

The Environment: Tu Bishvat

This chapter looks at the transformation of Tu Bishvat in the Zionist era, from a marginal and somewhat esoteric holiday that was celebrated by Kabbalists and children, if at all, into a pivotal Zionist holiday that expresses the patriotic values of nature and soil. This process was implemented through the invention of planting ceremonies, which imported the American Arbor Day into the Jewish world, and fostered by the nostalgia for nature that is typical of industrializing societies. The holiday makes scant impression on daily life in Israel, mainly because it has always been associated with children, and is almost never felt outside of the schools. It is not on the calendar of official holidays, nor can workers take it as one of their optional vacation days. Nonetheless, it occupies an important place in public culture as an image, a symbol, and source of cultural production—thanks to the nostalgia that informs it.

Nostalgia is widespread in many societies, which yearn, with greater or lesser reflexivity, for a peaceful and harmonious past, real or imaginary, that stands in stark contrast to the present, which is sometimes experienced as a perpetual crisis.¹ This phenomenon has been typical of many nationalist movements in the modern age, including Zionism. They glorified not only heroes and foundational events from the past, but also what they saw as the ordinary people and landscapes of the present—namely, farmers and the village, valued as the counterbalance to materialism, financial manipulations, and the competitive individualism of modern urban life.² In their attempt to establish an “original” culture in the Hebrew language and in the Land of Israel, the Zionists also strove to create “a new Jew” who would be different from what they saw as “the old Jew.” Among other things, the new Jew would have an “authentic” link to the place and the landscape—a bond that supposedly existed in ancient times and then was lost in the long years of exile.³

One of the important contexts of new Hebrew culture, one that has recently begun to attract scholarly attention, is the industrialization and urbanization that strongly influenced the emergence of modern nationalism throughout the world. Today, in economic and geographical retrospect, the Zionist project

1 Smith 1986: 174; Halbwachs 1992: 182–183; Boym 2001.

2 See Smith 1986, esp. p. 190; Mosse 1975.

3 Zerubavel 1995: 13–36. On nostalgia in Zionist culture see: Halamish 2012; Talmon 2001; Dubnov 2014; Lipshitz 2015.

seems to have been a massive enterprise to urbanize the country. In the spatial imagination common to many, and not only to Zionists, Zionism was identified with the rural environment of farmers settling the barren land and with pastoral agricultural landscapes. In this sense, Zionism was an inseparable part of the modern national process that, in Ernst Gellner's pithy formula, was "talking of peasants and making townsmen"⁴: that is, criticizing urbanization and industrialization even while the farmers moved en masse to cities and the land came to be covered in concrete and cement. For Zionists in Europe, and later in Palestine, the anti-urban ethos was even stronger because of the widespread anti-Semitic stereotypes that identified Jews with all the ills of modern urbanism that nationalism supposedly came to cure—the alienation between individuals and between human beings and the soil, cosmopolitanism, and the destruction of the community fabric, in both Central and Eastern Europe. The Zionist criticism of the Jews' excessive urbanization was also informed by the Maskilic criticism of the ostensible degeneracy of the *shtetl*.⁵ Both supporters and critics saw Zionism as a movement whose goal was to return the Jews to working the land; many of its activities were geared towards this objective.

Anti-urban thought resonated in pre-national Palestine, too, which began to experience increased urbanization starting in the late nineteenth century. This process accelerated in the closing decades of the Ottoman period, largely due to the newly arrived Zionist settlers.⁶ The two urban centers, Jerusalem and Jaffa, were overcrowded, not only by Jews, and the growing population led to the establishment of new neighborhoods and agricultural colonies outside the cities for economic and environmental reasons. More important, for our purposes, an urban discourse had already developed in Palestine, a discourse that included complaints about overcrowding, high morbidity, and other adversities, and a lack of vegetation in the city as a cause of physical and emotional degeneration; but this was still not the urban discourse of an industrial society, with the emphasis on alienation as the main ill of cities.⁷ Even though (and to some extent because) Zionist activity served as an effective catalyst for the urbanization of the country, this discourse fit perfectly into the romanticism of the Zionist village and the anti-urban ideology.⁸ These found an outlet in agricultural Zionism, which developed in Palestine during the Ottoman period, mainly in the farming villages, and which therefore served as an object of

4 Gellner 1983: 107.

5 Mann 2006: 1–25; Bartal 2007: 179–192.

6 Gross 2000: 19–52.

7 Katz 1986; Ben-Arie 1982; Shilo 1999.

8 See, for example: Cohen (Eric) 1977; Schnell 1997.