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Shabbat ends in London at 5.44 pm
Tu B'Shevat is on Tuesday evening and Wednesday

The
Cycle of
Life

Bar Mitzvah

by Rabbi Ephraim Levine, Watford United Synagogue

The Bar Mitzvah celebration takes pride of place amongst the lifecycle events for boys. At the tender age of thirteen, a young boy becomes an adult and is now obligated to observe all the *mitzvot*. Of course, when we say that a thirteen year old boy becomes an adult, we are not saying that he is now permitted to do all things that a legal adult would be permitted to do. His becoming an adult means that he is now responsible for his own Torah and *mitzvah*-related actions.

The most well known of the Bar Mitzvah practices are the 'call-up' (*aliyah*) to the Torah, reading the Maftir and Haftarah, and putting on Tefillin for the first time some time before his Bar Mitzvah Shabbat. These are special *mitzvot* that the Bar Mitzvah boy often spends a year

preparing for. When the big day arrives, it's no longer practice, but the real thing.

I would like to focus on the *mitzvah* of Tefillin. The Tefillin are placed on the head, just above the front of the brain and on the arm, just next to the heart. This teaches us to involve both our mind and heart as we deal with life's challenges in general and as we endeavour, in particular, to grow in our Judaism.



This is certainly a fitting message for a Bar Mitzvah boy as he begins to make his way in the world. We handle many of life's challenges better when we apply our mind and heart properly. The lifelong observance of this cherished *mitzvah* can only help to develop his youthful alacrity into adulthood and strengthen his devotion to life as a Jew.

Encompassing One's Being

by Rabbi Emmanuel Levy
Palmer's Green & Southgate United Synagogue

Having witnessed the miraculous division of the Sea of Reeds and experienced their own salvation, the Jewish people broke out into a song of praise to G-d. The Torah testifies: 'And the people believed in G-d and in Moshe (Moses) his servant' (Shemot 14:31). This seems to imply that until that point they did not have this faith. However, that implication would run counter to an earlier verse, in Parashat Shemot, which tells us that even before the redemption from Egypt, when Moshe performed miraculous signs before the Israelites, 'the people believed' (ibid 4:31). What new dimension was added to their faith following the splitting of the Sea of Reeds?

There is an important distinction between 'intellectual faith' and a stronger form of faith, which 'encompasses one's entire being'. This distinction can be best understood by the following examples:

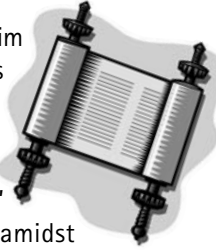
One can believe in G-d because it is logical to do so. When Rabbi Akiva was asked by a Roman princess to provide her with proof of G-d's existence, he asked her rhetorically, 'Who wove your garment?' Rabbi Akiva went on to explain that just as a garment must have had a manufacturer and could not have come into being of its own accord, so must the world. However, such a belief, based on cold intellect, will not necessarily spur one into righteous actions for the sake of Heaven.

Charles Blondin, a famous tight rope walker who lived in the nineteenth century, once announced that he was prepared to cross Niagara Falls high up on a tight rope. One

fatal slip would have cost him his life. Before beginning his perilous crossing, he shouted to the huge crowd, 'Do you believe that I, Blondin, can walk over this tight-rope?' The audience responded amidst great cheering, 'Yes, we believe!' After accomplishing this magnificent feat, he announced, 'Do you believe that I, Blondin, can cross Niagara Falls blindfolded and wheeling a barrow?' 'Yes' they shouted '...we believe!' Having achieved this act of daring, he asked, 'Do you believe that I, Blondin, can cross Niagara falls, blindfolded with a wheelbarrow, with a man in the barrow?' 'Yes' they screamed, '...we believe!' 'Alright then', said Blondin, 'Who would like to volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow?' There was an eerie silence.

It is one thing to believe intellectually, but quite another to put that belief into practice by risking one's life in the process. That was the type of belief demonstrated by Nachshon ben Aminadav and the tribe of Yehudah when they leapt into the waters of the Sea of Reeds as the Egyptians approached. It was only then that the waters parted.

Only after their final salvation, when they saw that every Egyptian soldier drowned and every Israelite was saved did they *all* reach that extra dimension, the pinnacle of faith which encompassed their very being, and which motivated them to break out in tumultuous song of affirmation: '*This is my G-d and I will exalt Him*' (15:2).



Tu B'Shevat: Our Nature

by Dov Lerner, Tribe Rabbinic Intern and Rabbinic Student at Yeshiva University

Originally serving a fiscal function, marking the end of the agricultural tax year, Tu B'Shevat (which falls this Wednesday) has been transformed into a celebration of nature.

In an age where sowing and ploughing have become rare for most of us, where the wheels that rotate are those of the family car rather than the family mill, nature sits somewhat on the periphery. We pass by natural beauty on a daily basis – glancing at the birds and the trees or seeing slowly-growing grass getting mowed. Yet we rarely notice it. We erect stone edifices in place of mountains, shards of glass in place of waterfalls – the world around us has become artificial.

Yet, if we look to our spiritual epicentre, the Temple, we are surprised to see precisely this vision.

In Parshat Shoftim we read: 'you shall not plant a tree next to the altar of G-d' (Devarim 16:21). The Rambam (d. 1204) extended this prohibition to anywhere in the Temple courtyard. In a further extension, Rabbi Akiva Eiger (d. 1837) ruled that our synagogues are considered in *halacha* as miniature versions of the Temple, and therefore must also be free of trees.

Why is the Divine distanced from His creation? Why do we separate our spirituality from the world that inspires much of our celebration?

Perhaps the origin of our confusion is an oft-repeated verse from Psalms: 'They are planted

in the House of G-d, in His courtyards they shall blossom' (92:14). Referring to the righteous, the verse describes their presence in G-d's house in very natural terms. However, as noted by Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (d. 1888), the verse then shifts from G-d's house to His courtyard. Although we are rooted in our synagogues, the institution from which we draw our sustenance, our values and ideals, it is only in the courtyard, the world beyond the sacred, where we blossom. The Temple's natural vacuum directs our attention to the world outside.



Even as we enclose ourselves within our self-made buildings, our dreams must lie beyond the walls that surround us. We need not live in the forest, but we must look to the world that under G-d's guidance spawned us, the dust that

made our humanity, the trees that provide for us despite our absent mindedness.

There may be moments of failure, where our hopes decompose and our aspirations erode away. Yet just as the winter fades and branches begin to bud, our hopes will rise once more. We are not heartless hollows built of brick, but breathing, growing, ever-changing, spirits of passion. Like plants, let us lean toward the light, allow others to nurture us, and offer them the fruit of their labour. Let our rigid constructions not lead us to what J. A. Hobson called 'the hardening of the moral arteries'. This Tu B'Shevat, as we eat fresh fruit, let us look outside and not simply remember nature, but *our* nature.

And finally... Gems from the Haftarah: Sing when you are Winning

by Rabbi Daniel Fine, Head of Tribe-sponsored Chachmei Angliyah,
learning-based summer programme in Israel for British students

One event that stands out from my schooldays is the assembly in which we welcomed the new headmaster. I remember being made to line up in the playground in silence, after which each form was marched into the assembly hall – upon orders, of course. The new headmaster, ordering boys around with his megaphone, was obviously keen to stamp his authority early on. We were being shown, in no uncertain terms, that the headmaster was no pushover. However, a bird had other ideas. Hovering above, the bird spotted its victim. The new headmaster's *kippah* was severely dirtied. Our undeclared new school hero, the bird, summarily performed a lap of honour whilst chirping a victory tune. The seriousness of the occasion evaporated, and the sheer incongruity of the moment gave way to laughter all around.

This week's Haftarah contains the song of Devorah the Prophetess, following the miraculous victory over Sisera's forces. G-d had orchestrated a tremendous, ear-piercing noise which caused the enemy to panic and take full flight. The link to the sidrah is song – Devorah's song is akin to the Song at the Sea of Reeds featured in our sidrah.

What is the concept of song? And why is the Torah itself called a 'song' (Devarim 31:19)?

A song is the synthesis of disparate parts to form a unified whole. The beauty of an orchestra is the fusion of all the various instruments to produce one harmonious whole. This is why 'song' is called *shirah* – from the verbal root *yashar* (straight), connoting direction and purpose. The various parts are not random features. They purposefully contribute to the overall goal of the piece.



This is why the Torah itself is called 'a song' – Torah connects the various parts of the world. It teaches us that there is no disparate randomness. Everything and every event is orchestrated by the Grand Conductor and His unified master plan.

When the Jewish People hailed freedom at the sea they looked back and saw that their slavery had propelled them to being able to connect to liberation. They understood that everything had been part of a unified plan. Similarly, when Devorah won the war and welcomed forty years' peace she realised that the same war, which had initially threatened our nation's very existence, was ultimately the cause of its tranquillity. The disparate parts had come together. Appropriately, they engaged in song.

Humour, as I experienced in the school playground, comes with incongruity, when things do not fit together. Security, prompting song, comes when unity of purpose is revealed.

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Editor: Rabbi Chaim Gross Editor in Chief: Rabbi Baruch Davis

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To sponsor Daf Hashavua please contact Richard Marcus on 020 8343 5685, or rmarcus@theus.org.uk

If you have any comments or questions regarding Daf Hashavua please email rabbigross@theus.org.uk