.

Sap Rises

Singing Psalms in Jerusalem
accompanying
the prayers chanted this New Moon eve;
a psalm of love to our Creator.
Open hands uplifted to Heaven,
herald Shevat, and remind us:
We need not suffer thirst.
Living Water from Heaven's stream
always flows, quenches, restores.
Like sweet sap rises
and fans a tiny flame into a burning fire.¹

The Hebrew month of Shevat arrives in the deep of Israel's winter. The 15th of the month, *Tu b'Shevat*, is celebrated as the New Year for Trees² and is the time that the sap in the trees begins to rise, ushering in new life, and feeding and strengthening the tree for the year to come. The dormant tree is waking from its winter's sleep and we are reminded that although the tree looks dead with no greenery, and no fruit, inwardly there is much life. The sap is at work. Sap is defined as juice, or the vital, circulating, energy and vitality producing fluid of a plant; especially of trees.

Now that the people of Israel are back in the Land, the celebration of a TuB'Shevat Seder is gaining more significance and is being reinstated by many... to find out more about this happy and meaningful seder please take a look at the website hi-israel.com under Festivals.

¹ Inspired by Velveteen Rabbi, *Rosh Chodesh Shevat*

² For more information on the New Year for Trees, Tu b'Shevat and a seder to celebrate please visit the His-Israel website - www.his-israel.com

From the beginning in Genesis, trees feature prominently in the biblical narrative. In the Garden of Eden we find specific mention of the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Contrary to God's instruction, Adam and Eve eat from the latter, with disastrous consequences, including exile from the Garden and the Presence of God. What of the Tree of Life - *Etz Chaim*? Judaism recognizes the wisdom of the Word of God as the Tree of Life.

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called blessed. (Proverbs 3:18)

During Shevat the winter rains, vital for the country's water supply and crops, are gratefully celebrated in Israel. Water is a gift from Heaven. So, too, is God's Word - the living water needed for the life of our souls.

Interestingly, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the 18th century Jewish writer and scholar, in his work "The Way of God", describes the Tree of Life as an upside-down tree, with its roots in the higher spiritual realms. The Tree draws nourishment and life from the heavens and passes it to the branches, leaves, and fruit on earth. The wisdom of God expressed in the Torah - the teaching and revelation of God through His Word - is associated with the Tree of Life. We read also in Proverbs 11:30, "The fruit of the righteous [who live according to God's Word] is a tree of life..." This analogy is further described in *Midrash Shmuel* on Pirkei Avot 3:24,

Man is like a tree in that his good deeds are his produce, his "fruits," and his arms and legs the branches which bear these fruits. He is, however, an "upside-down tree," for his head is rooted in the heavens, nestled in the spiritual soils of the Eternal, and nourished by his connection to his Creator.

God chose the palm tree to decorate the curtains in the Holy Place of the Temple. In Psalm 92:12-14, the righteous are compared to palm trees.

The righteous will flourish like the palm tree...

Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God.

They will still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green.

No part of the palm tree is wasted. "In Scripture, the palm is always the date palm, stately and beautiful. It has extremely deep tap roots and thus can flourish even in the desert, growing tall and living long. It is perhaps the most useful of all trees, not only producing dates, but also sugar, wine, honey, oil, resin, rope, thread, tannin, and dyestuff. Its seeds are fed to cattle and its leaves are used for roofs, fences, mats, and baskets. Its fruit is said to get sweeter as the tree grows older." ³

³ Henry Morris, Ph.D *Believers and Palm Trees*

Another powerful comparison to a tree is made by Paul in Romans 11:17-18, where he compares the Kingdom of God to an olive tree. He cautions the gentiles who are turning to God as “branches of a wild olive tree” not to be arrogant towards the “natural branches of the cultured olive tree,” saying:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root do not boast over those branches.

The olive tree is the tree most often associated with Israel. Its pure oil was used to keep the menorah in the Holy Place - the symbol of the light of God’s Word - constantly lit and shining. The eternal Word, with its deep roots of the Torah, keeps the Kingdom of God standing strong and secure in the place God has planted it.

Shevat causes us to wonder at something as common as the trees. We also are reminded of the deep-rooted connection of the Bible and the natural vegetation of the Land of Israel. Noga Hareuveni ⁴ describes in his book, *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage*, “Biblical literature is wondrously woven of natural fibers, richly seeded with terms and concepts integral to the nature and agriculture of the Land of Israel.”

WOMEN: YOCHEVED AND NITZEVET

YOCHEVED , a hidden heroine of the Torah, was the mother of Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Without the courage of Yocheved the redeemer of God’s people from Egyptian slavery would not have been born.

The Sages of Israel record that the redemption at the time of the Exodus came about as a result of the righteous women. The key women involved in the preserving of Moses’ life are his mother, his sister Miriam, and Batya, Pharaoh’s daughter.

An interesting option is offered as to the identity of the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Pu’ah, of whom the Bible says: “The midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had told them,” which was to kill all the baby boys born to the Israelite women. To fear and honor God meant to preserve and nurture life.

The renowned Torah scholar, Rashi, agrees with the consideration that Shifra and Pu’ah were none other than Yocheved and Miriam. He comments that Yocheved was called Shifra because she was expert in beautifying and cleansing the newborns. ‘Beautifying’ and Shifra are from the same Hebrew root *l’shaper*, from which also comes the word *shofar*! Miriam, though still a

young girl, assisted her mother and was called Pu'ah from the root *pa'ah*, to coo sweetly and to calm the cries of the newborn with her soothing voice.

The verses in Exodus 1:8-17, also proclaim "And it came to pass because the midwives feared God the He made them Houses." Indeed, from their progeny would come dynasties of Priesthood, Levites, and Kingship - leaders who derived their strength and conviction from the courage of these women.

Yocheved influenced all the Israelite women the time, who, in opposition to the harsh and cruel decrees of Pharaoh that crushed and drained hope and will to live from the men, would go out to their workplaces and feed and comfort their husbands. They used their mirrors to beautify themselves and would encourage their husbands to have sexual relations with them. They defied death by bringing life. As a result, the nation would be reborn through the waters of the Reed Sea. An enslaved people would become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!

NITZEVET, too, is a hidden heroine with a courageous voice of silence. She was the wife of Yishai (Jesse), the grandson of Boaz and Ruth, who served as the head of the Sanhedrin - the most distinguished group of religious leaders of his day.

The couple bear seven righteous and illustrious sons. Yet, when David is born, these upstanding brothers treat him with scorn. Even his godly father spurns him and he is given the lowly job of a shepherd and was sent to dangerous pastures "full of lions and bears" (1 Samuel 17:34-36). David comments on this in Psalm 69:21: "I was a stranger to my brothers, a foreigner to my mother's sons. ... They put gall in my meat and gave me vinegar to drink." Why? No clear answer is given in Scripture, but hints are found and some speculations are given in midrashim. The righteous Yishai may have become plagued by doubts as to the legitimacy of his grandmother Ruth's inclusion in the people of Israel. The Torah specifically forbade a Moabite convert as the nation of Moab had cruelly refused the Israelites passage through their land on their journey through the wilderness. In addition, they had not offered, nor allowed them to purchase, food and drink. Boaz and the sages understood this law only to apply to the Moabite men, who were responsible for the merciless decisions. It is considered, however, that in his state of doubt as to his own status in the nation, he may have decided to separate from Nitzevet - an honorable woman of Israel. After a long period of painful separation, Nitzevet, may have decided to enter her husband's bed under a pretext and conceived. When the pregnancy became obvious, her sons believed that she was carrying an illegitimate child. Yishai, in compassion and love for her, does not allow her to be harmed, but when the boy is born he is treated as a stranger and outcast. Not willing to embarrass Yishai with the fact that the son indeed is his, Nitzevet remains silent. As we see, she will be rewarded for her silence with a child who would become king and a forebear of Messiah!

Nitzevet, herself shunned, had always stood in solidarity with David and expressed her deep, maternal love for him. They suffered years of pain and humiliation until, finally, God sent the prophet Samuel to openly give evidence that the lineage of Yishai and David was pure and legitimate. Facing her sons, Nitzevet could proclaim: "The stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone!" (Psalm 118:22) They respond in humility, "This has come from God; it was hidden from our eyes" (v.23) Thereafter, the whole family could rejoice with the people of Israel, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (v.24).

What a wonder to behold! The once reviled shepherd boy is chosen by God and anointed as king of Israel. His mother's example of silent dignity and stoic courage in the face of hardship would give David the courage to face the many adversaries and challenges that lay ahead. With all you experience unjustified pain, we cry out to our Father God for the time when the "son of David" will usher in the Final Redemption and will reign in righteousness and establish true justice in the earth.

TRIBE: ASHER

The month of Shevat corresponds to the tribe of Asher. Asher was born to Leah's maid Zilpah. He was the sixth of Leah's progeny and, joyful that she had fulfilled her portion of the twelve tribes, Leah declared at his birth, "'Happy (*b'osher*) am I! For the women will call me blessed.' So she called his name Asher."⁵ Other connotations of the Hebrew word *osher* are: to be straight, honest, to go forward, to prosper.

For good reason, the symbol on the banner of the tribe was a large, fruitful olive tree. Jacob's blessing of Asher reads, "Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies."⁶ This richness is attributed to the fact that his territory would be filled with an abundance of olive trees. When Moses later added his blessing to the tribes, he said of Asher, "He will dip his feet in oil."⁷ Asher's tribal inheritance was the region of the Western Galilee, which was lush and fertile year-round with ample water sources. The harvest of oil indeed would flow like a spring! Despite their abundance and prosperity, Asher remained down to earth and humble, just like the agate stone on the breastplate of the High Priest that represented their tribe. The colors of this common gemstone are green, black, and brown, which reflect the olive tree.

The constellation [mentioned here in strictly an astronomical, and not astrological sense] associated with Asher and the month of Shevat is Aquarius, known in English as the

⁵ Genesis 30:13

⁶ Genesis 49:20

⁷ Deuteronomy 33:24

'Water Bearer.' Water mixes easily with other liquids, while oil floats to the top. However, in Asher we see both water and oil in abundance. Again we can find a connection with the Word of God - the Tree of Life, which also is described as water and is fueled, as it were, by the Spirit of Holiness. A woman of the tribe of Asher is highlighted.

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the Temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour [of Simeon's revelation] she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him [Messiah Yeshua] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.⁸

The Hebrew name of the constellation Aquarius is *Dli*, which means 'bucket.' The purpose of a *dli* is to draw water from a well. In the above Scripture, we see that Anna drew the water of life from the well of salvation and she poured it out to quench the thirst of others.

Moses' last famous discourse began on the first day of Shevat.⁹ This underscored the fact that Moses, "the most humble of men," saw himself as a mere vessel--a bucket--in the hands of the Lord. Moses' purpose was solely to draw water from the Source and to pour out the water of God's Word to His people. Yeshua, as the Living Word, stood and proclaimed on the last great day of the Feast of Tabernacles at the auspicious water pouring ceremony performed by the High Priest:

If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.
Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will
flow rivers of *mayim chayim* (living water)." ¹⁰

During the fifteen days from the new moon of *Shevat* to *Tu B'Shevat*, there is a tradition of reading the fifteen Psalms known as "Psalms of Ascent."¹¹ Some rabbinic sources suggest that the reciting of the Psalms of Ascent is a lifting of our spirit that mirrors the rising of the sap in a tree after its winter dormancy.

The beautiful Psalm 128 certainly reflects the tribe of Asher associated with this month.

⁸ Luke 2:36-38

⁹ Deuteronomy 1:3,5

¹⁰ John 7:38 ; Cf. Isaiah 41:17-18

¹¹ Psalms 120-134

A Song of Ascents.

Blessed (*Ashrei*) is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.