

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms
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Topic: Tu B'Shevat

Key idea: Biblical Jewish law determined that a tenth of one's produce must be given as a tax, or tithe, which went to the priesthood or the poor, depending on the year. Originally, the rabbis viewed the New Year for Trees as the day from which the tithes (*ma'aser*) should be calculated, and the date from which immature fruit was prohibited (orlah). The tithe of ripened fruits had to be of the same tax year (just as today, taxes are paid on each year's income). Consequently, fruit which blossomed prior to the fifteenth of Shevat could not be used as tithe for fruit which blossomed after that date. The years of a tree were thus reckoned from 15th Shevat; a tree planted in December would be legally "two years old" on Tu B'Shevat, only a year and 3 months later.

After the exile of the Jews from the Land of Israel, and for most of Jewish history, the only observance of this day was the practice of eating fruit associated with the land of Israel. A tradition based on Deuteronomy 8:8 holds that there are five fruits and two grains associated with it as a "land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and [date] honey." Almonds were also given a prominent place in Tu B'Shvat meals since the almond trees were believed to be the first of all trees in Israel to blossom. Carob or St John's bread (*bokser*) was the most popular fruit to use, since it could survive the long trip from Israel to Jewish communities in Europe and North Africa.

The medieval mystical Kabbalists carried Tu B'Shvat a step further. They believed that the ritual consumption of the fruits and the nuts, if done with the proper intention (*kavanah*), would cause the sparks of holy light hidden in the fruit to be liberated from their shells and rise up the heavenly ladder to return to their divine source, thereby contributing to the renewal of life for the coming year. The Kabbalists of Ts'fat (16th century) created a Tu Bishvat seder loosely modeled after the Pesach seder. The new form of celebration spread from Safed to Sephardic communities in Turkey, Italy and Greece, and later in Europe, Asia and North Africa.

With the Zionist return to the land, Tu B'Shevat was transformed yet again. In a new act of ritual creativity, Jewish schoolteachers of pre-state Palestine made Tu B'Shevat a day of tree planting, a festival of reforestation efforts, re-rooting and reconnecting to land and landscape... Though trees have unfortunately become a political pawn in the national struggles over this land, with aggressive plantings and uprootings taking place on both sides, the visceral significance of actually rooting a tree in the soil establishes an undeniable physical connection with the land. More recently, Tu B'Shevat became the Jewish "earth day," prompting greater concern for ecology and environmentalism.

Text 1: *Mishna*, (Rosh Hashanah 1:1):

There are four New Year days:

The first of Nissan, the New Year for kings and the festivals;

The first of Elul, the New Year for the tithing of animals;

The first of Tishrei, the New Year for the counting of years, the Sabbatical year (shemittah), and the Jubilee, and planting and vegetation; and

The first of Shevat, the New Year for Trees - according to the followers of Shammai. Those who follow Hillel say it is on the fifteenth of Shevat."

Text 2: Stephen Hazan Arnoff , "Trees and their New Year in Rabbinic Judaism."

The primary role of a new year for agricultural items is determining what products are certified for tithing. It thus essentially represents a tax on assets that is paid through sacrifices to God and direct offerings to priests and the poor. In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, the system of four new years remains as a marker of the central role that Temple worship and tithing played in the relationship between the Jewish people and God. Each new year marks a key component of this relationship.

The New Year for Kings and Festivals represents a yearly affirmation of the social, political, and religious structure of the nation. The Temple, particularly during festivals, was the vehicle for the masses to recognize and support the leaders responsible for the cycle of sacrifices that kept the Jewish people in good stead with God. The kings ruling over the land of Israel had to ensure that this system was functional and protected. Because ancient Israel was primarily an agricultural society, temple tithing as well as other forms of cultic tribute and sacrifice consisted of the vegetables, fruits, and animals that people cultivated.

The new years of the first of Elul and Tishrei and the 15th of Shvat shared the responsibility for marking the process of generating the resources that quite literally fed the cultic system. These new years determined the larger and smaller scale cycles for planting, harvesting, and offering or consuming Israel's most valuable goods.

While the rabbis preserved the first of Tishrei as Rosh Hashanah--celebrated today as the beginning of the Jewish calendar year as well as the start of a period of intensive individual and communal spiritual introspection and repentance culminating in Yom Kippur--the other three new years faded from Jewish practice. Nonetheless, rabbinic tradition continued to develop a rich body of texts and ideas about trees, even as the holiday of Tu Bishvat lay all but dormant for hundreds of years.

Text 3: Shaul Magid, "The First Ray of Light: A Mystical Interpretation of Tu Bishvat ."
<http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/luminaries/monograph/firstray.shtml>

The Jewish mystical tradition has always viewed the entire cycle of the Jewish year as a seamless tapestry, the textures and contours of each celebration neatly blending into one another. For the mystics the Jewish year rises as a mythic mandala in which each piece contributes to the balanced whole. This tradition presents Tu B'Shevat, conventionally known as the Jewish New Year for the Trees, as an essential "turn" from the season of darkness (winter--Hanukkah) to the season of light (spring--Passover); from the era of darkness (exile) to the era of light (redemption). Tu B'Shevat celebrates the ethereal divine spark which brings forth new life. Buds that will bring forth fragrant blossoms appear on the trees in Israel at Tu B'Shevat. The fragrance turns us away from the dark months of winter when we are consoled by the small light of the Hanukkah menorah toward a new beginning. We inhale deeply the blossoms of new life at Tu B'Shevat, say the mystics, for the sweet fragrance of God's creation.

Text 4: Ari Elon, Naomi Mara Hyman, and Arthur Waskow, *Trees, Earth, and Torah: A Tu B'Shevat Anthology*

Through much of the history of Rabbinic Judaism, a mystical strand of Jewish thought--sometimes at the intellectual and spiritual heart of the tradition, often at its institutional periphery--has danced with the Hidden Presence of God in the world, sometimes, the hidden presence of God in the earth itself.

For example, in kabbalistic [mystical] thought for centuries, trees that are mentioned in two passages of the *Tanakh* [Bible] have held special intensity of meaning. One passage--the story of *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Delight--gave enormous importance to the Tree(s) of Eden. In the other passage, Proverbs equates the "tree of life" with Wisdom--perhaps with Torah, perhaps with an aspect of Divinity Itself.

Indeed, the kabbalists came to imagine the emanations of God (called the *Sefirot*) connected in an organic pattern that they called a tree. Yet early kabbalists rarely connected these images with earthly trees.

The kabbalah received new energy in the wake of the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, and during the 16th century an extraordinary grouping of creative kabbalists resettled in the tiny town of Tzfat (Safed) in the Galilee region of the Land of Israel, actually within the Land, close to its rhythms.

So the mystical sense of God's Presence became charged with the earthiness of living close to the land. The Tzfat community created new forms of celebration that viewed the land and the rhythms of nature in new ways.

Midnight became a special time of Heavenly Opening. Sunset on the eve of Shabbat became a time of singing on the hilltops. And earthly trees became intertwined with the image and symbol the One Tree, God's Own Self, the Tree that has its roots in heaven and its fruitfulness on earth.

From these mystics emerged the notion of a seder for the Fifteenth of Shvat, celebrating the rebirth of trees. Their seder was built around fruits and nuts and cups of wine of different colors, which became for them edible symbols of the mystical Four Worlds as well as invocations of God's Holy *shefa*, all of life's abundance.

Text 5: Lesli Koppelman Ross, *Returning to the land of Israel leads to new rituals. Fom Celebrate! The Complete Jewish Holiday Handbook.*

When the Jews of Europe began to establish agricultural settlements in what was then Palestine in the late 19th century, they were fulfilling the dream of Jews for almost 2,000 years before them. As they reclaimed the Land long celebrated by Tu Bishvat and revived Jewish life on it, the holiday was again transformed.

The Jewish National Fund (*Keren Kayemet LeYisrael*, established in 1901 to collect money to buy property in Palestine) arranged highly spirited annual Tu Bishvat tree-planting ceremonies. In a procession with marching bands and banners, thousands of people carrying young trees sang and danced on their way to the hillsides. Today, almost one-seventh of the entire population of the State of Israel goes to the countryside to plant saplings.

Outside Israel, the day was often devoted to activities centered on the geography and produce of the land. Palestine Day, as it was known in America, was celebrated with parties, songs, games, and stories at school, synagogue, and home.

Early in the 1970s, there began to emerge a special literature that explored what Judaism had to say about the *adam-adamah*, human-earth, relationship. Some of it sprang directly from increasing public concern that new forms of human technology were damaging the earth. Some was a response to scientists who attacked Judaism and Christianity as the bearers of a destructive teaching that human beings alone of all creation bear the Image of God and that they should subdue the earth--a teaching that, the scientists argued, led philosophically to contempt for nature and practically to pollution and degradation of nature.

Two somewhat distinct Jewish approaches emerged, both interested in exploring Jewish responsibility for the whole of the planet, not only for the Land of Israel, where Jews had again

become historically responsible. Both approaches led to another burst of energy in the celebration of Tu Bishvat.

Increasingly, the festival was seen to fuse the mystical with the eco-planetary, and so to include the trees of all countries as aspects of the Sacred Tree Above. One of these new approaches we might call "Rabbinic Stewardship." Its proponents asserted that true Judaism was protective of the environment, bore no responsibility for the despoliation of nature that Western techno-industrialism was imposing, and should indeed be drawn on to protect the environment.

This approach emerged just about simultaneously with another kind of Jewish approach to the earth. It saw Rabbinic Judaism as an important source of Jewish concern for the earth, but one that was in itself insufficient to deal with the growing threats to the natural world posed by human technology.

In response to this sense of insufficiency, several Jewish philosophies were put before the public that bespoke a love of the earth that went beyond most rabbinic teachings, drawing deeply on Hasidic thought and on some kindred Western ideas. Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, each in his own way, spoke out of these roots. Their work, along with some earth-focused elements of Zionism, fed into an emerging exploration of new approaches to Judaism as the *havurot* [small, informal Jewish prayer communities] and early Jewish-renewal energies, including feminist Judaism, grew in the United States in the early 1970s.

The proponents of Rabbinic Stewardship and the proponents of Jewish renewal were both attracted to recovering and renewing Tu Bishvat, for somewhat different but overlapping reasons. Participants in the loose-knit Jewish renewal movement were drawn to the drama, the depth, the beauty, and the intellectual power of the kabbalistic [mystical] and Zionist ceremonial patterns embodied in Tu Bishvat ritual and ceremony as well as to its hints of celebrating an earth in danger. The Jews attracted to Rabbinic Stewardship also responded to the possibility of drawing on Tu Bishvat to focus on Jewish concerns for the earth.