

# MEDITATIONS FOR SHEVAT

*Bereishit barah Elokim / In the beginning G-d created...<sup>1</sup>*



## ***Bara /Create***

Singing Psalms in Jerusalem  
Swaying blue-striped tents of white  
dot this sanctuary of time.  
*Tefillin*, carrying the Word, light the way.  
*Tzitzit* dance gently, 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.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:1

<sup>2</sup> *Sap Rises*, Inspired by Velveteen Rabbi, *Rosh Chodesh Shevat* ~ adapted by Keren & Cindy

Shevat comes in the deep of winter. A time when many trees stand naked and to all appearance, absent of life. But reality is quite different. Shevat is the time that the sap in the tree begins to rise - running through its veins and waking the dormant tree from its winters sleep.

Who among us hasn't experienced a winter's sleep in relation to our creativity? But just like the tree, it doesn't mean we have lost our ability to create. The sap will rise again and our creativity will burst forth, waking us from our sleep.

The following meditations are taken from *the artist's Torah* by David Ebenbach. In this eleventh Hebrew month of Shevat may we come to experience creativity as a natural and essential part of being - an inheritance from our Abba Father.

## SHEVAT - 1

The first word of Genesis in Hebrew, *b'reishit*, yields two different, even contradictory understandings. Does the text in Genesis 1:1 mean to say, "In the beginning, G-d created the heaven and the earth..." suggesting that before G-d's initial act, there was nothing? Or should we translate it as, "When G-d began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void..." suggesting that the earth already existed but was unformed? In other words, is creation a crafting out of nothing or is it an ordering out of chaos?

What is the creative process that yields prose and poetry, dance, art, and music? Is it an act of breathing in what is - the chaotic swirl of feeling and thought, the jumble of smells and tastes, sounds and sights - and breathing out of form? Or is it a calling up from the emptiness, the void of nothingness, of absence, something new and altogether original? Might it be that the very first words of the Bible offer us the possibility that creation is both?<sup>3</sup>

## SHEVAT - 2 *B'reishit*

What makes a person start painting, choreographing, composing, writing, or snapping photographs, as a way of expressing what is irresistibly compelling about the universe? What makes a person even *notice* that the universe's details are worth expressing in this way?

The reason these questions matter is because our answers can change our lives. If we believe that art requires madness or genius or an expensive education, we'll just decide that art is for other people. If we believe that art is something only children do, we'll grow out of it and leave it behind. But what if we were to believe that art is part of all of us, part of what makes us human.

## SHEVAT - 3 *Noach*

To be an artist is to get into the powerful work of creation, and to judge your success in part by whether or not your work opens the heavens and the fountains of the deep - by whether or not it invites the flood.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso as recorded in the forward of *the artist's Torah* by David Ebenbach

## SHEVAT - 4 *Lekh L'kha*

The rewards and the insights will start to become manifest once the journey is underway. Right now, the important thing is to get started.

## SHEVAT - 5 *Va-yera*

Art (doesn't) come for free. Nothing important does, I suppose. Even in the story of the *akedah*, after Abraham unties his son they don't just climb down the mountain and head for home; they still have a sacrifice to make. But now that Abraham is perceiving things clearly - behold! - he sees a ram caught in a thicket and offers that up to G-d in place of Isaac. Artist, too, have to clear enough vision to find something to offer up in place of their own destruction.

## SHEVAT - 6 *Toldot*

There are blessings to be had through some kind of engagement with imitation - and you don't have to be untrue to yourself, or even steal anyone else's good fortune, to get them. When you need to grow, you try things on, but not because you're mixed up about who you are or because you want to take someone else's place...

The goal, in the ideal case, is learning - learning from another's style in order to develop one's own.

## SHEVAT - 7 *Mi-ketz*

In the artist's life, the dry period is often an essential part of the cycle of creativity. After a time of inspiration, having given ourselves fully to the work, we return to the world somewhat dazed. We may have lost the sense of discipline that we didn't need when things came so easily... The lean times, on the other hand, can be a time to get grounded again, to do some planning, to revise and rework, to get back into the habit of showing up no matter what.

## SHEVAT - 8 *Sh'mot*

An artist is to be engaged with some larger-than-ourselves [G-d]...to become closer to G-d, to be led forward by G-d.

...Our role is not to solve "G-d." Our role is...to be in dialogue with the divine mystery [G-d] and to view our art as reports on the conversation.

## SHEVAT - 9 *Bo*

There's only one real secret to being an artist: make art.

## SHEVAT - 10 *Mishpatim*

In our creative lives, we develop not by ignoring the natural laws of our work, but by wrestling with them.

## SHEVAT - 11 *Ki'Tissa*

We can create our art in an awareness that we are aiming for, in the words of Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton, “rather than perfection, connection.”<sup>4</sup> We are not trying to reproduce G-d, but to connect to the divine, to connect to wonder, to awe, and to leave some tangible trace of our struggle and our experience - not so that others can worship it but so that they can join us in the attempt.

## SHEVAT- 12 *Tsav*

The fact is that our work does go out into the world, does reach people, does affect them. All the more reason to approach our work with the purity of a temple priest [*cohen*], our minds and bodies all yearning toward...truth.

## SHEVAT - 13 *Sh'mini*

Art needs to look squarely at the broken and dark places in our world, and to express something truthful about them to the world.

## SHEVAT - 14 *Sh'mini*

“As a symphony needs rest to lift music out of noise,/so we need Silence to lift Truth out of words.”<sup>5</sup> We may never be able to articulate our feelings about certain things, and these things may not be able to show themselves in our art directly - but hopefully we can simply give ourselves to the experience without worrying about how to turn it into an expression. Hopefully we can sit in the silence and just listen.

## SHEVAT - 15 *Tazria - M'tzora*

There's a time for finding awe in the powerful moments in one's life, and a time for finding it in community.<sup>6</sup> For artists, this attitude can be the corrective to the potentially debilitating isolation that can set in; it may be impossible to avoid separation when in the throes of work or in its immediate wake, but there is a model here for return too. In our days it doesn't involve a burnt sacrifice, but any of us can find a way to let sufficient time go by, and then to close the studio door and take a shower - and then, with our experience still in our bones but no longer all-consuming, we can reach out to others again.

## SHEVAT - 16 *K'doshim*

Art and life are both ongoing acts of faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Bolton, *Toward a Jewish Theology*, 18

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro, Teutsch, *Kol Haneshamah*, 185

<sup>6</sup> Lieber, *Etz Hayim*, 649

## SHEVAT - 17 *B'har-B'chukkotai*

Artists have a different relationship to their work than people in other vocations: they are more dependent on their work for understanding who they are.

## SHEVAT - 18 *B'har-B'chukkotai*

The lesson that we learn from the double parasha *B'har-B'chukkotai* is that genuine replenishing rest is not a luxury, not laziness, not something to be dodged or cheated - rest is an essential part of a productive life. You *are* an artist, even if you're not working for a little while - and much better than working until you have nothing left to give.

## SHEVAT - 19 *B'midbar*

We would do well to follow the example of the Israelites - to hear very clearly what kinds of art are calling to us, and to set up our camp in the right spot. A camp isn't permanent, of course, but it does give us the chance to find the soil that best for us right now, and drive our stakes deep enough to build a home for a time there.

## SHEVAT - 20 *Naso*

We artist each have our distinct roles to play in the sacred activity of creation.

## SHEVAT - 21 *Naso*

We are the same, and we are different. As for artists, although we are all pursuing similar goals, and are all similarly trying to express our perceptions, what we express is unique because no one person is exactly like another...think of us as crystals, no two the same. The [L]ight doesn't change ,but the way it refracts through us does change.

## SHEVAT - 22 *B'haalot'kah*

At times you may feel yourself ready to cry out in envy like Miriam and Aaron, and at times you may need to cry out just to give vent to the feelings - but you must not let them take over. You must instead find a way to get back to your studio, your desk, your keyboard. The only sure-fire answer to envy is work.

## SHEVAT - 23 *Hukkat*

When Aaron dies in this parasha and when Moses dies at the end of Deuteronomy, we may feel the shock that Aaron seems to feel - he dies without a word - and the frustration of Moses, who complains bitterly to (and about) the people before climbing the mountain to his gravesite. We may fail to understand. This all seems right to me; we're talking about death. How easy should it be? How much sense does it usually make? The same holds for life itself. If we are to produce an art

that will compel the world, we must remember that the richness of life can't be captured in a moral or a message. Life drinks deeply from mysterious waters, and so must our art.

### **SHEVAT - 24** *Balak*

From Balaam's example we hopefully learn to see our work not as a slavish pack animal that moves where we want it to with a yank on the reins or a whack from a stick but as a partner on our journey.

### **SHEVAT - 25** *Pinhas*

I'm not advocating for art that destroys the artist or others. I'm not even saying that all passion is constructive - after all, according to the Torah, if G-d has given into passion, the Israelites would all have been destroyed (Numbers 25:11). What I'm saying is that the creative process isn't a logical process, not a sober or nice process. It is fueled by our passion, and those passions will allow us to reach others. G-d granted Phinehas the priesthood, the Israelites' most holy office, for his zeal. Surely you can find something of the sacred in your own emotional life - and surely you can find a place for that in your art.

### **SHEVAT - 26** *D'varim*

Mistakes are a big part of the artist's life. It has to be that way - as we've seen elsewhere, doing creative work means journeying into the unknown, trying new things and asking questions that haven't been asked before, or asking them in a new way.

### **SHEVAT - 27** *D'varim*

If I were to look at artistic successes, seamless and whole and mysterious, I might never know how they were made. When I see a piece that's a little imperfect, I have a sense how work is done. What a gift that is for us!

### **SHEVAT - 28** *Va-yeilekh*

Teaching, perhaps ironically, becomes a way to learn. By becoming fluent in conveying your understanding of your art, that understanding deepens and broadens. By listening to your students, you encounter wisdom you couldn't have generated on your own.

### **SHEVAT - 29**

Just as our striving for success can make us forget the point of our art, so can our *attainment* of success. As Ecclesiastes would say, this too is vanity. This, too, is a kind of idolatry that values the wrong thing and devalues the thing that is most crucial. If we are not careful, what we lose is the work itself.

### **SHEVAT - 30** *V'zot ha-B'racha*

...Meredith Monk once said, "I don't think of my work as a line. I always think of spirals or cycles";<sup>7</sup> a line would take us into the Promised Land and bring us to a full stop there, but spirals and cycles bring us back to the work - and is the work ever truly done, truly complete?

We usually define being an artist not as *having created* but as being a person *who is in the habit of creating*. It is, by definition, ongoing...

...there's work to do....Whether we've been on a journey already or whether it's just beginning, whether we have a plan or whether we don't, whether we think we can get it all done or whether we have our doubts, wherever we are and whatever we've done, there is always the need to return to the beginning, to the task at hand. As the *Mishnah* tells us, *It is not incumbent on you to complete the work, but neither are you free to abstain from it.*

And tell the truth - would you really want the freedom to abstain?

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<sup>7</sup> Morgenroth, *Speaking of Dance*, 92