

Birthdays, Radiance, Angels and Tu Bishvat

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BH

Since Tu Bishvat is fast approaching, I thought we'd learn something from the tractate that examines all the new years:

“On the first of Tishrei is the New Year for reckoning years...and saplings.”
(M. Rosh Hashanah 1:2)

“Initially, [before the Babylonian exile] Tishrei was called “the Month of the Mighty” because in that month were our patriarchs born and died and matriarchs were remembered by God and they became pregnant.”

“Initially, Marcheshvan (the month after Tishrei) was the month when the leaves wither and the earth was formed into clods and one has to provide animals with food from within one's house (as there is none left in the fields).”

“Initially, Iyyar (the month after Nissan) was called “the month of radiance” for in this month the radiance of the world was created and the produce is recognizable and the fruit on the trees is recognizable....”

“The names of the angels also came up with the Jewish people when they returned from Babylonia. They used to be called Seraphim but now they have specific names such as Ish, Gabriel and the prince angel Michael.”
(Y. Rosh Hashanah 1:2)

Before some of the Jews were exiled in 586 BCE and returned in 516 BCE, we were pretty set on which month was the beginning of the Jewish year: it was Nissan, the month when we celebrate Passover. But the Jews returned from Babylonia and brought their calendar and beliefs with them. So, in this passage we find that Tishrei (the Jewish month in which we celebrate New Year today) is tied in to the births, deaths and conception of some of our patriarchs. The month after Tishrei is the beginning of Winter. The month after Nissan is Iyyar, when Spring begins to flower in earnest and Summer can be felt approaching. So the Babylonian Jews seem to have picked up a bit of a solar calendar and brought it home when they returned to Israel.

But that wasn't all they brought back. They also fetched for us an elaborate angelology of which only a fraction is mentioned here. There are whole lists of names of angels, and demons, which our passage says came from Babylonia.

Discussion Questions:

1. For more on angels, see this terrific outline, written by no less than Kaufman Kohler(!):<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1521-angelology>
2. If the lunar calendar is the calendar of the Torah and the solar calendar is the calendar of Babylonia, why did they both win? (We have a solar-lunar calendar now.)
3. What do you think about angels? Real? Not real? Rational explanation for this phenomenon? (I have some theories, but I'd like to hear yours.) Why is it such a hardy concept, surviving centuries?
4. Are you planning to have a Tu Bishvat seder? Tell us about it? (Planting more trees is always a good way to celebrate the holiday.)

As always, looking forward to your answers!