

“Wait! Lessons from a Fruit Tree” (Parshat Kedoshim/Earth Day 2021) by Rabbi Rena Kieval
 “Your call is important to us – please hold the line and we will be right with you.” Don’t you hate sitting through those recordings, often peppered with an annoying musical soundtrack, over and over? We hate to wait, and we usually do not expect to wait, because we live in a world of instant gratification. We have overnight shipping! We can zap our dinner in the microwave – ready in 2 minutes! We have instant information on the internet, about anything and everything.

Our wonderful time-saving innovations have made us impatient - we want what we want when we want it! That impatience can be especially hard when we face bigger life issues, that take longer. Our patience has been challenged this past year during the pandemic, when we have had to wait. A lot. We had to wait: wait to leave our homes, wait to see our families and friends, wait to receive the shot in our arms, wait to learn when we can travel, or do so many other missed activities.

Patience – that is the essence of an obscure mitzvah in today’s Torah portion, a mitzvah about fruit trees called *orlah*. (You can wow your friends by knowing about this one – it is that obscure!) The Torah states that in the land of Israel, when you plant a fruit tree, you may not eat the tree’s fruit for the first three years. That fruit is called *orlah* – blocked, literally: uncircumcised. You may see lovely fruits hanging on your tree, but you must wait, you cannot eat them. In the fourth year, the fruit is no longer *orlah*, and you can eat it, but only under very specific conditions: the fruit of year four must be eaten in Jerusalem, as part of a celebration of *hillulim* – praise to God. Finally, in the fifth year and afterwards, the fruits are entirely permissible. Five years – that is a very long wait! What is this mitzvah about, and what might we learn from it today?

First, we remember that today’s Torah portion, Kedoshim, begins with the statement that every person should strive to be holy. The *parsha* then offers an amazing collection of fifty-one *mitzvot*, – fifty-one paths to holiness. Some are about how we live with other people, like the famous “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Other *mitzvot* pertain to the way we relate to the earth, like our fruit tree mitzvah, *orlah*. As we have been observing Earth Day, as trees are blooming, and as our country is involved in a global conversation about climate, this is a good week to consider: How is *orlah* – the long, long wait to eat the fruit of a new tree – a path to holiness?

Our sages explained *orlah* in various ways. Some noted that in its first few years, the fruit of a tree has not yet reached its full taste and aroma. Since produce must be presented to God (in year four) before making it fully available to people, it would be unseemly to bring this incomplete fruit before God. So we wait. The sage Ramban noted that *orlah* forces us to wait out a tree’s natural rhythm, so that we will appreciate the miracle of its fruit in the natural order established by God.

Waiting reminds us that full growth takes time. That so much of life is a process, not an instantaneous event. In our relationships, in our work, in our inner life - we need to cultivate things, or sometimes just let them be, just be patient, wait and see. The writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen, called this the Spirituality of Waiting. For many people, he wrote, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. "Yet," he said, "the longer we wait, the more we will know about that for which we are waiting. "

In our fast-paced, results-driven world, how often we may find quick answers but miss the nuances of what a friend or loved one is trying to tell us, or miss the complexities of a political situation because we jump to quick conclusions. How often we may miss the full beauty of what stands before us.

Orlah is the embodiment of holy waiting, the antithesis of instant gratification. Plant a fruit tree, and wait, three years. Then – in year four – move to a new level of relationship with this fruit – by eating it in a sacred place, Jerusalem – with praise to God, in the context of community. This is also a gratitude practice, a reminder that before enjoying the fruits of this world, we should stop - be aware of what we have - and sanctify it. That should sound familiar – it is the idea behind *brachot*. In fact, *orlah* was one of the sources used by the rabbis of the Talmud when they developed the whole idea of reciting a *bracha* before we eat any food. Wait – appreciate –and the act becomes sacred.

Today's Torah portion asks every one of us to strive to "be holy." Kedoshim. The mitzvah of the fruit trees, *orlah*, reminds us of one path to kedushah - patience, waiting, deeper understanding as time passes, looking for the holiness. It reminds us to ask ourselves more often: let me wait and see, I wonder what I will learn?

And the mitzvah of *orlah* reminds us to celebrate the bounty of nature. With our precious earth in trouble, we as a society must balance our constant need for quick results and convenience with a holy appreciation for the earth. Let each of us imagine and ask: how can my relationship to the earth be one of holiness?

Shabbat Shalom