Tu B’Shevat - Two Banquets

Question

 Tu B’Shevat isn’t really a holiday. It’s true that we call it the Rosh Hashanah of the trees. But that doesn’t mean that the trees all dress up in kittels and sway as they listen to the blowing of the shofar. It just means that it’s considered to be the beginning of the year in terms of calculating what type of ma’aser to give from the crops that grew that year. Nevertheless, the custom has developed to eat fruits on Tu B’Shevat, especially those that grow in *Eretz Yisroel*. As the Jewish people have now been living in exile for thousands of years, Tu B’Shevat became a day to remember *Eretz Yisroel*, and how it is special.

 But that’s our question that we now need to ask: why is *Eretz Yisroel* special? Isn’t it possible to be a *frum* Jew outside of *Eretz Yisroel*? Do you need to live in *Eretz Yisroel* to learn the Torah and keep the *mitzvos*? Why is *Eretz Yisroel* so important to us?

 As it turns out, a non-Jewish king once asked the same question, and the story went as follows:

*Mashal*

 Rephael was a faithful servant of the king. He advised the king in all matters of the kingdom. He helped the king with his finances. He helped the king with diplomacy. He even helped the king in issues relating to the military. And the king loved Rephael for all his help. He showered Rephael with wealth and honor, for he truly did not know what he would do without him.

 But Rephael wasn’t happy. Even though he had both wealth and honor, it wasn’t enough. In fact, it wasn’t what he wanted at all. What Rephael wanted was only one thing: to move to *Eretz Yisroel* and to live a full Torah lifestyle there. But this dream of Rephael’s was the one wish that the king would not grant him, because he valued Rephael’s advice so much that he simply could not let him go.

 “Why do you have to go to *Eretz Yisroel*?” the king would ask. “Don’t you have everything that you need right here? Don’t I allow you to study your Torah and keep your *mitzvos*? I’m sorry, I can’t let you go. I need you here. Maybe next year I’ll allow it, but right now I’m not ready to part with you.”

 And so, every year Rephael would present his request to the king, and every year the king would turn it down.

 Time passed, and Rephael started to get old. He became nervous that he may not live too much longer. And he became fearful that if he didn’t go to *Eretz Yisroel* now, he may never get the opportunity. So this time he pleaded with the king:

 “Please, Your Majesty! Haven’t I been a faithful servant to you for all of these years? I’m an old man now. There’s not much more that I can do for you! Please grant an old man’s wish, and let me live out my remaining days in *Eretz Yisroel*!”

 “Okay,” sighed the king. “If this really means so much to you, then I guess I have to allow it. After all, you did serve me well for many years. However, I am attaching one condition to this permission. You must first explain to me why living in *Eretz Yisroel* is so important to you. If you can successfully convince me of the importance of *Eretz Yisroel*, then I will let you go. But only after I am convinced!”

 “Very well, Your Majesty,” replied Rephael. “In that case, I have two requests of you. The first is that you should hold a banquet in my honor in the palace. The second is that you should then attend a banquet at my home, which I will hold in your honor. Then, I will explain everything.”

 “So it shall be!” declared the king. “Next week you will come to my palace and I will serve you a sumptuous feast!”

 “Thank you, Your Majesty. Just please remember that I am Jewish, and I eat only kosher foods. I won’t be able to eat most of your foods. I can only eat fruit.”

 “Of course. Everything shall be taken care of!”

 A week later, the day of the banquet arrived. Rephael arrived at the palace, and the king ushered him in.

 “Welcome, Rephael, please come in and have a seat at the table. I have prepared a special kosher feast of fruits in your honor.

 “Servants! Please bring out the first course!”

 The servants brought out platters filled with large, juicy oranges.

 “Try this, Rephael. What do you think?”

 “Mmm! It’s delicious! I’ve never had such a good orange in my life!”

 “These are special oranges, Rephael. They come from a faraway land called Florida. I sent my servants there to get these oranges just in your honor! Now, let’s have the second course.”

 So the servants brought out platters filled with beautiful looking grapes.

 “Rephael, do you like these grapes?”

 “They’re amazing! Where did you get such grapes?”

 “These grapes are from the best vineyards in France. I sent my servants there to get them, just for you, Rephael. Now let’s have the third course.”

 The servants brought out platters filled with pears. There were pears of all colors. There were green pears, yellow pears, brown pears, and red pears.

 “Where did you get such a beautiful selection of pears, Your Majesty?”

 “There’s a tiny island in the middle of the ocean where all of the different kinds of pears grow. I sent my servants on a month-long journey on a boat, in order to get these pears!”

 “Your Majesty, I am so honored by this special banquet that you have prepared for me. I hope that I can now repay this honor by inviting you to a banquet at my home next week.”

 The day of the banquet arrived, and the king’s chariot pulled up to Rephael’s house.

 “Your Majesty, welcome! I’m so glad that you have come! Please come sit at the table, so that you can enjoy my banquet.”

 Rephael then ran to the kitchen and brought out the first course: a plate of oranges.

 “These oranges look a little wrinkled. Are you sure they’re good?”

 “Of course! Why shouldn’t they be good?”

 So the king started to peel one of the oranges. He held the orange a little bit away, so that it wouldn’t squirt juice into his face.

 “Oh, Your Majesty, you don’t have to be so concerned. These oranges have no juice in them.”

 “No juice? Are these oranges from Florida?”

 “Florida? Of course not! These oranges come from my cousin Chaim’s backyard!”

 “You don’t have any Florida oranges?”

 “What’s the difference? An orange is an orange! Please, Your Majesty, finish the food on your plate. I want to bring out the next course.”

 The second course that Rephael brought out was a plate full of grapes. The grapes were brownish, and there was a terrible smell coming from them.

 “Let me guess, these grapes aren’t from France.”

 “Of course not. I got them in the supermarket.”

 “Okay, that can’t be too bad. The supermarket usually sells fresh fruit.”

 “No, you’re misunderstanding, Your Majesty. I didn’t get these grapes from the produce section of the supermarket. I found these grapes in the garbage can behind the supermarket. Isn’t that great? They were free!”

 “Uch!”

 “Please, Your Majesty, a grape is a grape! Eat up! I want to serve the third course. I’m serving pears.”

 “I hope these are the colored pears.”

 “Oh yes, they’re a special color.”

 “Which ones are they? Red? Yellow? Green? Oh my goodness! What is that?”

 “They’re pears!”

 “But they’re black!”

 “Yes, I told you they’re a special color. Eat them!”

 “Help! I’m being poisoned!”

 “Please, Your Majesty, calm down. Just try a little bit. Stop being so picky. A pear is a pear.”

 “It tastes disgusting! Where did you get such horrible pears?”

 “Well, outside of the city, there’s a small pond. Actually, it’s more of a swamp.”

 “You mean you didn’t take a boat to get there?”

 “Yes, a boat. A rowboat!”

 “To an island?”

 “Not really an island. It’s more like a big piece of mud in the middle of the swamp. That’s where these pears grow, so I got them from there.”

 “Rephael, I must say, I have never been so offended in my life!”

 “What do you mean?”
 ”What do I mean? I mean that I prepared a beautiful feast in your honor. And this is how you pay me back? By feeding me garbage?”

 “Please, Your Majesty, don’t be offended. I had to do all of this in order to explain to you why I wish to go to *Eretz Yisroel*.”

 “*Eretz Yisroel*? What does any of this have to do with *Eretz Yisroel*?”

 “Ah, Your Majesty, now I am ready to explain.

*Nimshal*

 “You see, if there’s one thing that I have clearly demonstrated to you, it’s that an orange is not an orange, a grape is not a grape, and a pear is not a pear. There can be big differences between them! Some of them are delicious, and some of them are horrible. When you go to the king’s palace, everything you get there is the best. But if the king comes to your house, it’s not as good.

 Yes, it’s true, you can learn Torah and do *mitzvos* outside of *Eretz Yisroel* too. But there’s a big difference! *Eretz Yisroel* is the place where *Hashem’s* presence is located. Learning Torah and doing *mitzvos* there is like doing them in the king’s palace. Everything there is better! The people who live in *Eretz Yisroel*, and who learn Torah and keep the mitzvos, are simply able to achieve greater spiritual levels than those who don’t live there! And that’s why I want to live in *Eretz Yisroel*.”

 “Okay, I’m convinced.”

 And now you should be too.