

# Twelve Sticks

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe  
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*Moses spoke to the heads of the matot ("tribes") . . .*

Numbers 30:2

The stick, it can be said, is a piece of a tree that has paid the price of leaving home. Indeed, one would hardly recognize it as the tender green shoot who departed the mother tree: its supple spine has stiffened into a column of inflexibility, its porous skin has hardened into a core-deep hardness. The springy bough has become, well, a stick.

The stick, it can also be said, is one who has reaped the rewards of leaving home. The tender shoot has gained backbone and stature. It has learned to stand its ground—no longer is it swayed by every passing wind and breeze. Its spell out in the cold has toughened it, made it a force to be reckoned with. The malleable sprig has solidified into the formidable staff.

## Exile

The Torah has two names for the tribes of Israel: *shevatim* and *matot*. A *shevet* is a "branch" or "switch"; *mateh* means "stick" and "staff."

Both names express the idea that the tribes of Israel are limbs of the "tree of life," offshoots of the supreme Source of all life and being. But each represents a different state in the Jew's relationship to his or her roots. The *shevet* bespeaks a state of manifest connection to one's source: the branch is still fastened to the tree, or at least still has its life-juices coursing through its veins. The *shevet* is the Jew in a state of visible connection to his G-d, sustained by an open divine involvement in his or her life.

The *mateh* is a *shevet* who has been uprooted from its tree. The *mateh* is the Jew in *galut*, a "child banished from his father's table"<sup>1</sup> to wander the cold and alien roads of exile. Deprived of its supernal moorings, the *mateh* is compelled to develop its own resistance to the storms of life, to look to its own frail heart for the strength to hold its own, far from the ancestral home.

## The Torah Reading of Matot

There is a section of the Torah (Numbers 30:2–32:42) that carries the name *Matot*, as its opening verse describes Moses' instruction to the "heads of the tribes" (*rashei ha-matot*) of Israel.

It is significant that the Tribes of Israel are referred to here as *matot*, and that the entire Torah portion is so named. This Torah section is always read during the "Three Weeks" from 17 Tammuz to 9 Av, during which we

mourn and re-experience the destruction of the Holy Temple and the onset of our exile.

Every stick yearns to return to its tree, yearns for the day that it will once again be a fresh and vital branch, united with its siblings and nourished by its progenitor. When that day comes, it will bring with it its hard-earned solidity, the *mateh*-maturity it gained sticking it out in the lone and rootless environment of *galut*.<sup>2</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Talmud, Berachot 3a.

2. Based on Likkutei Sichot, vol. 18, pp. 382–384.

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From an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson; translation/adaptation by Yanki Tauber.

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