Tu Bishvat
the greening of Judaism

interfaithfamily
Supporting Interfaith Families Exploring Jewish Life
What Is Tu Bishvat?

Jewish Earth Day!
A New Year for Trees!
A Jewish Arbor Day!
A great excuse for a party that anticipates springtime!

Decoding The Words

Shvat is the name of a winter month in the Jewish lunar calendar.

Tu is 15

Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet is also a number:
T (tet) = 9 and U (vov) = 6.

The “Bi” means “of” or “with”.

Now you know how to decode the name. Tu BiShvat is both a date and the name of a holiday celebrated on that date; it’s understood in the same way as the Fourth of July.

Origins

Originally a time for farmers to record the age of their trees so they would know which trees were old enough to harvest, it has become a time to connect Jewish values of taking care of the earth with contemporary concerns about pollution, climate change and the preservation of the environment.

In Israel, Tu Bishvat comes in the middle of the rainy season. In the Diaspora (the rest of the world), the harvest cycle is slightly different. In the northern hemisphere, it may be rainy or snowy this time of year. Just when you are bored with the grayness of winter, and wondering if you will ever be truly warm again, Judaism provides you with a reminder that spring and the sun will come again, bringing new fruits and flowers. In the southern hemisphere, Tu Bishvat comes in the peak of summer; not an ideal time for planting. But a welcome excuse to go outdoors and enjoy nature nonetheless!

Trees Are Holy

Judaism has always seen trees as sacred. The Torah itself is called a “tree of life.”

The importance of maintaining an orchard is exemplified by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai, a sage of the first century, who is recorded in Avot de Rabbi Natan (a homiletic text) as saying,

“If you have a seedling in your hand, and someone says to you, ‘Look, here comes the Messiah,’ go and plant the seedling first, and then come out to meet the Messiah.”

The Torah also forbids the cutting down of an enemy’s fruit trees, even in a time of war when the wood might be needed to attack a city.

These Jewish values can be connected to ecological activism on Tu Bishvat.

Caretakers Of The Earth

In the book of Genesis, humankind is instructed to be shomrei adamah, caretakers of the Earth, and of all God’s creations.
Activities With Children

Herbs are resilient and start growing quickly! Plant parsley seeds and learn how plants need water and sun to germinate and grow. Harvest the parsley and put it on your seder plate at Passover.

Have a scavenger hunt in your supermarket. Give out pictures of the produce of Israel: olives, dates, figs, pomelos, oranges, almonds and pomegranates. Then assign pictures to each child to find the fruits in the pictures. Another variation on this scavenger hunt would be to have children find the “seven species,” seven agricultural species listed in the book of Deuteronomy as being special to Israel. These include wheat, barley, figs, grapes, olives, pomegranates and dates.

Tu Bishvat Seder

The most common seder is the meal we share on Passover, but seder just means “order” in Hebrew; any meal with a set lineup or procedure can be a seder.

Kabbalists in the Middle Ages revived Tu Bishvat, elevating it to be a joyous holiday. As a new year for the trees, they felt it deserved a new year’s feast. With that, they created a seder.

As there is no one, standardized Tu Bishvat seder, what follows is an example of the formatting and meaning one can glean from it:

**Fruits and nuts with a hard outside and an edible inside, like walnuts, almonds, pomegranates, pistachios or coconuts.**

- **Asiyah (actualization):** we open these fruits and nuts to reveal gifts that transcend their outward appearance.

- **Winter:** everything lays dormant and hidden, but inside is the potential for more.

- **People:** because a gruff exterior can hide one’s true nature, we need to refrain from judging others based on appearances. They can also represent ways we separate ourselves from others. Eating these fruits and nuts reminds us that no matter who we are, we all carry a divine spark within.

**Fruits with soft exteriors and pits at their center, like olives, apricots, cherries and plums.**

- **Yetzirah (formation):** these fruits remind us that every flowering tree was once bare, that growth can sometimes come from the innermost places.

- **Spring:** the seeds in the center, though we cannot eat them, are signs of rebirth.

- **People:** within all of us is untapped potential!
Blessings For the Tu Bishvat Seder

The real focus of the seder is on serving fruit. We say this blessing for fruits that grow on trees, such as apples, pears, almonds, olives and dates:

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

[Blessings for wine and fruit]

Fruits that are entirely edible, such as raisins, grapes, apples, pears and raspberries.

Beriah (creation): so much more will be created; so much more is yet to come!

Summer: though trees are full and green, their growth is not complete.

People: examining the fruit of our own creations and actions, we realize we can deepen our relationships in the world and with the Earth.

That which is invisible to the eye. Instead of eating fruit, we enjoy sweet smells, like cinnamon, rosemary or bay leaf.

Atzilut (presence, emanation, birth): all things are part of one another, connected. Like smells, connections can be subtle.

Autumn: as the cycle comes to the end, we’re reminded that it will begin again.

People: we need to stop and take time to remember and appreciate what we cannot see.

Your seder can be a fruit-only seder or be combined with grains, vegetarian soups and salads to make a full meal. The goal is to make it an evening of fun learning, celebrating and honoring one of the four Jewish new years.

Because seders for Tu Bishvat continue to evolve each year, we recommend looking online for the best sources for readings and haggadot (books that outline a seder). See our listings at www.interfaithfamily.com/tubishvat.

Connection To The Earth

In the beginning, God created Adam from earth – adama in Hebrew. Adam lived with Eve, in complete harmony with the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve tilled the earth, tended it, and the trees bore fruit which they ate; the world was perfect.

With every step or misstep, our relationship to the green world has become more distant. Exiled from the Garden, growing food only came from the sweat of Adam’s brow. Cain, Adam and Eve’s son, murdered his brother Abel and was punished by no longer being able to profit from the strength of the soil, causing him to wander the Earth. God sent a flood to cover the Earth and begin creation again, but soon enough man tried to leave Earth by building the tower of Babel.

On Tu Bishvat we remind ourselves that we are one and the same as the Earth. Taking care of the world and all that grows will nurture us as well.
InterfaithFamily’s mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships—individuals, couples, families and their children—to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

InterfaithFamily offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

You can join the InterfaithFamily Network or signup for our email newsletter at www.interfaithfamily.com

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