

## *Tu B'Shevat:* **Celebrating Nature's Bounty**

The Mishnah identifies four different "New Years." One of these is *Tu B'Shevat*, the New Year for Trees, which (according to Bet Hillel) occurs on the 15th day of the Hebrew month of *Shevat*. The significance of the holiday, and the ways in which it is celebrated, have differed from place to place and from one generation to another. Today, the holiday is widely viewed as an opportunity to enhance environmental awareness.

In Israel, *Tu B'Shevat* is an agricultural festival, originally bound up with the practice of "tithing," or "taxing," the produce of the land. Under this system, farmers were expected to contribute one tenth of the fruit their trees produced each year, for the benefit of the Temple in Jerusalem. Since most of the seasonal rainfall has occurred by this date, it was determined that any fruit blossoms appearing after the cut-off date would be counted against the next growing season for purposes of tithing.

With the destruction of the Temple came new ways to observe this special day. The Middle Ages saw the creation of the *Tu B'Shevat* seder, a somewhat mystical event in which the seven main crops mentioned in the Torah (grapes, barley, figs, dates, wheat, olives, and pomegranates) were consumed by participants. The first such seder was held in Safed in the sixteenth century. Today, non-mystical versions of the ceremony emphasize our relationship to the environment.

Planting trees has been another way in which those living in Israel observe the holiday of *Tu B'Shevat*. Indeed, even today, schoolchildren in Israel celebrate the holiday with festive singing and tree-planting ceremonies. The holiday took on an added significance with the founding of the modern state, signifying the revival and redemption of the land through conquest of the desert.

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### **The Tradition Continues**

While Jews living in North America may have some trouble relating to the agricultural aspect of the holiday -- since *Tu B'Shevat* inevitably falls during our coldest, rainiest season -- we can still mark the day by consuming fruit and other products (e.g., wine) made in Israel. *Tu B'Shevat* seders are becoming increasingly popular. How much fruit to eat -- and which varieties to include -- vary widely. Some people eat three types of fruit -- fruit with a peel, fruit with a pit, and fruit which is edible inside and out. This reflects a mystical tradition in which each type of fruit represents a particular level of creation.

Some people use the opportunity to eat a new fruit, in order to include the *shehehyanu* blessing in the ceremony. Many also drink four cups of wine, ranging in color from light to dark. In Ashkenazic communities in Europe, it was customary to eat fifteen different types of fruit, reflecting the fact that the seder was held on the fifteenth of the month. In Sephardic communities, the holiday took on even greater significance, generating additional liturgy as well as customs.

A variety of *Haggadot* have been created for the occasion, including appropriate verses from the Bible or Talmud about each fruit eaten as well as readings on *bal tash'hit*, our obligation not to be unnecessarily wasteful or to needlessly destroy natural resources.

### **Celebrating the Environment**

*Tu B'Shevat* provides a wonderful opportunity to reflect on and teach others about our responsibility to the environment.\* Some communities have used the occasion of *Tu B'Shevat* to organize local park clearings and tree plantings. In addition, while those Jews living in the Diaspora can certainly plant trees in their own neighborhood, they can also use this opportunity to plant trees in Israel through organizations such as the Jewish National Fund. Some communities have used the holiday to launch letter-writing campaigns to protect forests and oppose pollution.

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\*For a listing of Jewish sources on this topic, see "Judaism and the Environment," a publication of the United Synagogue/Rabbinical Assembly Joint Commission on Social Action.

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An environmental handbook published by the United Synagogue Department of Youth Activities lists 130 things one can do to help the environment. Several ideas are listed below. Let *Tu B'Shevat* inspire you to put these ideas into practice.

Stop junk mail. To stop your junk mail, write to:

Mail Preference Service	Mail Preference Service
Direct Marketing Association	Canadian Direct Marketing Association
11 West 42nd St.	
P.O. Box 3861	1 Concorde Gate Suite 607
New York, N.Y. 10163-3861	Don Mills, Ontario N3C 3N6

Use unbleached coffee filters. The toxin produced from the bleaching process, dioxin, is deadly and has been dumped into our waterways. Use 100% cotton filters or, better yet, reusable cloth ones.

Turn your water heater down to 130 degrees Fahrenheit. This will save energy and is still at a high enough temperature to wash effectively.

Don't buy products with CFCs if there is an alternative. Ask about the contents of products before purchasing them.

Drive less -- use a bicycle or walk. This saves energy and gives you the opportunity to exercise!

During dry periods, cut your grass higher and leave the clippings on the lawn. The clippings will act as natural fertilizers.

Take a shower instead of a bath. A short shower will use up less water than a bath. If you're not sure about how much water you use, plug the drain the next time you take a shower.

Don't release helium filled balloons outside. They can land in the ocean and harm marine life.

*Written by Lois Goldrich, Director, Department of Public Affairs  
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THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF  
CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM  
Rapaport House, 155 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010  
Tel: 212-533-7800 Fax: 212-353-9439  
Website: www.uscj.org

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