

# Difficulties Strengthen

By Tali Loewenthal

An intriguing aspect of our history as Jews is that our people was originally divided into Tribes, each descended from one of the twelve sons of Jacob. Today, Jewish families carefully preserve the tradition that they are *kohanim* or Levites, and other are described simply as *Yisrael* (Israel), meaning they are from the other Tribes.<sup>1</sup> Yet when we read the Torah the theme of the various Tribes is prominent. In fact this week's Torah reading<sup>2</sup> is termed "*Matot*," which is one of the words meaning "Tribes." The singular is *mateh*. Another word used in the Torah for Tribe is "*shevet*."

Every detail of the Torah is precise and significant. What are the overtones of these two words for Tribe?

The English word "tribe" probably derives from the Latin term *tribus* used for the three political divisions of the ancient Roman state.<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word is quite different. Both terms *shevet* and *mateh* mean a branch of a tree or a staff.

The idea that that the different groups among the Jewish people are called "branches" makes sense. We are all branches on the same tree of the Jewish people, and are all unified together. But what about the difference between the two words *mateh* and *shevet*?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains this point in a way which is relevant not just regarding the ancient tribes of Israel but also for our lives today.

Chassidic teachings explain that *shevet* means the slim branch as it is when still joined to the tree. It is fresh, and also pliant and soft. *Mateh* means the same slim branch, but now detached from the tree. It is no longer attached to its source. Despite this, or because of this, the *mateh* becomes hard and strong, and can be used a staff to support someone, or as a symbol of leadership.<sup>4</sup>

The first state, *shevet*, the branch attached to the tree, represents the soul before it enters the world, while it is still directly attached to and part of the Divine. It is fresh, vibrant, alive. This can also be seen as the pristine period of the history of the Jewish people, when the Temple stood in Jerusalem.

The second state, *mateh*, is when the branch has been detached from the tree. The soul has entered the chaotic pressures of human life; or in a further image, the Jewish people have entered a further stage of history. The Temple is in ruins and they are scattered round the world.

The paradox of life is that it is in the second state, that of being cut away from the tree, that the soul and the Jewish people as a whole achieve their strength. We long to be joined to the source, and ultimately the Temple will be rebuilt and even in this world our bond with the Divine will become tangible. Yet the sense of being "cut off" from the trunk of the tree is the very fact which strengthens us, and makes us into a staff which can support

and can lead. That is the message of this week's Torah portion: difficulties strengthen us, and help us move forward towards the future.<sup>5</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. The *kohanim* are a subset of the Tribe of the Levites.
2. Numbers 30:2-32:42. The Sedra begins with Moses speaking to the heads of the Tribes, hence it is called simply 'Tribes'.
3. The word may link to "tri"—meaning three.
4. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Discourses of 1802* p. 238.
5. Based freely on *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 18, p. 382.

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