

# Weekly Teaching

January 26, 2018

On the evening of January 30, we will begin to celebrate *Tu B'Shevat*, the "birthday of the trees."

*Tu B'Shevat* is considered a minor festival and named for the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shevat*.

In antiquity, *Tu B'Shevat* was the date that determined when Jews should bring a portion of their harvest of fruit to the Great Temple in Jerusalem to make an Offering to God of "First-Fruits."

In the 16th century, the Jewish Mystics in the city of Safed, in Israel, created a new ritual to celebrate *Tu B'shevat* called the "Feast of Fruits."

This new ritual was an imitation of our Passover Seder, and participants read from both Biblical and Rabbinic literature as appropriately connected to agricultural sources.

Examples:

[God instructs] *replenish the earth and master it.* (Genesis 1:28)

Adam and Eve are commanded: "*to till it [a garden] and keep it.*" (Genesis 2.10)

*When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down.* (Deuteronomy 20:19)

*When you are harvesting in your field, and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.* (Deuteronomy 24:19)

*I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.* (Amos 9:14)

*At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail.* (Job 14:7)

*I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees.* (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6)

*A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.* (Ecclesiastes 3:2)

*How can a person of flesh and blood follow God?...God, from the very beginning of creation, was occupied before all else with planting, as written: "First, God planted a Garden in Eden" [Genesis 2:8] Therefore...occupy yourselves first and foremost with planting.* (Leviticus Rabbah 25:3)

*Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai used to say: if you have a sapling in your hand, and someone should say to you that the Messiah has come, stay and complete the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.* (Avot de Rabbi Nathan, 31b)

*To serve God, one needs access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-decorated meadows, majestic mountains, flowing rivers. For all these are essential to the spiritual development of even the holiest people.* (Rabbi Abraham ben Moses)

*Acknowledge that humanity has no ownership or authority over the natural world. Nothing may be dealt with as we please; including the environment, for everything belongs to God.* (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh)

*Nature is of the very essence of Deity.* (Baal Shem Tov)

*Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go each day outdoors among the trees and grass and all growing things, and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer.* (Nachman of Bratzlav)

Beyond reading sacred texts, at the *Tu B'Shevat* Seder participants eat fruits and nuts that hold a special connection to the land of Israel.

Almonds hold special meaning at the *Tu B'Shevat* Seder because almond trees are the first trees to blossom in Israel each new agricultural year.

Carob also became a popular fruit at the *Tu B'Shevat* Seder because it stays edible for long periods of time, and could historically be delivered more easily from the land of Israel to Jews who lived in European exile.

At a *Tu B'Shevat* Seder we utilize four cups of wine:

- White wine symbolizes winter
- White mixed with red wine symbolizes that the spring season is approaching
- Red mixed with white symbolizes the beginning of spring
- Red wine symbolizes the remainder of the spring and summer

Modern Day Zionists seized upon *Tu B'Shevat* as an opportunity to celebrate the re-planting of Trees in Israel.

This custom remains strong, and many of us grew up with Blue Jewish National Fund (JNF) *Tzedakkah* Box within our homes.

I especially encourage this mitzvah; to celebrate Israel's re-growth with the planting of a Tree in our Holy Land.

You may send funds for this purpose to my Discretionary Fund—Checks Payable to Temple Shalom—Memo “JNF Tu B'Shevat.” (If you would like the tree in honor or memory of a loved one, please also indicate this for me.)

You may also plant your tree directly by going to [www.jnf.org](http://www.jnf.org).

The Israeli Poet, Shin Shalom, wrote:

*On Tu B'shvat  
when spring comes  
An angel descends  
ledger in hand  
and enters each bud, each twig, each tree, and all our garden flowers.*

*From town to town, from village to village  
the angel makes a winged way  
searching the valleys, inspecting the hills  
flying over the desert  
and returns to heaven.*

*And when the ledger will be full  
of trees and blossoms and shrubs  
when the desert is turned into a meadow  
and all our land a watered garden  
the Messiah will appear.*

May the New Year of Trees usher in an era of Peace for us, the Household of Israel, and People everywhere.

Happy *Tu B'Shevat* and Shabbat Shalom,  
Rabbi Mitch

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