

This is truly a week of learning. Moses learns valuable lessons from his father-in-law Yitro, who learns the details of the Israelites' miraculous delivery from Egypt and recognizes the supremacy of HaShem (18:8-11); and the Israelites receive the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, the Ten Statements (Commandments) and learn the rules for creating a free, equitable, and sustainable society. And Tu Bi-Shevat teaches us that *tikum olam* (healing the world) includes doing our part to safeguard our Earth's precious resources. Although every Commandment can be applied to this important work, they all stem from the first two. If we acknowledge HaShem's supremacy (#1), we will not "chase after the false gods of our own desires," as I like to call idol worship (#2). As Hillel told the pagan who dared him to explain the Torah to him while he stood on one foot, "The rest is commentary." Indeed, each Commandment contains a seed from which the *mitzvot*, our instruction manual, will grow. How timely, that Tu Bi-Shevat coincides with our parashah! Actually Tu Bi-Shevat was not originally a festival, but simply the date for calculating the age of trees to determine when fruit may be brought to the Temple, i.e., taxed. In Hebrew, the number 15 is written with the letters טו (*tet vav* – 9+6), and pronounced *tu*. Tu Bi-Shevat, the 15th of Shevat, was tax day, like April 15 in the USA today. The Kabbalists of the Middle Ages, who believed that every living thing contains a spark of the Divine Presence, created the symbolic rituals that underly many of our Tu Bi-Shevat celebrations today. When the Zionists began to reforest what is now Israel, they repurposed Tu Bi-Shevat as a day for planting trees and eating the land's "first fruits." In the Diaspora, Tu Bi-Shevat has become a symbol of our dedication to sound ecological principles. We plant trees, make donations, and hold creative Seders that inspire us to be good stewards of our Earth. Many of the Torah's laws deal with respecting and protecting life, which depends on preserving our resources. "When you come to the Land and plant any food tree, you shall surely prevent using its fruit for three years. And in the fourth year, all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year, you may eat its fruit; [in order] to increase its produce for you. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:23-25) And Deuteronomy 20:19-20 forbids soldiers from destroying fruit bearing trees during a siege. "You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human, to withdraw before you?" Underlying all of these traditions is the principle of gratitude and awe for HaShem, manifested in our respect for all life – which brings us back to those Ten Statements, and to Yitro's sudden appearance. He does not come alone. With him are Moses' wife Zipporah and their two sons. Much has been speculated about this meeting. Did Moses divorce Zipporah so she would be free to remarry in case he was killed? Or did he simply abandon his family? It is noteworthy that Yitro refers to Gershom and Eliezer as her sons, which could mean that when he assumed leadership of the Israelites and reclaimed his Hebrew identity, Moses divorced her, in essence severing his relationship with his Midianite family. However, Moses welcomes Yitro with great deference, tells him all that has happened, and then heeds his advice. Interestingly, Zipporah and the two sons are never mentioned again in the Torah. In fact, it is only implied back in Parashah Shemot that Gershom even had a brother: "Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt." (4:20) At least there, they were explicitly his sons, and the name *Eliezer*, which appears now for the first and only time, means my God help, which may reflect Moses' feelings at the time of his birth. Whatever his relationship with his family might have been, Yitro notices that Moses has dedicated himself so fully to his leadership duties that he is not only in danger of burnout, he is also disrespecting the people by forcing them to stand while he sat, "like a king" in Rashi's words, judging them all individually. Even working "from morning to nightfall" (18:13), Moses is unable to handle all the cases the people bring before him. The Ramban (Nachmanides) points out that this causes people to "simply put up with the injustice done to them, being unwilling to leave their jobs or businesses for as long as it would take to wait for an audience." In essence, Yitro is teaching Moses that in order to make justice accessible to everyone, he must learn to delegate responsibility. Establishing a judicial system headed by leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, frees Moses to judge the most difficult cases and also have time to attend to his many other leadership duties – and to his family, as Yitro may be indicating by bringing them along. Yitro emphasizes that the leaders Moses chooses must be well-established, honest individuals who will not put their own interests ahead of the interests of the people. With this system in place, the Israelites are prepared to receive HaShem's instructions, although they are far from being able to understand and enact them. We are still trying, with varying degrees of success. Far too many people, despite what they may profess, persist in chasing after the false gods of their own desires, perverting justice and despoiling the Earth and her resources to serve their own interests. Sadly, they never seem to lack willing followers. Like the connection between Parashah V'etchanan and Tisha b'Av, the confluence of our parashah and Tu Bi-Shevat is a wakeup call. In both parashiot the Ten Statements, those seeds from which Torah grows, teach us how, if only we would learn. "*Eyzt chayyim hi ...*" The Torah is indeed a tree of life for those who cling to it ... and all its paths are peaceful. We have the seeds. It is up to us to plant them in good soil, and nurture them so they will produce good harvests.

Shabbat shalom!