



Seder Tu B'Shevat, a celebration of Israel's seasons and of ecology in the Jewish tradition

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This Tu B'Shevat Seder is designed as a conversation-between a leader and participants, or among participants sitting around the table. Each paragraph indicates a change of speaker. Enjoy!

Shalom and happy Tu B'Shevat!

In the spirit of the Pesach Seder, we are going to be asking a lot of questions at this Tu B'Shevat Seder. What exactly is Tu B'Shevat? Why are we celebrating a tree holiday in the middle of Israel's winter? And since Tu B'Shevat has become a time to think about ecology-how we relate to the earth-what do our sources have to say on this subject?

Good questions. I have another one. What are these flowers that we are looking at and what are they doing inside the wine cups?

I will answer you in the Jewish way by asking you another question. What color are the flowers? And don't forget to open this folding Haggadah and look at the other side as well.

Looks like white and red, with the red ones mostly on the other side.

The flowers that we see here all bloom in Israel at different times of the year. The first ones, starting at the end of the summer, are all white- the tall white squill stalks that you see at the bottom of this page. Then, with the first rains in the fall, we start seeing some light pink and lavender. As the year progresses, more and more red appears on the landscape.

But why inside the wine cups?

The kabbalists, the mystics who lived in 16th century Safed, had a wonderful custom at their Tu B'Shevat Seder. They drank four cups of wine, mixing red and white to reflect the changing colors of Israel's natural landscape. The first cup was all white; the second white with a bit of red, the third half white and half red, and the fourth all red. And that's what we'll be doing.



The fruit of the vine means celebration in the Jewish tradition. With each cup of wine, we will be celebrating the goodness of Creation- the beauty and order of the natural world, the seasons that follow each other every year, as in God's covenant with Noah, after the flood:
continued





*“So long as the earth endures,
Seedtime and harvest,
Cold and heat,
Summer and winter,
Day and night
Shall not cease.”*

Pour the first cup of wine-all white.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine.

Drink Wine.

Here we begin celebrating Israel’s seasons. Around the time of Sukkot, after the long, dry summer, the earth starts coming to life with the first rains. These bring the first, light-colored wildflowers-crocuses, narcissus, and sand lilies.

Here’s to the earth coming to life! *Le’Haim!*
And what does the Bible say about preserving this wonder of life on earth?

A great deal. Let’s begin at the beginning, with the first chapters of Bereishit, Genesis. In the Creation story, all the plants and animals are created “after the kind.”² seed-bearing plants, fruit trees, sea animals, birds, herd-animals, crawling animals-all created after their kind.” This phrase is repeated ten times in the Creation story. Each separate species is important.

And each one is called “good.”

Yes. God calls each creations, each part of the world, “good.”
Light, dry lands, oceans, plants; the sun, moon, and stars; fish and birds, animals of every kind- each in turn is “good.” But on the sixth day, when God saw all that He had made, he called it very good.³ it is the whole, in all its infinite variety, with the millions of interplays among all the parts, that is very good.

And Noah is told to take representatives of all the species into the ark.⁴



Indeed. All this strongly suggests what we call today “biodiversity”- the variety of life, and the value of that variety. The Talmudic sages knew this when they said “Of all that the Holy Blessed One created in the world, God created nothing without a purpose.”⁵ and the psalmist celebrated this when he said “How manifold are Your works, O Lord, in wisdom You have made them all, the earth is full of Your creations.”⁶

And it is that intricate whole, the symphony, that we are to guard and protect and preserve.
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Yes. People are stewards of the earth.

Of all creatures, only human beings are created in God's image.⁷

Only human beings have language, and consciousness-and responsibility. Adam was put into the garden "to fill it and tend it," or "work it and watch it."⁸

And in Psalm 115: "The heavens belong to God, but the earth was given to humanity."⁹

But Psalm 24 says: "The earth is the Lord's and all the fullness thereof."¹⁰

There is a paradox here, and the rabbis responded to it: the earth does indeed belong to the Lord-and enjoying its fruits without saying a blessing is like taking something that doesn't belong to you without permission. But once you say a blessing, Psalm 115 applies and you are allowed to eat!¹¹

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree.

Taste fruit.

This blessing celebrates the Creator's sustaining the goodness of Creation. On the third day, God created "seed-bearing plants, fruit trees after their kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with seed in it."¹² The blessing is in the present tense, praising God who creates the fruit of the tree-who sustains the earth, the order of the seasons, the rain and the sun that allow the trees to keep bearing fruit.

Taste figs.

Why is eating a fig like studying Torah?

Because it's very sweet? Because the fig is from a tree and the Torah is the tree of life?¹³

Both true, and our fig-eating sages gave two more reasons: one, you eat all parts of the fig. there are no seeds or rind to throw away. Similarly, all parts of the Torah are spiritually nourishing.¹⁴ Two, figs have an unusually long harvest season in Israel, from May to September. Just as you can't harvest the figs all at once, but little by little, each day through the long season, you can't learn Torah all at once, but little by little throughout a lifetime. The more you search the tree, the more figs you find, and the more you study Torah, the more you find in it.¹⁵



Taste dates.

"The righteous person will flourish like the date palm," says Psalm 92.

Why like a date palm? Why not like a fig or pomegranate or olive tree?

Good questions, and there's a good answer. Just as the date palm can grow in salty soil (like around the Dead

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Sea) and produce sweet fruit, the *tzaddik*, the righteous person, can take a difficult situation and create something positive from it.

Taste nuts.

Take one walnut (in shell) from the bottom of the pile.

When we take one nut away, all the rest of them fall. It's the same with a close-knit community of people. When one leaves, everyone else feels it.¹⁶

Pour the second cup of wine-white with a bit of red.

With this second cup of wine, we are well into Israel's rainy season, in November and December. As you can see by the color of the wine, the colors in the landscape are changing. Around Hannukah, we see white and pink cyclamens, maybe an early red anemone, and soon the beautiful red Sharon tulip will appear.

Drink wine.

Returning to the Creation story, and what it says about people and the earth: Human beings are created last and are given a task: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it."¹⁷

"Subdue?" That doesn't sound very friendly.

Right, in fact, the Hebrew verb here () is the same word for "conquer," as in war. This of course caught the attention of the commentators. Some say this doesn't mean conquering in a destructive way, but rather mastering desolate land and making it sustain life.¹⁸

Another interpretation of that problematic Hebrew verb is that it means "transform."¹⁹ In other words, human being are to take the crops of the earth and transform them in order to sustain life-to make wine from grapes, bread for the wheat, and oil from the olives. These were the three main crops of ancient Israel, appearing dozens of times in the Bible as "grain, wine, and oil."²⁰ We have already tasted the wine, and now we're about to taste the other two in the form of bread dipped in olive oil-a Middle-Eastern staple that's been eaten for thousands of years.

Glad to hear that. All this talk about sustaining life is giving me an appetite.



Washing hands.

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

Uncover bread.

Eat bread, dip in olive oil.

Bread was the main food in ancient Israel, and lehem, bread is also a synonym for food. So blessing the bread blesses the entire meal.

The meal is served.

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People, as we said, are partners in making the earth produce crops and transform the produce of the earth to make food. The Bible and the Jewish tradition also limit these roles, and set times for stopping this work of producing and transforming- when we rest and let the earth rest as well.

You mean the Sabbath?

Exactly. Once a week, we stop doing melacha- the kinds of work that manipulate the environment. We stop the job of transforming. Once a week, we rejuvenate and allow the earth to rejuvenate as well.

And what about the sabbatical year?

Extremely important in this context. Every seven years, biblical law forbids sowing and harvesting the grain fields, and pruning and harvesting the grapevines. Each household harvests only the bare minimum that they need to survive, and the rest is left for the hungry and even for the wild animals. ²¹

Behind this is an important idea: “The land is Mine.”²²

We human beings do not own the land. According to biblical law, land is leased, not sold permanently. ²³ we are tenants, stewards.

And if we don’t own the land, we don’t own the produce of the land either. It has to be shared-tithed. And that brings us to the origin of Tu B’Shevat. Originally, the 15th day of the month of Shvat was not a holiday but simply a cut-off date for the fruit tithe. Let’s say you’re a farmer in ancient Israel, and I am a priest, or a levite, ²⁴ or simply someone who doesn’t have any land. How am I going to eat?

Good question. I, the farmer, am commanded to give you, the landless, part of the grapes, figs, pomegranates, dates, and olives that I’ve worked so hard to grow (about 10 percent).

Moreover, I have to pay this fruit tax every year, as it says, “You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field, year by year.” ²⁵ something like our annual income tax on each year’s earnings. The fruit that formed before Tu B’Shevat was tithed in one year, and the fruit that formed after Tu B’Shevat was tithed in the next year. ²⁶

But we still don’t know why this date? Why the 15th of Shevat.



For that, we have to look at the rhythm of Israel’s seasons, the time of dormancy and the time of re-awakening. And we’ll find out about that with our third cup of wine.

Pour the third cup of wine-half white and half red.

The third cup of wine brings us right to where we are now-the middle of the month of Shevat. It’s still winter in Israel, but there are signs that the season is starting to change. As the days get longer, the groundwater starts warming and rising through the roots into the trees. ²⁷

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Drink wine.

How do we know this is happening?

There are some visible signs, and they have to do with the red and white wine that we have been drinking. One, we start seeing some red leaf buds on the fig and pomegranate trees, a nice contrast to their pale, bare winter branches. Two, in Israel, the almond trees start blooming with beautiful pink and white flowers around the time of Tu B'Shevat. Like people who can get along on only a few hours of sleep a night, the almond trees need less dormancy than other fruit trees, and “wake up” and flower as soon as the water starts rising through the trunk and into the branches.

I wish I could be like the almond tree but what does this have to do with the fruit tithe?

Tu B'Shevat was seen as the average date when “the trees become moist and begin to drink and grow.”²⁸ it says in the Jerusalem Talmud, “Until this day, the trees live from the water of the past year; from this day on, they live from the water of this year.”²⁹

So the fruit that formed before Tu B'Shevat was seen as using the previous year's water and taxed with that year's produce, and fruit forming after Tu B'Shevat was seen as using the current year's rainwater and tithed with the current year's produce. And since in Israel most fruit forms in the summer, there was little chance of confusing tax years.

Now I understand why we eat and dried fruit on Tu B'Shevat. In Israel, we have to wait till the summer to find ripe grapes, dates, and figs on the trees.

Yes. And talking about fruit trees brings us to another important biblical idea on ecology.

Take care of the fruit trees?

Even more than that. In the book of Deuteronomy, there's a law that forbids cutting down even an enemy's fruit trees in wartime.³⁰ when you are besieging a city, you can eat from the orchards that were planted outside the city walls, but you can't destroy them.



Because we didn't create the trees and we don't own them?

Yes. And because even in war, we are not supposed to destroy wantonly, whatever we feel like, without limit.

And because people need the fruit trees to eat?

Also yes. People and fruit trees keep each other alive. People plant and nurture the tree, and the tree gives food. This is a life-sustaining relationship, and it is to be maintained even-and especially-in war, the ultimate life-destroying situation. There is always hope that the war

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will end, and that future generations will be able to eat from the tree. Unlike the annual grains that have to be planted every year, fruit trees are planted for the future.

A story from the Talmud: an old man was planting a carob tree. A passer-by asked him:

“How long will it take for this carob tree to bear fruit?”

“Seventy years,” replied the old man.

“And you expect to eat from this tree?”

“Just as I found the world full of carob trees that my grandparents before me planted for me, I am planting for my grandchildren after me.” 31

Beside fruit trees, anything else we’re not supposed to destroy?

Excellent question, because the tradition extended this law in Deuteronomy to a concept called *bal tashkhit*-do not destroy. The Talmud says that whoever destroys something that could be useful to others breaks the law of *bal tashkhit*. 32

Maimonides says that anyone who breaks dishes, tears clothing, destroys a building, stops up a spring, or destroys food breaks that law. 33

That Talmud says that, if you drop a bottle on the street and leave the pieces there, you are breaking the law of *bal tashkhit*. 34

Pour the fourth cup of wine, all red.

With this fourth cup of wine, we have come to Israel’s spring, around the time of Pesach. Red is now the main color in the landscape- pomegranate flowers in the orchards, and red buttercups and poppies in the fields.

Drink wine.

We have come full circle in Israel’s seasons, and now, with *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after the meal, we are about to complete another circle.

We began our Seder with *Bereishit*, Genesis, the story of the Creation of the world. God created an earth that sustains life-human life and “all the animals on land, all the birds of the sky, and everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life.” 35 the blessing after the meal, expressing a similar idea, praises God who

“nourishes the entire world,” who “provides food for all living creatures.”



The creation story is told in the past tense. The blessing after the meal, like the blessings on bread, wine, and fruit, is in the present. God nourishes, sustains, provides. God, in His mercy, maintains the seasons promised to Noah, the seasons we have celebrated- the rain, sun, heat, and cold that make it possible for the wheat to ripen, the grapevines to bear grapes, and the olives to form on the olive trees, year after year after year.

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Many psalms celebrate this abundance of the earth:

*“You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
They flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal...
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;*

*They sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains,
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
And plants for people to use,
To bring forth bread from the earth.”* ³⁶

As stewards, as the only creatures created in the Divine image and charged with tilling and tending, it is our job to guard and protect the earth’s bounteous ability to nurture all life, to preserve a “very good” world in which we live but which we do not own.

May we be given the wisdom to fulfill that sacred trust.

The first paragraph of birkat hamazon, the blessing after the meal:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who nourishes the entire world, in His goodness-with grace, with kindness, and with mercy. He provides food for all living creatures, for His kindness is forever. Through His great goodness, we have never lacked, and will never lack nourishment, for all eternity. For the sake of His Great Name, because He is God Who nourishes and sustains all, and benefits all, and prepared food for all His creatures which he has created-Blessed are You, Lord, Who nourishes all.

On the table:

For the Seder, you will need red and white wine or grape juice, bread and olive oil, figs, dates, and unshelled walnuts. Since it is customary to bless the bread before other foods, the bread may be covered or left on the side until needed.

In addition, it’s nice to feature fruit, the traditional Tu B’Shevat food. The custom of eating fruit from Israel on Tu B’Shevat arose in Diaspora- perhaps as a way of “tasting” the land during the long centuries of distance from its soil. Favorites were the “Seven Varieties” mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8, describing Israel as “a land of wheat and barley, of (grape) vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olives for oil and (date) honey.” Since all these native fruits ripen in Israel at the end of the summer; they were eaten in dried form on Tu B’Shevat. Various communities went way beyond the two grains and five fruits listed in the verse and at 30 or even 50 kinds of fruit at the Tu B’Shevat Seder. Another nice custom is to eat a fruit you haven’t yet tasted that year, an occasion for saying the shehekheyanu blessing, praising God for having kept us alive to reach this time.

