



SIMCHAT SHMUEL

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Shavuot, the second of our three pilgrimage festivals, is also known as *Zman Matan Torateinu* – the time of receiving the Torah – as well as *Chag Ha-Bikkurim* – the festival of the first fruits.

One of the customs associated with Shavuot mentioned in *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 494:3)* might very well reflect each of these two secondary names of the festival.

“There is a custom to place greenery (either plants or trees) in our Synagogues (before) during Shavuot, to recall the joyful experience of receiving the Torah...”

How exactly are we to understand this comment, specifically that placing greenery in our synagogues is somehow related to recalling the joy of receiving the Torah? Some have suggested that perhaps by placing trees and plants in the synagogue on Shavuot, we are symbolically recalling physically standing at Sinai, to experience being in the “wilderness” of Sinai, arriving at the mountain in preparation to receive the Torah.

But is there perhaps something more, some deeper meaning inherent in this peculiar decorative custom?

I am reminded of a challenging teaching from the *Mishna* in *Pirkei Avot* (3:9):

“Rabbi Yaakov said: If a man is walking by the way and is studying and then interrupts his study and says: ‘How fine is this tree?’ or ‘How fine is this ploughed field?’ Scripture regards him as though he was liable with his soul...”

This is a challenging idea! If I am on a hike, listening to a Torah class on my mp3 player, and suddenly I see an incredibly beautiful tree in front of me, and I exclaim, “Wow, what a beautiful tree,” how could this possibly be a transgression, let alone a grave transgression? The psalm we recite each and every *Shabbat* includes the very verse: *“Ma Gadlu maasecha Hashem – How great are your acts, Hashem?”*



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This would seem to be in line with an important entry in the legal code of Maimonides as well:

“And what is the way for us to fully realize our love and awe for G-d? During those moments when a person contemplates G-d’s creations and wondrous acts, and sees within these creations the Divine wisdom which is endless and has no bounds, immediately he is moved to love G-d, to praise G-d’s glory, and longs with all his desire to know G-d’s great name.” (Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 2:2)

How then are we to understand the teaching from the Mishna cited earlier, in light of this profound teaching from the Rambam? It is this very question that the great Chassidic Master, *Rabbi Yisrael Elazar Hopshtein, the Avodat Elazar of Kozshnitz zy’a*, addresses in explaining the tradition of placing greenery in our synagogues on *Shavuot*. The Rebbe wrote in an essay for the festival of *Shavuot*:

“There are those who have explained the custom of placing trees near the holy ark on Shavuot, in accordance with their interpretation of a teaching from the Mishna (Avot 3:9): If a man is walking by the way and is studying and then interrupts his study and says: ‘How fine is this tree?’ or ‘How fine is this ploughed field?’ Scripture regards him as though he was liable with his soul.

It would seem at first glance that this is a harsh idea, what is so atrocious about being awestruck by the wonders of creation? Alas, it is possible to explain that the intention of this teaching is if one’s purpose in noticing

nature is to be distracted from his studies, if one sees this contemplation of G-d’s great acts as a distraction from his studies, if he sees no connection between the splendor of nature and the Torah’s wisdom, such a person would indeed be liable!

In actuality, of course there is no distinction to be made between nature and Torah, and all of nature needs to be seen specifically as in accordance with the Torah’s wisdom.

Therefore, we place trees around the holy ark on Shavuot, to remind us of the eternal connection and relevance of Torah and the splendors of nature...”

Perhaps, it is precisely this idea that is meant to commemorate “the joy of receiving the Torah.” Maybe it’s through contemplation of the wonders of nature that we arrive at the ability to appreciate and begin to approach some understanding of the wondrous acts of the divine, and through the wisdom, guidance and discipline of Torah, we are charged to become guardians of nature! The connection between Torah and nature is indeed not only inseparable, but also it is through the wisdom of Torah that we fully realize our mission as G-d’s trusted partners in preserving and improving this world ; and in sharing with the entire world the awareness of the gifts our natural resources provide for us not only in terms of our physical well being, but also as a vehicle for experiencing spiritual inspiration, fulfillment, and deep awe and appreciation for *Hashem’s* ever presence in our lives. ■