

15 Sh'vat

FAMILY EDUCATION PRESENTS

טו בשבט
Tu B'shvat

Tu B'Shevat, the 15th day of the Jewish month of Shevat, is a holiday also known as the **New Year for Trees**. Most American Jews know it as "the birthday of the trees," but few know its origins and observances. Just as taxes are paid on the basis of a fiscal year, in ancient Israel fruits, vegetables and grains were tithed for the Temple on the basis of the agricultural cycle. Deep in winter, Tu B'Shevat is a logical time to end the growing year and begin anew. It is the time when the fruit of the trees would begin to form.

You may wonder why is it that the late winter month of Shevat is considered the time to end and then to begin the year of the fruit crop? The Talmud explains that even though most of winter is still to come, most of the rain (in Israel) has already fallen—so the trees begin to drink from it, and their sap begins to rise. The turn of the year has come. *Life is reasserting itself, it is the reawakening of the Tree of Life*. In fact, it was in the Talmud that the New Year of the Trees received its name. (But long before Talmudic times the Torah itself set the example regarding preservation of our world and environmental responsibility. Consider the fact that the Bible says that fruit trees may not be cut down even in time of war. (*Deuteronomy 20*)) The message of preserving and respecting the earth was formulated thousands of years ago in ancient Israel. Tu B'Shevat, which usually falls in late January or very early February, is, in some ways, similar to the Earth Day celebrated here.

What does Tu B'Shevat mean? The Hebrew numeral system uses the letters of the alphabet for numbers, like Roman numerals where the letter "V" denotes the number "5". The way to say "13" is to use the letters for "10" and "3" together; the way to say "14" is to use the letters for "10" and "4" together etc. So how would you say "15"? You might answer, given the preceding explanation, use the letters for "10" and "5" together. But this raises a problem. The letter for "10" is *yud* and the letter for 5 is *hay*. So 15 would be *yud hay*. But that is also one of the names of God, and is half of the most sacred Name (Yud Hay Vav Hay), therefore, it is not used. Instead the numerals for 9 plus 6 (*tet and vav*) are used. Pronounced like a word, they come out like "Tu" for 15. Therefore, Tu B'Shevat means the 15th of Shevat, the day the holiday is celebrated.

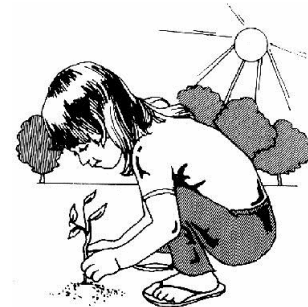
Goin' Green

On Tu B'shevat

Tu B'Shevat is a date that speaks the praise of the *Land of Israel*, and it is therefore abundant with festivity. Work is not forbidden, and because it is a minor holiday, fasting and saying penitential prayers are prohibited. Among the Ashkenazic communities of Central and Eastern Europe, the custom arose of singing Psalm 104 and the fifteen Psalms of Ascent. Along with the fifteen psalms went eating fifteen different kinds of fruit, especially some from the Land of Israel such as: grapes, barley, figs, dates, wheat, olives and pomegranates. All of these fruits are mentioned in the Torah especially as part of the goodness of the Land of Israel. A special association arose with *carob*, a tree mentioned as the chief food of the mystical rabbi Shimon bar Yochai during the years he hid from the Roman soldiers in a cave. Another traditional food to eat during Tu B'Shevat is the almond, since it is the first tree to bloom in Israel in the spring. Fruits such as avocados, oranges, bananas and kiwis are more modern Israeli fruits.

A lovely ritual, known as the Tu B'Shevat Seder, has its origin in the Middle Ages. But instead of celebrating redemption from slavery, Tu B'Shevat celebrates the New Year of the trees. A creative ritual designed to celebrate the produce of the land of Israel, participants would consume the seven main crops (listed above) mentioned in the Torah (*Deuteronomy 8:8*). Those items were in short supply in European and North American winters, so generations of Hebrew School children grew up gnawing on "boksar," the carob-like fruit which was imported in plentiful supply from Israel each January.

The growing Jewish settlements in Palestine during the late nineteenth century were discovering that planting trees was a crucial act of restoration of the land. In a hot, dry land like Israel, trees make the difference between an unfriendly desert and a good land. Planting trees became both the practical means and symbolic representation of planting Jewish communities. Settlers began having their children plant trees on the fifteenth of Shevat. It has long been a custom in Israel to plant a



young cedar tree for every boy born during the year and a young cypress tree for every girl. In this way, the beginning of life was celebrated by the beginning of more life. When a grown boy or girl was married, cedar branches from his tree and cypress branches from hers were woven together to form the *chupah* or marriage canopy. In the diaspora (Jewish communities outside Israel), the day became a day of focusing on collecting money to plant trees in Israel. Some congregations here have planted trees in their own communities in addition to collecting money for trees in Israel.

In 1949, on the first Tu B'Shevat celebrated in the Jewish state, thousands of people gathered to plant life giving trees in a forest which will one day contain six million trees—the number of Jews killed during the Holocaust. It will be known as the "Forest of the Martyrs".

Today Tu B'Shevat directs our attention toward the earth, the land of Israel and the way we treat nature. It is a time to examine our relationship with the wider world of God's creation. It is a fitting time to review our recycling habits and look for ways to improve them. During this holiday of Tu B'Shevat, Jewish environmental organizations are encouraging families to focus not just on the planting of trees in Israel, but on expanding the holiday's message to incorporate a general sense of environmental responsibility.

Although Tu B'Shevat is a minor holiday, it conveys important messages for our time. Massive deforestation of the Amazon rain forests and elsewhere (including North America) has focused world attention on the importance of trees. Forests and ecosystems must be saved, new trees must be planted and paper must be recycled.



A story is told about an old man who was planting a carob tree in his garden when the king happened to ride by. "Old man, is that a tree you are planting?" inquired the king.

"Yes, your majesty, a carob tree."

"And how long will it be before your carob tree bears fruit?"

"About seventy years."

"Seventy years!" laughed the king. "Why do you bother to plant this tree, since you will not live to eat its fruit?"

"I have often eaten carob from trees planted before my time," replied the old man. "Years from now, after I am gone, my grandchildren will be able to eat the fruit of this tree."

The old man knew something the king did not: when we plant a tree we show our love for the world, and we help to make it a better place.

This tale reminds us that planting for the future is a lot like parenting. Much of what we do day after day has no immediate or obvious effect, and yet the influence of our small, everyday interactions with our children may have great bearing on their futures and even upon the futures of generations yet to be born.

As parents, we can't protect our children from every storm, and some storms uproot even great trees. But constant nurturing of the roots is one of our crucial tasks. The roots are the firm foundation that support all the outward attraction and achievements that we hope our children will have.

Things to do with your family while celebrating Tu B'Shevat:

- Tree planting is a mitzvah that should be enjoyed by the whole family. Contact the Jewish National Fund at 1-800-542-TREE to inquire how they can plant a tree on your behalf in Israel. It will be fun to decide as a family who the tree should honor.
- As we don't live in a temperate climate in January (usually!), try some indoor gardening with your kids. They will love to see seeds sprout.
- Make some Tu B'Shevat Date Nut Squares

It is customary to make fruity, nutty and Israeli type dishes for this day.

Mix 1 pkg. chopped pitted dates (1 1/2 cups) and 3/4 boiling water in a small bowl. Let it cool.

Mix 1/2 cup shortening or oil, 2 eggs and 1 t. vanilla until light fluffy looking. Mix 1 1/3 c. sugar, 1 1/3 c. flour, 1 t. cocoa, 1 t. baking soda, and 1/4 t. salt together. Add to batter alternately with date mush. Spoon into a greased 9 x 13 baking pan. Sprinkle top with 3/4 c. chopped nuts. Bake at 350 for 40-45 minutes. Let cool, remove from pan. Put 1/2 c. confectioners sugar into a wire colander and sift over the cake. Cut into squares.

- Plant parsley seeds in a pot with soil. The parsley should be fully grown in time to be dipped in salt water at the Passover seder
- Another custom is to donate ninety one cents or dollars to tzedakah since "charity averts the evil decree." Because Tu B'Shevat is the day of judgment for the trees, we give ninety one, which is the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew letters that make up the word *ilan* (tree).
- Hold a Tu B'Shevat seder with your family. The basic format of the seder consists of the following.
 - * Eat three groupings of fruits and nuts. The blessing said before eating fruit is: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam, borei pri ha'etz.*
 - Eat those that have a hard outside shell that cannot be eaten.
Examples of these are: pomegranates and coconuts.
 - Eat those that have a soft outside but an inedible pit such as: olives, dates, cherries, apricots, plums and peaches.
 - Eat those fruits that are wholly edible such as: grapes, figs, apples, pears, raspberries and the ever popular carob.
 - * In between eating the fruits and nuts, drink four cups of wine. Begin with white wine, (the white represents the dormancy of winter) and make each successive cup redder by adding some of the red wine, until the fourth cup, which should be all red (the red represents the full bloom of spring). The blessing said before drinking the wine is: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam borei pri hagafen.*
 - * Read selections about trees and the environment.
- Feed the birds. Feeding the hungry birds in winter is an example of concern for tzaar baalei hayyim, the suffering of animals. Remember, it is important that once you start to feed the birds, you need to continue. They will learn to depend on that full birdfeeder!

Books that your children may enjoy:

Title	Author
Alina, a Russian Girl Comes to Israel	Mira Meir
Dates as Sweet as Honey	Betty Ann Ross
Honi and His magic Circle	Phillis Gershatar
Curious David, A Tu B'Shevat Tale	Esther Adler
A Tree is Nice	Janice May Udry
Tree Spirits	Florence Baker Karpin
Pearl Plants a Tree	Jane Breskin Zalben
A Thriving Olive Tree	Esther Adler
The Lorax	Dr. Suess
Tu Bishvat	Norman Simon
Seder Tu B'Shevat	Adam Fisher
A Tree Full of Mitzvos	Dina Herman
The Gift that Grew	Yaffa Ganz
The Little Leaf	Chana Sharfstein
The Giving Tree	Shel Silverstein
Solomon and the Trees	Matt Biers-Ariel
The Littlest Tree	Sylvia Rouss
The Tiny Seed	Eric Carle
The Never-Ending Greenness	Neil Waldman
Grandpa and Me on Tu B'Shevat	Marji Gold-Yukson

Books that were used in the preparation of this text:

Seasons of Our Joy	Arthur Waskow
Jewish Family and Life	Yosef Abramowitz and Rabbi Susan Silverman
The Book of Jewish Holidays	Ruth Kozoday
All About Jewish Holidays and Customs	Morris Epstein
The Jewish Parent's Almanac	Julie Hilton Danan
The Jewish Holidays	Michael Strassfeld
When a Jew Celebrates	Harry Gersh
Trees, Earth and Torah	Ari Elon, Naomi Mava Hyman, Arthur Waskow
Torah of the Earth	Arthur Waskow
Ecology and the Jewish Spirit	Ellen Bernstein
The Way into Judaism and the Environment	Jeremy Bernstein
A Seder for Tu Bishvat	Harlene Appelman and Jane Shapiro

Websites

www.jnf.org

www.coejl.org

www.myjewishlearning.com/