

The Apple Tree and Matan Torah

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2 (Vilna 3, Dunsky 10): The Nature of the Apple Tree

As an apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the young men (Song of Songs 2:3). R. Huna and R. Aha in the name of R. Yossi b. Zimra: Why does everyone take flight from the apple tree when it is hot? Because it produces no shade to sit beneath.¹ So too the nations fled from sitting in the shadow of God on the day of Matan Torah. Is it possible that Israel also fled? It is written, "with great delight I sat in his shade" – I delighted in him and sat – it was only I who delighted in him, and not the other nations.²

R. Aha in the name of R. Zeira said two things.³ One: This apple sprouts fruit before leaves,⁴ and so too Israel in Egypt preceded faith to hearing, as it is written: "and the nation believed, and heard that that God had given heed to Bnei Yisrael." [The second:] R. Aha said in the name of R. Zeira, in the name of Hori: Just as the fruit blossoms of the apple tree preceded its leaves, so too Israel in Sinai preceded observance to hearing (*na'aseh* to *nishma*), as it is written, "we will obey, and we will hear."⁵

¹ The apple tree, similar to other deciduous fruit trees, does not have sufficient foliage for shade to enjoy in the hot Israeli summers. [Dr. Moshe Raanan](#) explains in the Portal ha-Daf ha-Yomi: "The apple tree leaves respond to heat and dryness by pointing downward to minimize the surface area exposed to the sun; therefore in the sunny hours, the tree produces little shade." For this reason, the apple tree externally looks like a barren tree, as explicated in the next comment.

² Between the lines (or the little leaves of the apple tree) we hear about Israel choosing God, as expressed in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 6:1: "They overwhelm me – they have made me their king." See also Rashi on Song of Songs 2:3: "As an apple tree – an apple tree among the trees of the wood is the most valuable, since it has fruit with a good flavor and a good scent; So is my beloved among the young men – among the men is a parable, so too God is chosen from all other gods; therefore *with great delight I sat in his shade*. And according to a *midrash aggadah*, everyone flees from this apple tree since it provides no shade, and so too all the nations fled from God when he offered them the Torah – but I delighted and sat in his shade" (the first part of Rashi's comment is taken from Shir ha-Shirim, Buber Zuta, 2:3, with some disruptions). The motif of the small amount of shade that Israel chose to delight in, and the comparison to a barren tree, is developed extensively by biblical commentators, such as the Alsheikh on Song of Songs 2:3: "One who sits under a barren tree may say to one sitting under an apple tree: why are you sitting in the shade of an apple tree, so that the sun may strike you in the daytime and the moon by night, and you will sit sad and angry in its shade? You should sit in the shade of a forest tree so you can rest like me. And one sitting in the shade of the apple tree might answer: I prefer to be tortured by the sun under the apple tree, because the day will come when it produces nice apples, and my sorrow will have been paid off." Hassidic authors, notably among them the Sefat Emet, addressed this motif at length.

³ R. Aha's first midrash is stated immediately, and the second is in the name of Hori, below.

⁴ Apple trees, similar to the pear, peach, almond, cherry, and all Rosaceae plants, are characterized by a fruit that precedes the growth of seasonal foliage; this idea is expanded below in the Gemara in Shabbat. The midrash refers to the blossoms of the fruit.

⁵ The famous incident of *na'ashe ve-nishma* - 'we will obey and we will hear' – נעשה ונשמע in Sinai (see Parashat Mishpatim, Ex. 24 verse 7, and also [Naaseh ve-Nishma](#) there) overshadows an earlier precedent in Egypt, which the midrash points out here: In Egypt, Bnei Yisrael preceded their show of faith to hearing of God's promise for intervention. In this merit, Bnei Yisrael were saved from God's wrath in the incident of the Golden Calf, when they violated this faithful commitment, as expressed in Shemot Rabbah, Ki Tisa 42:1: "At that time, Moshe saw that the angels were poised to destroy all of Israel. Moshe said to them: I can state their virtue. He said: Lord of the world, remember when you wanted to give the Torah to Esau's descendants and they would not receive it, but Israel did receive it, as it is written: *The people all answered as one: Everything that God has spoken we will obey* (Ex. 19:8). God said: but they transgressed their commitment to obey, as it is written: *they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them, they have cast for themselves an image of a calf* (Ex. 32:8). Moshe responded: Remember for their benefit that when I went to Egypt on your mission, and told them your name, they immediately believed me and bowed down to your name, as it is written: *and the nation believed*, and immediately after, *they bowed down* (Ex. 4:31)." When 'we will obey and we will hear' could not help save the nation, an earlier show of faith in Egypt that reflects an inherent commitment to God specifically while still under the yoke of Egypt saves the nation from destruction.

Pesikta deRav Kahana 12, Bahodesh hashelishi: From the Blossoms of Nissan to the Fruit of Sivan⁶

As an apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the young men (Song of Songs 2:3). R. Huna and R. Aha in the name of R. Yossi b. Zimra: Just as everyone runs from the apple tree because it cannot provide shade, so too all the nations of the world fled from God on the day of Matan Torah. Is it possible that Israel also fled? It is written, "with great delight I sat in his shade."⁷

R. Ahva b. Zeora said: just as this apple tree produces fruit blossoms before leaves, so too Israel preceded observance to hearing. R. Azarya said: Just as the fruit of this apple tree are only completed in Sivan, so too Israel only produced a good scent in the world in Sivan; when was this? In the third month (Ex. 19:1).⁸

Shabbat 88a: Fruit Precedes Leaves, Obedience Precedes Hearing

R. Elazar said: When Israel preceded *na'aseh* - 'we will observe' to *nishma* - 'we will hear,' a divine voice came out and said: who told my sons this secret, used by the angels? [...] R. Hamma in the name of R. Hanina said: It is written "as an apple among the trees of the wood" – why were Israel likened to an apple tree? To say: just as this apple tree preceded fruit to leaves, so too Israel preceded observance to hearing.⁹

⁶ The entire unit in the Pesikta is particularly appropriate for Shavuot; but here we will only cite the sections about the apple tree.

⁷ To this point, the Pesikta is almost identical to the text in Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah above. Midrash Zuta on Song of Songs 2:3 continues: "*with great delight I sat in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my palate* – I have delighted in your Torah; I was not coerced. There is no comparison between one who is forced, and one who chooses to come himself; we delight to sit in your shade." The shade motif is expanded in Sefer ha-Ikarim 3:1: "*As an apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the young men, with great delight I sat in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my palate* – The apple tree is a parable to God as the midrash says: this is to teach you, that although the shade of the apple tree cannot be enjoyed since it does not produce as much shade as other trees, one may yearn to sit in the little shade it produces for its good fruit and sweet scent and flavor." The Sefer ha-Ikarim cites the entire pasuk, providing a better understanding of the midrash: the shade and the fruit are interlinked.

⁸ This midrash does not mention the show of faith in Egypt, instead focusing on the faith represented by the month of Sivan (instead of Nisan). R. Azarya mentions the apples 'being completed' – this does not indicate ripening, which occurs not in Sivan, but in the fall; rather, the shape of the apple is formed by Sivan. The process begins in Nissan with the budding of the fruit, and the fruit takes shape in Sivan, but this is not the end of the process – the fruit still takes time to grow and ripen. This idea is developed in the midrashim that follow, which are modeled after the Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov) on Ex. 19: "Therefore it says *Under the apple tree I have wakened you* (Song. 8:5) and it says: *as an apple among the trees of the wood* (2:3): Just as the apple tree blossoms fruit fifty days from the time they bud, so too the Torah was given fifty days after Israel's redemption." Yalkut Shimoni on Shir ha-Shirim 986: "*with great delight I sat in his shade* – this is the tabernacle, *and his fruit is sweet to my palate* – this is the Torah, as it is written, *my fruit is better than gold*. Another interpretation: It takes fifty days from the time an apple tree blossoms to the time the fruit is formed; so too fifty days passed from the time Israel emerged from Egypt until they received the Torah." The fruit ripens only in the fall, around Tishrei; on the tenth of Tishrei God commanded Israel to build the tabernacle, mentioned above by Yalkut Shimoni (and in Nissan, when the fruits blossom, the tabernacle was inaugurated). Mishna period botanists can further clarify what the development was at the time from blossom to fruit, and what happened to the apple tree foliage in the fifty days between Pesach and Shavuot; although it is unclear whether the midrash was providing an accurate account. Nonetheless, the midrash correlates sufficiently with the apple tree we are familiar with in modern times.

⁹ The commitment to obey is compared to the fruit, and this precedes the 'hearing' which is compared to the foliage. "Study is not the most important thing, but actions" (Avot 1:17). If we connect this to the little apple leaves that are reminiscent of barren trees, we see a surprising notion! Therefore the midrash emphasizes the fruit in this instance. However, Talmudic commentators outside of Israel who were unfamiliar with the midrash had difficulty with this Gemara. Rabbeinu Tam was probably familiar with other strains of apple in France, as indicated by Tosfot: "Rabbeinu Tam questioned this statement, since we see [the apple tree] grows no differently from other trees! And he interpreted the apple tree here as an Etrog, and translated *your scent is as apples* to mean 'like an Etrog.' And the fruit of an Etrog preceded its leaves, since it remains on the tree from year to year, and after a year the leaves from the previous year fall, and are replaced with new leaves; therefore its fruit precedes these new leaves." The Torah Temima (Song of Songs 2:38) indicated that this is the correct reading of the midrash, which mentions a blossom instead of a fruit; however it seems the opposite is true: the fruit mentioned in Shabbat is the blossom in the midrashim here, and their purpose is to indicate that 'we will obey and we will hear' is reminiscent of the fruit, while the critical stage is its formation. See the explanation of [Dr. Moshe Raanan](#) in the Portal ha-Daf ha-Yomi:

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 8:2: Sinai is the Apple Tree

Under the apple tree I awakened you (Song of Songs 8:5) – Palatyon of Rome expounded and said: Mount Sinai was detached and stood in the heavens, and the Jews were placed underneath it, as it says, "And they approached and stood under the mountain" (Deut. 4:11).¹⁰

Shemot Rabbah 17:2: The Apple as the Beloved

Another interpretation: "Take a bunch of hyssop" (Ex. 12:22), this is why it is written, "As an apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the young men" (Song of Songs 2:3). Why is God likened to an apple tree? To tell you: Just as this apple is not much to look at, but has flavor and scent, so too is God: "His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable" (Song of Songs 5:16).¹¹ He showed Himself to the idolaters and they refused the Torah, since the Torah seemed empty to them, even though it has both flavor and scent.¹² Israel said: We know the power of Torah, therefore we will remain at the side of God and his Torah, as it is written: "with great delight I sat in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my palate" (Song of Songs 2:3).¹³

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 12, Bahodesh hashelishi 3: The Sweet Scent of Mikra and Aggadah

R. Yitzhak opened: "Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples" (Song of Songs 2:5) – this refers to the words of Torah, whose scent is as sweet as apples. "For I am faint with love" – R. Yitzhak said: At

"Rabbeinu Tam's question concerning the midrash is unnecessary if we relate to the apple trees in our area. In Israel, apple leaves fall in the winter, and then the flowers awaken; the foliage begins to regrow only after the fruit has mostly blossomed. When the tree is covered with foliage, the fruits are fully visible. This phenomenon is especially striking when it comes to the apple; whereas in the Etrog tree the fruit preceding the foliage is undetectable since the tree is an evergreen, and there is no way to determine whether the visible leaves preceded the fruit." We will leave the botanical observations at that.

¹⁰ The midrash elaborates on the verse 'Under the apple tree I awakened you' in various contexts; for example, Shemot Rabbah 1:12 refers to the Hebrew midwives who "birthed babies in the field under the apple tree, as it is written, *Under the apple tree I awakened you.*" However, in the current context, the midrash does not focus on the tree itself, but rather on a wordplay concerning the similarity between the Hebrew word for apple (תפוח) and the root for bloating and swelling up (תפוח). In the midrash, the swelling of the תפוח hints to Sinai (see Tamid 2:2 and Vayikra Rabbah 2:30 for additional use of this root in the context of swelling). This indicates the opposite of the previous midrashim, since the תפוח here (that is, the swelling mountain) does not represent the willing acceptance of the Torah, but rather the coercion, as expressed in Shabbat 88a: "They stood at the foot of the mountain – R. Avdimi bar Hama bar Hassa said: This teaches us that God suspended the mountain above them like a barrel and said, If you accept the Torah, good. If not, there will be your burial place. Rav Aha bar Yaakov said: From here emerges a great protest about the Torah." See [They stood at the foot of the mountain](#) on Shavuot.

¹¹ In this midrash it is God – the beloved in the Song of Songs – who represents the apple! He is the one who 'is not much to look at' – perhaps because he cannot be seen, and is a "hidden God" (Is. 45:15). The beloved female partner represents Am Yisrael; but who is referenced in the description 'among the young men?' And another unanswered botanical question to explore is this: what is the unique quality of the apple tree that makes it seem like 'not much to look at?' Is this another reference to the lack of sufficient foliage?

¹² Note the shift from God to the Torah in the midrash. The *darshan* defends the Torah, and explains that the nations are wrong, since it has both good scent and flavor; he later supports this position with relevant verses: "How do we know it has flavor? As it is written, *O taste and see that God is good* (Ps. 34:9). And that it is nourishing? As it is written, *my fruit is better than gold* (Proverbs 8:19). And that it has scent? As it is written, *the scent of your garments is like the scent of Lebanon* (Song. 4:11). The Torah has flavor, nourishment, and scent!

¹³ Here the midrash returns to the apple tree, whose fruit is sweet, and yet, is not much to look at, and lacks shade. Later the midrash compares the tall cedar and the low hyssop, both of which are used to fulfill God's *mitzvot*: "Some things seems lowly, but nonetheless God commanded us to use them in order to do *mitzvot*. The hyssop seems useless, but its power is great before God, who compared it to the cedar in several places ... to show that great and small are equal in the eyes of God. And he performs miracles using small matter, and used the hyssop which is the lowest of the plants to redeem Israel. Therefore: *As an apple among the trees of the wood.*" We addressed this in [Hyssop](#) on Parashat Hachodesh. Here God is compared to an apple tree, which lacks an impressive appearance; it is up to people to discover that he has flavor and scent. The transition from God to the Torah may be the midrash's attempt to soften this formulation.

first, when society was affluent, people would yearn for words of Mishna and Talmud; now that society is poor, and we suffer under the hands of the monarchy, people yearn for [the comforting words of] *Mikra* (Torah) and *Aggadah* (midrash).¹⁴

The Rambam's Introduction to Guide to the Perplexed

The Wise One said: "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (Proverbs 25:11) – Observe how wonderful this allegory is, when described through a complete allegory.¹⁵ That is to say, this is a matter with two aspects, one revealed and one concealed; that which is revealed has to be as fine as silver, and its content, which is concealed, should be as fine as that which is revealed, until the proportion between its content and its revealed part is as the proportion between gold and silver ... this is like a golden apple covered with a thin layer of silver; when observing from afar one might think the apple is silver, but when one with sharp sight looks properly, he will understand that the content reveals gold.¹⁶

Shabbat Shalom

Chag Sameach

Mehalkei Hamayim

Mayim Ahronim: The blossoms of the apple tree, from [Ilana Bar's website](#).

¹⁴ Am Yisrael is riddled with distresses, and needs to be cuddled with apples; not with the sharpness of halakhah, Mishna, and Talmud; but with the softness of Torah and Aggadah, or midrash that is as fine, sweet scented, and palatable as apples. See [In Praise of Aggadah](#) on Parashat Ekev. This is also mirrored in the redemption process: Israel needed time between the redemption and Sinai, and that time was given to them in the form of Sefirat ha-Omer. The midrash continues: "Another interpretation: *For I am ill with love* – R. Levy said: This is compared to a prince who was cured from his illness. His tutor said: let him go study! The king responded: his color has not yet returned, and you want him to go study? Let him eat and drink and regain his strength for a few months, and then he may go study. So too, when Israel emerged from Egypt they were worthy of receiving the Torah, but some were deformed from the forced labor with brick and mortar. God said: the color of my sons has not returned from their hard work, how can they receive the Torah? Let them enjoy the well and the manna and the quail for a few months, and then they can receive the Torah. When? On the third month (Ex. 19:1)." Perhaps Israel were not fully recovered by Sivan, and this was what led to the Sin of the Golden Calf. Only on Yom Kippur, when Moshe came down from the mountain with the new tablets – when the apple in Israel ripens – this was the time for a renewed covenant. See [The Second Tablets](#) in Parashat Ekev.

¹⁵ The artistic imagery is a model for using a parable in rhetoric, and the construction of the written parable as a complete allegory.

¹⁶ These apples are also part of Matan Torah and its infinite teachings; the content surpasses the form. Even if our analysis here did not successfully reach the golden core of the apple, perhaps we successfully delighted in the silver lining, since in our generation as well "people yearn for the comforting words of *Mikra* and *Aggadah*," and require ideas that are as sweet and refreshing as apples.

