

Trees in the Bible

There are many references to trees in the Bible, from the first chapter to the last! In the beginning, at Creation, we find the “trees bearing fruit” that provided food for Adam and Eve and in the last book of Revelation we find the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, with its leaves providing healing for the nations!

The importance of trees is highlighted in Genesis, by *the* two trees that God placed at the very center of the Garden – the Tree of Life, *Etz ha'Chaiyim* (Gen. 3:22) and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, *Etz ha'Da'at* (Gen.2:17). As we know, the downfall of man came as a result of eating the one fruit in the garden that was forbidden to them by God! The result was the exile from the Garden and separation from the direct Presence of God.

The next trees we find of any significance are in connection with Abraham, on his travels in the Land promised him by God. When he reached the Negev desert we find the first description of tree-planting in Scripture,

“And Abraham planted an *eshel* (tamarisk) tree in Beersheva, and called there on the Name of the Lord” (Gen. 21:33).

Why did he choose to plant a **tamarisk tree**? Abraham knew he would settle in Beersheva for an extended time and he chose a fast growing tree that provides the coolest shade. It is ideal in a desert climate as its roots grow to great depths to find underground water, which enables it to withstand long periods of dry heat.

Trees also are mentioned in the transaction for the first piece of land bought by Abraham, “So the field of Ephron in Mach-pe'lah, [modern day Hebron] which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave which was in it and *all the trees* that were in the field, throughout its whole area, was made over to Abraham as a possession...” (Gen. 23:17-18).

In the book of Exodus the subject of trees becomes even more interesting! They feature in the Ten Plagues that God inflicts on Egypt in order to free His people when the locusts:

... covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and **all the fruit of the trees** which the hail had left; not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt. (Ex. 10:15-16)

During their forty year sojourn in the wilderness, en route to the Promised Land, it is likely that **palm trees** were the most welcome of sights to the Israelites. These tall trees with their wide, waving branches could be seen from afar and signaled an oasis of shade and a precious supply of water and sustenance to weary desert travelers. It is little wonder that when God gave

Moses the details for the construction of His Tabernacle that He chose the palm tree (*tamar*) to adorn the inner walls of His Dwelling Place (1 Kings 6:32). The place of His Presence is indeed the only true oasis in our sojourn on earth; the place we find rest for our souls and are strengthened and sustained by the living water of His Word. The palm trees also indicate that it is the righteous who will flourish in His House, as we read in Psalm 92:12-13: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree... Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God."

Two additional trees of great importance in the Holy Place of the House of God are the **almond** and the **olive**. They feature in the golden Menorah, which symbolizes the illumination of God's Presence and His Word and they work together to bear the light of God.

The almond (*sha'ked*) is the first tree to blossom in Israel and is a signal of spring after the cold, wet winter. It is thus a symbol of new life and hope. God instructed that the branches of the Menorah be decorated with almond buds and blossoms and the lamps were in the form of almonds, which are eye-shaped, emphasizing the fact of God's watchfulness over His Land and people. As expressed by the Psalmist, "Behold, He who watches over Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps" (Ps. 121:4).

The almond also reminds us of God's faithfulness to His Word, as we see in the prophet Jeremiah's vision,

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a rod of **almond** (*sha'ked*)." Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am **watching over** (*sho'ked*) My Word to perform it" (1:11-12).

The lights of the Menorah were fueled by the purest oil of the olive tree (*etz zayit*), which was especially processed and consecrated for this holy purpose.

Trees in the Seven Species

After the miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the long journey through the wilderness, before the Israelites eventually enter the Land of Promise, God references trees:

"When you come into the Land and plant all kinds of trees for food..." (Leviticus 19:23). His instruction here carries an echo of the Garden of Eden, the recreation of which it appears is His desire for His beloved children. He longs to establish a place of rest and beauty where He can again "walk and talk" with them! The "good land" He promised to their forefathers, and to which He is bringing them, is characterized by its abundance of water and by seven particular species.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills, a land of **wheat** and **barley**, of **vines** and **fig** trees and **pomegranates**, a land of **olive** trees and [**date**] honey...(Deut. 8:7-8).

Wheat and Barley are the first and second of the seven, emphasizing their importance as staple crops. Their importance is highlighted in the Bread of Presence (the twelve loaves that are placed on the Table in the Holy Place), in the Temple offerings and in the Festival Cycle.

Vines are the first in the subsequent list of fruit. Wine, the product derived from the fruit of the vine, is the symbol of blessing and joy. In Temple times it was offered to God on the altar together with the morning and evening offerings, as well as on Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh and the Festivals (Leviticus 23:13).

Since the destruction of the Temple, the *challah* loaves, candles, and wine on the table every Shabbat signifies that one's home is a small sanctuary of His Presence.

The first tree mentioned is the **fig tree** (*te'elah*). The special traits of the fig tree are its welcoming shade, pleasant fragrance and its fruitfulness. It yields up to five pickings annually and is therefore a symbol of peaceful prosperity. Conversely, a fig tree without fruit is a picture of calamity (Joel 1:7; Revelation 6:13). At Passover, towards the end of spring, the tree bears a picking of particularly delicious figs that are much sought after. It was at this time that Yeshua cursed the fig tree that bore no fruit (Mark 11:13). If one considers his action in connection with the parable of the barren fig tree he told in Luke 13, he is offering a striking call to repentance, echoing his words: "...unless you repent you will all likewise perish!" (Luke 13:5).

Next is the beautiful pomegranate tree! (*etz rimon*)

The fruit of the pomegranate tree ripens by the month of Tishrei, toward the end of the summer, which is why they are particularly associated with Rosh HaShanah and also appear as decorations in the *sukkah*.

An interesting botanical fact is that there is only one family of the pomegranate tree. It is unique. There is no other plant or tree related to it on earth.² The healthy, antioxidant and cleansing properties of all parts of the fruit, but especially the seeds and juice, are becoming more and more appreciated today. The Hebrew root of the word *rimon* is *ram*, which means high or elevated. We find they are the fruit, carved from copper, chosen by King Solomon to decorate the entrance of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

"...four hundred pomegranates for the two networks, two rows of pomegranates for each network, to cover the two bowls of the capitals that were upon the pillars" (1 Kings 7:42).

King David selected the fruit as the symbol of the Davidic monarchy. Its crown, indeed, has six points which resembles the *Magen David*, the Star of David. The beautiful shape of the pomegranate is found on many archaeological artifacts such as coins, carvings, mosaics, and also in modern Judaica, such as Torah crowns and Ark covers.

Next is unique olive tree (*etz zayit*).

The beautiful olive tree produces light not only from its oil but also in its foliage. As the wind blows through its branches, the silver undersides of the leaves are exposed, causing ripples of light. A reference in the Talmud, concerning the role of Israel as a light to the nations, reflects this:

Israel was called, “An olive tree, leafy and fair” (Jeremiah 11:16), because they shed light on all (*Shemot Rabah* 36:1).

In the gospels, it was under the olive trees on the Mount of Olives where Yeshua was pressed in prayer on that Passover night before his arrest and eventual crucifixion by the Romans.

In addition to its uses for illumination and cosmetic purposes, the many positive medicinal and nutritional properties of the olive are well recognized. There are olive trees in Jerusalem, particularly those in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in northern Israel that are known to be thousands of years old and yet bear fruit. The best oil producing olive trees in the Land are found in the tribal area of Asher in the Galilee.¹

Biblically, the olive is a symbol of peace, hope and illumination. After the devastation of the Flood, Noah sent a dove out from the Ark and we read: “The dove came to him toward evening and there was a freshly picked olive leaf in her mouth...” (Genesis 8:11). This was a sure indication of the hope of new life. This adds significance to the symbol of the reborn state of Israel – the menorah and two olive branches – and her national anthem ‘*HaTikvah*’, ‘The Hope’.

Finally, we have the stately **palm tree** (*tamar*).

Every part of the palm tree is useful to those who dwell in desert lands. Dates (*tamarim*) are delicious and healthy as fresh fruit. Dried dates are edible throughout the year. Date honey and tasty date spread are made from the sweet, thick juice of the ripened fruit. Date pills are used as camel fodder. The palm fibers are used for ropes and the leaves for braiding mats and baskets. A most productive tree! All that it lacks is fragrance.

Date palms historically were a symbol of triumph and honor. The Maccabees had them minted on coins to signify their victory over the Greek army, as did

the Romans to commemorate their conquest of Jerusalem! ³ In parades to honor conquerors, princes or kings, it was customary to wave palm branches and lay them in their path. This was how the people of Jerusalem welcomed Yeshua as he entered the city, riding on a donkey. Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road or waved them.

Josephus, the Jewish historian (37-95 CE/AD) records that all the beautiful palm groves around the Jerusalem area were destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE/AD, along with the destruction of the city and the Temple⁴. During the subsequent two thousand years that the people of Israel were in exile from the land of Israel the land was totally denuded of trees under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. In fact it became so desolate and almost devoid of life that no birds traversed the land. According to Mark Twain's descriptions in "Innocents Abroad" where he recorded observations of his trip through the area circa 1860, it was a desolate land and not an inspiring place to visit. He wrote:

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine [then comprised of what is Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria today] must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent. ... It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land.

The trees are joyous at the return of the exiles who now plant and nurture them in place of the enemy who heedlessly raises an axe to them. Today Israel is adorned with millions of trees and is one of the foremost bird watching areas in the world.

This regard for the life of a tree and the care of the Land given by God is reflected in the words of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who lived in the time of the Second Temple, he said:

"If you have a sapling in your hand and you are told 'The Messiah has come!'" first plant the sapling and then go and greet him," (*Avot De Rabbi Natan* 31).⁵

God gave man the task of caring for the Garden, and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai saw that it would be a more fitting welcome to first ensure the life of the sapling and then to welcome His Messiah.

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¹ Shoshana Harari, *The Seven Healing Fruits of Israel*, Israel 2007; 135 ² Ibid; 110 ³ Ibid; 156 ⁴ Ibid; 157

⁵ Nogah HaReuveni, *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage*, Neot Kedumim, Israel; 129