

What a Beautiful Tree by Rabbi Elli Fischer

Tu b'Shevat, the Jewish New Year of the Trees, is a good time for Torah learning about trees. I'd like to share with you a mishnah that has always concerned me, and see if we can learn something new that will help us enhance our appreciation of nature.

Rabbi Shimon says: one who is walking on a path and is repeating, and he interrupts his repetitions and says, "What a beautiful tree! Or, what a beautiful plowed field!" the Torah treats it as though he owes his life.

I've always been taught that this Mishna means that if one is engaged in Torah study, one shouldn't 'stop and smell the roses', or otherwise appreciate nature. What's at stake here is *bittul Torah*, neglect of the Torah, which is tantamount to a capital crime. Rashi, ad loc, seems to adopt this position when he refers to the trees and fields as '*devarim beteilim*', i.e., frivolous things, a category which, in most yeshivot, includes pretty much anything aesthetically pleasurable.

But I've got a couple of questions and observations which lead me to a different conclusion. First, who ever comments on how beautiful a plowed field is? A sunset. A flower. Maybe even a tree.

Second, an *ilan*, as far as I can ascertain, specifically refers to a FRUIT tree. Witness: We only make *birkat ha-ilanot* on fruit trees. In all other contexts that I can think of, it means fruit tree.

Third, the terms *shoneh* and *mishnato* have very specific connotations. One would be diligently repeating terse statements that he had memorized. Learning was done orally, and repetition was the name of the game. Thus, interrupting one's *mishnah* means neglecting one's learning altogether. If it's not committed to memory, all is lost.

This last point is reinforced by the subsequent Mishna which distinguishes between actively allowing one's *mishnah* to atrophy and what we'd call normal memory loss. The Mishna after that might also be relevant to the discussion, as it may suggest that learning won't last unless accompanied by a requisite degree of seriousness, though that Mishna speaks of *chokhma*, not *mishnah*.

Thus, I think that the Mishna isn't talking about '*bittul Torah*' in the way it's understood in the yeshivos. Rather, the Mishna criticizes one who interrupts his study at a time when he risks atrophy, because he's distracted by something of PRACTICAL value. Like he stopped to check his stocks or something. Both fruit trees and plowed fields are of this latter category. The Mishna is not criticizing aesthetic appreciation of things; it's criticizing an attitude which would allow one to interrupt Torah study and allow it to atrophy in order to engage in important but ultimately mundane '*chayei sha'ah*', temporal life.

There are an additional two points to reinforce my reading. First, R' Yonah there doesn't talk about '*devarim beteelim*' like Rashi, rather about '*sichat chullin*' - mundane conversation - i.e., something which undermines the sense of awe that ought to accompany Torah study.

Second, if the correct version of the Mishna is indeed R' Shimon (some have R' Yaakov), then it can be read in light of the Talmudic narrative in Shabbat 33b, where R Shimon (b. Yohai) is very severe with someone who was neglecting the *chayei olam* (eternal life) of Torah study in order to engage in the *chayei sha'ah* of planting a field.

Perhaps this new reading can give us a better relationship to our own appreciation of nature, and help us, by appreciating His wondrous creation, to experience an ever-deepening awe of Hashem.

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