

THE SEVEN SPECIES AND THE ORANGE - NOSTALGIA AND JEWISH NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Nostalgia for an event or a place - real or imagined - serves as an aid for personal and collective identity building. However, it can also be a comfortable snare, for building an identity that empowers and motivates can, at the same time, provide an excuse for psychologically sinking into a sleepy passivity from which it is hard to rise. In national terms this is referred to by the twin concepts of 'diaspora exile' and 'national rebirth.'

The ideas of 'rootedness' and 'exile' (rootlessness) surface over and over again in Jewish history. The Land of Israel for the People of Israel in the Diaspora was an object of yearning not experienced firsthand, but imagined. The dialectic of rooted and rootless encouraged nostalgic rituals intended to strengthen identity and rootedness.

It is not surprising that trees, and chiefly tree planting, are used to symbolize rootedness, in contrast to the Wandering Jew motif. The tree, compared to man in various cultures and used metaphorically to denote the life cycle (birth, survival, death), also serves as a symbol for national interests. Specific tree types, whether common or rare, in any region, are chosen as symbols of consciousness formation along with associated ritual activity, such as partaking of the indigenous fruits of Israel on Tu B'shvat.

Eating fruits of the Land, as a metaphor for rootedness, has traced the strings of recollection from the present to an imagined glorified past and shaped the collective memory of Israel in exile. This worked two ways: on the one hand, fostering a sense of belonging and an eternal longing for the Land that promoted passivity; and prompting an awakening to 'return' and national rebirth on the other.

In view of this, it is interesting to see if the ritual of 'partaking of fruits of the Land' differed between 'in the Land' and 'in the Diaspora,' and to see which fruits were chosen to help shape memory and strengthen the collective, in exile and later in the Land.

Tu B'shvat and Fruits of the Land of Israel

In the 16th century, at the time when the descendants of those exiled from Spain and Portugal returned to the Land and settled in Safed, the Kabbalists celebrated Tu B'shvat with a festive meal, a Seder. This is surprising when we consider that the traditional object of yearning (Eretz Yisrael) and the fruits of Israel were tangible and within reach. An explanation may be found in the fact that the feast took on apocalyptic content and the fruits symbolized the mending of Man and the yearning for complete redemption of which Eretz Yisrael is only a part. The custom of the festive meal spread quickly through the communities of Israel thanks to the publication of the book 'Citrus Fruits,' in 31 editions throughout the world. However, in the Diaspora, it was cast in traditional content - nostalgia for a time and place in the past, real and imagined, represented by the sensual experience of eating the fruits of Israel. Thus, for example, Uri Zvi Greenberg describes Tu B'shvat of his childhood in the Diaspora:

Snow covers the horizon. Frost on the windows. How can we explain this to our sun-drenched children in Eretz Yisrael? We children of Israel in the Diaspora winter, we feel the bloom in ourselves: It is the Land of Israel blooming within us. Our fathers offer us carob, figs and dates to bless on a snowy, frosty day: the fruits of faraway Eretz Yisrael, with a warm luster in our eyes and the taste of

Eretz Yisrael in our mouths! In the winter of a foreign land, we bless the fruits of the Land of Israel, our land always and forever.

The Seven Species - Jewish Exilic Nostalgia

Aside from the apocalyptic meaning in the nostalgic symbolism, eating fruits of the Land underwent another revision. The Kabbalists of Safed included 30 types of Eretz Yisrael plants in their Tu B'Shvat seder, including vegetables and legumes, over which the blessing 'fruit of the land' rather than 'fruit of the tree' is made. Among the many types was citrus fruit (such as oranges, mandarins and lemons), as the title of the book 'Citrus Fruits' mentions specifically. In the Diaspora, though, partaking of the fruits of the Land is associated with the Seven Species with which the Land of Israel is blessed:

"A land of wheat, barley, the vine, fig and pomegranate; a land of olive and honey" (Deuteronomy 8:8).

These Seven Species were also granted halakhic priority over other fruits; their eating and blessing precedes that of the others.ⁱ The nostalgic attitude towards the fruits of Eretz Yisrael is tied, therefore, to the Seven Species, even though it was customary to eat other fruits as well.

The Seven Species in the Settlement of the Land

In modern times, settlers in Eretz Yisrael did not ascribe particular importance to the Seven Species. Settlers in the first aliyot almost completely ignored the agricultural landscape of the Land with its many orchards and fields, because these were tilled by Arabs. They traveled very little to the mountainous areas of the Land, staying mainly in the coastal region. When they did relate to those areas, it was through the eyes of the Bible, namely, the ancient Israelite settlement in the hilly region. Or, they praised the fertile Land and its glorious past when the people of Israel lived in their Land. This Diaspora nostalgic attitude is similar to that described above towards the Seven Species - a passive approach full of yearning for the past.

An alternative way to relate to Arab agriculture in the hilly region was to transform nostalgia into energetic activity of regeneration and renewal: building Jewish settlements. Yehoshua Barzilai (Eisenstadt) described his journey from his home in Jafa to Jerusalem:

How beautiful the dates, how splendid the olives, the figs have only just ripened." He passed through "groves of oranges, lemons, citrons, almonds, pomegranates, olives, nuts, figs, and dates whose treetops dazzle the eyes." And yet: "I looked around at the Judean hills and also saw terrible destruction and land laid to waste- our Land had been turned into a desert." The conclusion: "In Eretz Yisrael the vine and the olive tree will blossom even in these places, if only the land is worked with industrious hands."ⁱⁱ

These hands were obviously meant to be Jewish, but Barzilai expresses regret that the Jews were not eager to settle in the hills but preferred the coast.

In the coastal and Galilee settlements the Jews did grow grapes for wine, as well as olives and wheat. But these crops did not take on any nostalgic sense that associated them with the Seven Species. They were grown strictly for economic reasons. In fact, vine growers were severely criticized by the likes of Ahad Ha'am, who claimed that the unprofitable crop was leading the settlements to a dead end.

Alongside the two tendencies of indifference of the new Jewish farmers to the symbolic value of the Seven Species and disregard of the Arab agricultural presence, the old

'Diaspora nostalgic attitude' towards the Seven Species continued. As in the Diaspora, they continued to feature in works of art, similar to the Twelve Tribes, the Star of David and the Menorah (visible at the King David Hotel, the Ben-Zvi family hut in Jerusalem and at the Bialik House in Tel Aviv.) It is noteworthy symbolically, that the Seven Species, as well as other fruits exported for Tu B'shvat to the Diaspora, were eaten in dried form.

The Olive Tree - Special Symbolism

Of the Seven Species, the olive stands out as a special national symbol, a symbol of peace (as per the story of Noah and the dove with the olive branch) and as a symbol of deep roots. But the olive tree also took on political contentious meaning. Alterman's poem 'The Olive Tree,'ⁱⁱⁱ written a decade before the establishment of the State, depicts the survivability of the olive tree, analogous to the people of Israel, throughout the long years of drought (exile), and its unwavering steadfastness:

No retreat...how holy is its oath!...It is shaped in the wall...in its twisted trunk, in its flaming veins...for the mountain will stand and its heart will beat, as long as there is one sprout slicing its chest.

The symbolism of the olive tree reached its peak when the motif of olive branches was chosen as the emblem of the State of Israel, alongside the Menorah, according to Zechariah 4:2-3:

I see a solid gold lamp stand there with a bowl on its top... It has seven lamps on it... and two olive trees beside it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.

As the Seven Species became a poetic nostalgic idea meant to connect the Diaspora Jew to the Land of Israel via the senses, so the olive tree was intangible, a poetic symbol.

Over the years the Jewish farmers uprooted the vineyards, to which they had never attached any ancient symbolic majesty, and planted orange groves in their stead. Also in abandoned Arab villages, olive and fig trees were uprooted or left desolate, because it generally did not pay to cultivate them. Many of them evolved over the years into hiking sites (called *bustanim*, from the Arabic word for orchard), enabling nostalgic reminiscing about the Seven Species and the 'good old days' when the nation of Israel 'sat each under his vine and under his fig tree.' The remains of the ancient Arab landscape were repressed.

The Orange - A Nostalgia-Free Zionist Symbol

The orange met a surprisingly opposite fate. It went from being a purely economic fruit to the ultimate symbol of Zionism - representing establishment of roots, Jewish labor and technological advance in contrast to Arab ignorance. Its attractiveness - round, large, and bright orange color - made it easy to transform it into an Israeli icon. Its mark as an Arab export ('Yaffa') was appropriated by Israel and it became an official Israeli fruit ('Jaffa'). Today, after years of almost total disappearance as an agricultural crop, it has undergone accelerated renewal, but no longer as a fashionable fruit or as a Zionist symbol. Modern agricultural development has enabled rejuvenation of strains of the Seven Species, but today the Israeli label is not associated with the nostalgic-Diaspora flavor of the Seven Species. They are not endowed with the symbolism that once adorned the orange.

Another Revolution: the Olive Tree as a Symbol Today

The symbolism of the Seven Species with which Israel is blessed has remained,

therefore, a Diaspora feature, intangible, serving as a nostalgic reminder through the long history of the Jewish People and its passive clinging to the Land, of longing for the ancient landscapes of Israel. The orange, which rejected nostalgia in favor of the empowerment derived from nation building, also lost its status as an Israeli icon. In contrast, the poetic idea of the olive tree as a symbol took center stage in its new form: the political struggle for the Land. Already in 1956, Leah Goldberg published a poem describing an abandoned Arab village and its olive trees, symbolizing Arab ownership of the land:^{iv}

Above one of the hills/An orange bird wings/I do not know its name,/But the olive trees know it,/And the wind chases it and sings:/Your home is here/In the eyes of an Arab girl/At the entrance to the ruined village/An orange bird hovers/I do not know its name.

In contrast, the poet Zelda, in 'A Place of Fire,' published after the Yom Kippur War which greatly affected her,^v reinforced the olive tree motif as symbolizing the love of the people of Israel for their Land (the City of David as a metonym for the Land):

"When an alien enemy king/Maligns our great love/For David's City /The roots of the olive tree hear/How the blood of the little soldier whispers/ In the dust:/The city afflicts my life."

(Translation by Penina Goldschmidt)

NOTES

ⁱGemara Tractate Berachot 41a

ⁱⁱYehoshua Barzilai (Eisenstadt) (1913), "In the Gates of Jerusalem,"

The Writings of Yehoshua Barzilai (Eisenstadt), Jaffa: Hever Sofrim.

ⁱⁱⁱNatan Alterman (1938), ***Stars Outside***, Tel Aviv: Yahdav.

^{iv}Lea Goldberg (1959), ***Early and Later: Selected Poems***, Tel Aviv: Poalim Library, National Kibbutz.

^vZelda (1974), ***Be Not Far: Poems***, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad.

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