



Secure Your Roots From Generation to Generation A Tu B'Shevat Family Celebration

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Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakkai said, "If you have a planting in your hand, and someone says to you, 'here is the Messiah' – go and plant the planting, and afterwards go to greet him." (*Avot de-Rabbi Nathan*)

Why is Israel compared to the Olive Tree? Just as the leaves of the olive tree do not fall, neither during summer nor during the rainy season, so too, Israel can never be destroyed, neither in this world nor in the world to come. (*Babylonian Talmud 53b*)

Roots the contribution of the tree is not rooted in its magnificent braches, leaves, and fruits, but rather in its roots, which are held in place where winds and storms do not reach. They are strengthened by the source of living water of renewal. The tree does not worry when the storms seize it and shake and bend it. It does not stir or move from its place, and as long as it is not uprooted from its place, it shall speak back! Consequently, we find that not only did the tree not lose anything; to the contrary, it gained strength from the struggle. So too is man. As long as he adheres to his spiritual roots, no wind is capable of uprooting him from his place. The opposite is true: the storms will arouse the power of renewal! (*Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*)

Who devotes himself to the land when Israel stand on the ground, even the non Jewish nations praise them. Happy is the one who devotes himself to the Land and engages in its settlement, proclaims the unity of His great Name in heaven and on earth, and increases the honor of Israel. As this planting which they plant in the ground and which sprouts and ascends... (*Shmuel Yosef Agnon*)

These quotations illustrate that trees have always occupied a special place in Jewish tradition. They have served as an inspiration to our prophets, scholars and poets, who endowed them with human qualities. Trees combine a utilitarian aspect with one of great beauty; they go through cycles of growth, renewal and demise, evoking a feeling of kinship between trees and humans. It is, therefore, natural and fitting that Judaism has set of laws pertaining to trees, and a holiday marking the birthday of trees.



The widespread celebration of Tu B'Shevat, the new year of the trees, became part of Jewish life at the start of the 20th century. The first impetus was the establishment of the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael, the Jewish National Fund, in 1901. The second, giving Tu B'Shevat even more prominence, was the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. To make this beautiful holiday more accessible as a family event, we are bringing you:

1. a short review of its origin
2. its historical development
3. suggestions for home celebration
4. bibliography

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ORIGIN

The first mention of Tu B'Shevat can be traced to the Mishnah (*Rosh HaShanah 1:1*) where it is recorded as one of the four new years of the Jewish calendar: the first of Nisan-this month is designated as first of reign of Israel's kings. The first of Elul, the sixth month, was used to calculate the tithing of cattle. The first of Tishri served as a marker for the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. Even though Tishri is the seventh month of the calendar, it ushers in Rosh Hashanah, the official New Year for all Jews.

The necessity for a special day to mark the start of a tree's life brought about a fourth new year. It is rooted in the biblical laws of tithing and heave offerings which were brought to the Holy Temple. Another biblical law, *orlah*, regulates the consumption of fruit of a newly planted tree. It is only in the fifth year after planting that the fruit is permitted to be eaten. Since these mitzvot (commandments) are bound up with the age of trees, all trees planted before Tu B'Shevat begin their first year of life on the following Tu B'Shevat. This day, therefore, represents the new year of trees.

As with many of our holidays which have more than one name, this one features four names: NEW YEAR OF THE TREES-*ROSH HASHANAH LA'ILANOT* is the most appropriate one. However, since it is observed on the 15th of the month, rather than on the first, it is also known as *HAMISHA ASSAR BI SHEVAT*, literally the 15th of Shevat. The third one, Tu B'Shevat is a shorter, more modern adaptation of the previous name. It is based on the numerical value of the Hebrew letters. The letter *TET* is 9, *VAV* is 6, which gives us the combined number of 15, culminating in the name Tu B'Shevat.

YOM HULEDET LA'ILANOT-BIRTHDAY OF THE TREES evolved in this century. It highlights the fact that this date marks the renewal in tree's life.

We marvel that a purely agricultural holiday survived centuries during which the Jews were uprooted from their homeland, dispersed to all countries of the world. For some, the underlying motivation to continue celebrating Tu B'Shevat was the burning desire never to forget those laws that bind the Jewish people to *ERETZ ISRAEL*, the LAND OF ISRAEL.

Abraham, traversing the Land of Canaan, planted trees to demonstrate his taking root in his new homeland. Trees, thus evoked a powerful connection between a people and its land.



With the removal of the Jews from their land, the observance of Tu B'Shevat evolved up to the end of the 19th century as a purely symbolic celebration. A variety of customs developed, with the focus on trees native to Eretz Yisrael. Biblical quotations and stories regarding trees as recorded in the Talmud, together with the eating of fruit that is typical for Eretz Yisrael, became the core of each Tu B'Shavt celebration.

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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Although we are one people, the following customs and traditions have evolved over the years in a number of communities in different lands:

THE KABBALISTS – (Jewish Mystics) must be credited with formulating a set of customs which have not only survived since 1500's, but have a special appeal to us today.

THE KABBALISTS lived in Safed, Eretz Yisrael. They recited from the Bible, Talmud, and the Zohar while eating at least 15 kinds of fruit corresponding to the date 15.

SOME COMMUNITIES added the drinking of four cups of wine. Both red and white wine was used, mixing the two together to change the color from white, to pink, to deep red. Doing this, they likened the changing colors of the wine to the changing colors of the landscape during the seasons.

NATHAN BENAJMIN OF GAZA, who lived during the 17th century, wrote a special service replete with a festive meal for Tu'Bshvat. It is called *PRI ETZ HADAR*-THE FRUIT OF THE GOODLY TREE, and is used in many Sephardic communities.

SEPAHRDIC JEWS, living in Jerusalem, held special parties on the eve of Tu'Bshvat in synagogues and yeshivot. They also instituted a *MAOT PEROT* fund or money for fruit. This parallels the *MAOT HITTIM* fund, money of wheat, which was given to the needy before Pesach to buy matzot.

THE BENE ISRAEL, Jews from India, observe Tu B'Shevat by offering a symbolic sacrifice of fruit in honor of the prophet Elijah.

AMONG JEWS LIVING IN SYRIA AND IRAQ, the prophet Elijah was credited with the renewal of plant life.

HASSIDIM who lived in Eastern Europe had to make a special effort to perpetuate the celebration of Tu B'Shevat. The day would arrive in the midst of the most severe winter months when local fruit was not available and fruit from *Eretz Yisrael* could be obtained only with great difficulty. Despite these hardships, no effort was spared to gather 15 varieties of fruit, most often the dried variety, in order to observe this day. One of the staples was the *BOKSER-HARUVIM* (St. John's bread and carob)



THE POPULARITY OF EATING *BOKSER* is connected to the Talmudic tale of *Honi Ham'agel* (Honi the Circlemaker). A special feature of the Hassidic community was the recital of a prayer expressing the hope that there would be a good harvest of Etrogim (citrons) for Sukkot. After using the Etrog ceremonially on Sukkot, many would prepare preserves from it to be consumed on Tu B'Shevat.



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A BEAUTIFUL CUSTOM ORIGINATES IN ANCEINT ISRAEL, in which trees were linked to the life cycle of a person. At the birth of a boy, the parents planted a cedar tree, and at birth of a girl, a cypress tree. Branches from these trees would eventually be used for the *HUPPAH* (wedding canopy).

TREES ARE MENTIONED IN THE TORAH not only in connection with laws, but also in metaphors, analogies, allegories, and parables. In addition to the laws mentioned earlier, there are two interesting examples:

We are commanded to plant trees in the Land of Israel, and are admonished not to destroy fruit trees, even in time of war.

To briefly illustrate the symbolic application of trees, we recall that the Torah is compared to a TREE OF LIFE, and the righteous person to a FLOWERING PALM TREE. We see, therefore, that trees in our tradition represent perpetuity and renewal in both a very real and symbolic sense.

As previously stated, with the arrival of *halutzim* (pioneers) in *Eretz Yisrael*, and the establishment of the State of Israel in the 20th century, longings and memories were transformed from the realm of dreams to the arena of actions. Pioneers planted forests as an urgent response to a barren and swamp-infested land.

Since its inception, it has been the task of the Jewish National Fund, to link the practical work in Israel with the educational activities there and the world over.



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HOME CELEBRATION

Celebrating Tu’Bshvat in the home, heightens identification of the entire family with Israel, our past, present, and future. Parents too often rely on schools, synagogues, youth organizations to provide their offspring with knowledge and atmosphere that will evoke an emotional response to our heritage. While Tu B’Shevat can obviously be celebrated most comprehensively in Israel, we can combine materials from our rich tradition, to create a meaningful celebration.

There are many publications, audio-visual productions and posters available, or something new may be created.

Below are a number of suggestions, and a brief bibliography. In addition, the Department of Education of the Jewish National Fund will be pleased to assist you in formulating a celebration to fit your needs.

A Tu B’Shevat Seder is now the highlight in celebrating the holiday in schools and synagogues. There is no substitute, however, for a family celebration, just as a model seder before Pesach is no substitute for a real seder held at home.

Children are able to distinguish between a performance and a genuine shared family experience that is bound to strengthen the relationship between parents and children. A Tu B’Shevat Seder will also bring the family into the realm of Jewish/Zionist education. Just as we invite family and friends to our Seder on Pesach, so should we do the same on Tu’Bshvat. It adds yet another dimension to the holiday and enriches the fabric of our tradition.

In planning the celebration, prepare a list of suggestions, but let your children participate as well. The ideas in section II may be included as part of your seder. Others may become part of the “story telling” segment. Listed below are 10 suggestions:

1. Ask family members to come up with a list of at least 15 different types of fruit to be available for Tu B’Shevat.
2. Delegate the shopping for the fruit to the older children in the family.
3. Have children work on decorations- fruit, flowers and posters. They may feature biblical quotations regarding trees. Ready-made posters can also be purchased.
4. Create your own placemats. Decorate them with drawings or pictures of fruit, trees, flowers, and write *b’rahot* (blessings) for fruit, juice and cookies on them. Hebrew, transliteration of Hebrew or English is optional. Consult your prayer book for appropriate blessings.



5. Include the drinking of four cups of wine, and the mixing of the different colors as part of the ceremony. You may substitute grape juice for wine.
6. Israeli song tapes are available. Until you have mastered a number of songs, you may rely on tapes to provide the musical component.
7. The most time-honored Tu’Bshvat tradition is the planting of trees in Israel. It is, after all, the birthday of the trees. If your family has purchased trees just prior to this day, distribute the JNF tree certificates as part of the Seder.

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8. To make tree planting more realistic, you may want to include JNF's SYMBOLIC TREE PLANTING CEREMONY. It features a prayer used in Israel when planting trees, and is available from JNF at no charge.
9. Games, such as tree lotto, quizzes, etc., may be incorporated to make the proceedings lively.
10. Videos and slide shows dealing with the holiday and related topics may be obtained. They are geared to different age groups and can trigger lively discussions.

CONCLUSION

Though Tu B'Shevat arrives in the cold, dark winter, it brings a message of renewal and hope. For centuries it symbolized the eternal connection between our ancestors and the Land of Israel.

For 2,000 years, the observance of Tu B'Shevat had to be limited to symbolic acts. We, who are privileged to live during the era of the establishment of *MEDINAT YISRAEL*-THE STATE OF ISRAEL- can reach beyond the symbols. We are able to visit Israel and plant trees there, thus securing our roots in the Land of Israel and being nourished by these very roots while living in the Diaspora.

A Tu B'Shevat celebration, while open to changes, should have a set framework that will provide the basis for establishing a tradition. Thus, children, parents, grandparents, and friends will deepen their bond from generation to generation, connecting to our living source, Israel

