

TU B'SHEVAT

The New Year of the Trees

Tu B'Shevat is the New Year of the Trees. It is marked by the eating of nuts and fruits, donating funds to plant trees in Israel, focusing on environmental issues and hosting a Tu B'Shevat seder.

Tu B'Shevat literally means "15th of Shevat." Shevat is one of the months in the Hebrew calendar; the holiday occurs on this date.



History

As with most of the Jewish holidays, the exact origin of Tu B'Shevat is open to speculation. Some guess that Tu B'Shevat started out as an agricultural festival, marking the beginning of spring. Others think that it was merely the date used to calculate the tithe on tree fruit and evolved into a minor holiday.

Tu B'Shevat is not noted in the Torah. It first appears in the Mishnah, completed circa 200 C.E. The only mention there appears in Tractate Rosh Hashanah 1:1, which states there are four new years, only two of which have any observances associated with them today: Rosh Hashanah and Tu B'Shevat.

The Mishnah does not mention any particular observances or celebrations associated with Tu B'Shevat; it is presented merely as a date important in figuring the tithe on fruit. Commentary in the Talmud on this Mishnah rationalizes that the 15th of Shevat is the New Year of the Trees because, by that time, the majority of the winter rain has fallen in Israel and the fruit of the trees begins to form.

A Connection to Israel

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the exile of most Jews from the land of Israel, Tu B'Shevat took on a new character. A widespread custom developed of eating fruits that grow in the land of Israel on Tu B'Shevat. In this fashion, the holiday evolved into a means for Jews to maintain a connection to the land of Israel. The custom of eating fruit from Israel continues to this day.

In the 16th century, Sephardic Kabbalists revitalized the holiday by composing a Tu B'Shevat seder based upon the Passover seder. On Erev Tu B'Shevat, they would gather in their homes for a fifteen-course meal, each course being one of the foods associated with the land. Between courses, they would read from an anthology called *Peri Etz Hadar*, citrus fruit, which was a compilation of passages on trees drawn

from the Bible, the Talmud and the mystical Zohar. The Sephardic seder did not catch on among Ashkenazic Jews. (Most American Jews are Ashkenazic.)

The Jewish National Fund

In modern times, Tu B'Shevat has taken on additional meaning. It is a popular custom today to donate money on Tu B'Shevat to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) for planting trees in Israel.

The Jewish National Fund was the brainchild of a German mathematician named Hermann Schapira, who first proposed the concept in 1884. Schapira, an ardent Zionist, realized there had to be an agency that would purchase the land on which a Jewish state might ultimately flower. He felt Jews throughout the world should help to buy the land, enabling it to be held in trust for the entire Jewish people. The land, he affirmed, must never be sold or mortgaged, only leased. The agency he proposed would ensure that the Jewish State, once established, would never be subject to the whims of real estate speculators or political bodies, whatever their wealth or nationality.

Schapira's concept became reality in 1901 with the establishment of the *Keren Kayemet LeYisrael* (Jewish National Fund). Since then, JNF has secured countless acres of land, helped to establish *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, paved thousands of miles of road, built dams for irrigation and planted over two hundred million trees.

Environmentalism

Due to the increased environmental awareness of recent decades, Tu B'Shevat has taken on the character of a Jewish mini "Earth Day." A holiday for trees inspires reflection on the human impact on the environment.

Trees and Judaism

Trees are part of the natural wonder of the world and have always been a special symbol for Jews. Trees were protected in times of war (Deuteronomy 20:19), and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav proclaimed: "If a man kills a tree before its time, it is as though he had murdered a soul."

Above all, the Torah itself is seen as "the tree of life," a growing and abundant source of spiritual sustenance to a great people. Perhaps this is the best indication of the reverence and respect which Judaism holds for God's world. The tree has been a symbol of life; on Tu B'Shevat, we celebrate that life in joy and gladness.

The Tu B'Shevat Seder

The Tu B'Shevat seder is loosely based on the Pesach seder. In particular, just like the Passover seder, there are four glasses of wine drunk during the seder. At the Tu B'Shevat seder, however, the color of the wine in each glass is varied. The first cup is all white wine; the second is mostly white wine mixed with some red wine; the third is mostly red mixed with some white; and the fourth is all red wine. (Grape juice can be substituted for wine.)

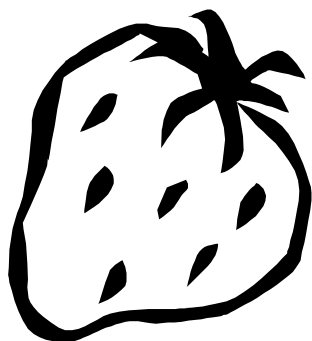
The Pesach seder liturgy is largely concerned with the story of the Exodus from Egypt. A major portion of the Tu B'Shevat seder liturgy is composed of excerpts mentioning trees from the Bible, Talmud and other sources. The Kabbalists believed Creation is composed of four separate worlds or levels. Fruits are used during the seder to symbolize these worlds. The four worlds are: *assiyah* (action), which is the lowest level; *yetzirah* (formation), which is the second lowest level; *beriah* (creation), which is next to the highest level; and *azilut* (emanation), which is the highest and purest level. The 16th century Kabbalists in Safed were very interested in these four levels, so it comes as no surprise they get a "starring role" in the seder.

The first set of fruits eaten during the seder symbolizes *assiyah*, our level. These fruits all have an inedible outer shell, such as nuts. The edible part of the fruit represents holiness. In our world, holiness is hidden and we have to seek it out. The fragile holiness must be protected within our world.

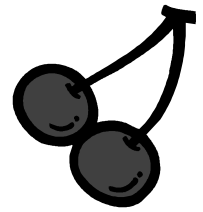
The second set of fruits eaten during the seder symbolizes the level of *yetzirah*. These fruits are edible on the outside but have pits on the inside, such as peaches. The edible portion symbolizes holiness. At this level, holiness can be left exposed, but its inner core, its "heart," must still be protected.

The third and final set of fruits eaten during the seder are completely edible and symbolize the level of *beriah*. Holiness at this level needs no protection. (Some of the fruits included in this group, such as apples and oranges, are not actually considered totally edible by most people; small seeds are ignored in the symbolism.)

What about the symbolism for the highest level or world - *azilut*? The Kabbalists felt *azilut* was so pure and spiritual there was nothing in our world that could possibly be used to symbolize it. Thus, no fruits are assigned to represent it during the seder.



The Blessing for Fruit



There is a blessing that is appropriate to recite before eating raw fruit:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Elohaynu, Melech Haolam, borei pri ha'eitz.

Blessed are You Adonai, our God, Ruler of the universe, who brings forth the fruit of the tree.

This is exactly like the blessing for wine, except the last word, *ha'gafen*, the vine, is replaced with *ha'eitz*, the tree. Both blessings are recited several times during the course of the Tu B'Shevat seder.

Our thanks to . . .

This information was assembled from *The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living*, by Daniel B. Syme, UAHC Press, New York, New York, 1988, and an article by Edward Walker, which appears on the web site of Beth El Temple Center, Belmont, Massachusetts.

Apple Date Nut Bars*

2 large Granny Smith apples, peeled, cored, chopped
2 tbsp. granulated sugar
2 tbsp. each: fresh lemon juice and water
1-1/2 cups pitted dates, chopped
2 sticks (1 cup) butter, softened
1 cup packed light brown sugar
1 tsp. salt
2-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1-1/2 cups finely chopped pecans
1-1/2 tsp. cinnamon

Combine the apples, sugar, lemon juice and water in a saucepan, simmer covered, stirring for 5 to 10 minutes until apples are tender. Add the dates and simmer uncovered, stirring and mashing the dates for 3 to 5 minutes until the dates are soft and the mixture is soft. Let the purée cool. Cream the butter and brown sugar, add the salt, flour, pecans and cinnamon and blend well. Press half the flour mixture into a buttered 13 x 9-inch baking pan. Spread the purée over it. Crumble the remaining flour mixture over the purée, pressing it lightly to form an even layer. Bake at 375° for 35 to 40 minutes until golden. Cool and cut into 36 bars.

* This recipe is from the Sisterhood Cook Book, which is available at the temple Gift Shop.