

TU B'SHEVAT - a basic introduction

Background

Named for the 15th day of the month of Shevat, this festival is known as the **New Year of the Trees** or the **Trees' Birthday**. Although it's hard to believe when you live in New England, this time of year is the beginning of spring in the Middle East. The first almond blossoms have opened and the sap in the trees is beginning to rise. Therefore, it's traditional to eat fruits from Israel on Tu B'Shevat: figs, dates, grapes, olives, pomegranates. It's also traditional to eat fruits you haven't tasted in a long time (or ever), and to say the *Shehechyanu* (a prayer for experiencing something new.) While the holiday has changed over the centuries, today in the U.S., it is seen as a time to celebrate nature and affirm our relationship to the Earth.

Activities

Take a walk with friends or family. **Plant a tree** or some seeds. **Make a family donation** to your favorite environmental cause. Another beautiful action that is becoming more and more common is to **have a Tu B'Shevat seder**.



In the 16th century, Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, created this seder with songs, readings, wine and fruits. Like the Passover seder, this one uses experiential learning, **four cups of wine**, and special foods. Each cup of wine represents different aspects of the fruit tree and of ourselves. As the seder progresses, we change the color of the wine in the cups (like the changing of the seasons) - from the whiteness of winter to the fullness of spring. The color gets more and more red and we look forward to the fully red wine of the Passover seder.

Of course, there are many interpretations and ways to find meaning in a Tu B'Shevat seder. The cups can represent the tree's growth from seed to sapling, to continued growth, and to bearing fruit. Or they can symbolize the kinds of relationships we can have with Nature and with each other, even with God. There are the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements – all are possible interpretations.

The traditional Tu B'Shevat seder also includes a special order for eating **different kinds of fruits**, each kind representing a different ways that trees give to us, as well as representing our own spiritual growth. Before eating each kind of fruit, one thing some people do is to ask themselves or each other a spiritual question related to that kind of fruit. The seder here follows that model.

However you celebrate Tu B'Shevat, this holiday is an opportunity to savor and appreciate the bounty of this world, and to give thanks for all the ways that trees provide us with food, shelter, beauty, air, and valuable life lessons.

We hope you will use the attached Hagaddah (which explains the order of the steps) for a Tu B'Shevat seder. For kids, it might be best to intersperse the steps of the seder with the meal, itself, and to focus on the tastes and the experience rather than on the words.

Basic Blessings To Accompany The Tu B'Shevat Seder



Blessing For The Wine

You can say this before each cup of wine you drink.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, borei p'ri ha-gafen.

Blessed be You, the One who creates the fruit of the vine.

Blessing For The First Time You Experience Something (Shehechyanu)

You might want to say this before any fruit you are tasting for the first time this season.



ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחינו וקימנו והגענו לדמן הזה.

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, she-hechyanu v'kiy'manu v'higi'anu la-z'man ha-zeh.

Blessed be You, the One who has kept us alive and sustained us so that we could reach this moment.

Blessing After Eating Various Fruit

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא נפשות רבות וחסרון,
על כל מה שבראת, להחיות בהם נפש כל חי, ברוך חי העולמים.

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, borei n'fashot rabot v'chesronan, al kol ma she-barata, l'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai, barukh chei ha-olamim.

Blessed be You, the One who created so many different living things, all needing each other, to make one Life interwoven through them all, as one soul. Blessed be the Life of all worlds.

This handout was adapted from numerous resources. For more information, ideas, and games related to Tu B'Shevat, see www.myjewishlearning.com; and www.jewishmuseum.org/kidzone. The Coalition on Environment and Jewish Life has excellent resources www.coejl.org/tubshvat. For those wishing to dive deeper into the mystical tradition, visit: www.neohasid.org.

A TU B'SHEVAT SEDER

The Tu B'Shevat seder is a celebration of our relationship with nature and with fruit trees in particular, and a time for reflection. Today, as we celebrate together, let us envision ourselves as partners in shaping, cultivating, and healing the natural world. The Tu B'Shevat Seder is split into four sections, each reflecting the seasons and symbolizing different aspects of the trees and our own lives. Each section is connected to one of the four worlds of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, and represents the transition from the most physical to the most spiritual.

First Cup - The World of Asiyah (Actualization)

Fruits and nuts with a hard outside and an edible inside

[Pour a glass of white wine, say the blessing, and drink half or more.]



Although seemingly inedible from the outside, each of the foods eaten at the level of Asiyah, when peeled or shelled, hold gifts that transcend their outward appearance. Like winter, where everything lays dormant and hidden, these fruits and nuts contain inside them the potential to reveal what is hidden within. Because of their hard exterior, these foods can represent the human tendency to judge others by their outer appearance. They can also represent the ways we separate ourselves from other people. Eating these fruits reminds us that whoever we are, we all carry a divine spark within.



Discuss: When have you “judged a book by its cover” only to realize that you were mistaken?

Eat: Walnuts | Almonds | Pomegranates | Coconuts | Pistachios

Second Cup - The World of Yetzirah (Formation)

Fruits with pits at their center

[Add a few drops of red wine and fill the rest with white. Drink half or more.]



We now drink our second cup of wine. Just as each new stream begins with a trickle, each flower with a single bud, just a few drops of color transform the hue of our wine. Although we discard the pits of these fruits, they are the seeds, the means to rebirth. These fruits can remind us that every flowering tree was once bare and that the means to growth can sometimes come from the innermost overlooked places. They can symbolize the potential within us that we have not tapped.



Discuss: What is something you have done or created that started out very small and became bigger or more important over time?

Eat: Cherries | Olives | Plums | Apricots | Avocado

Third Cup - The World of Beriah (Creation) Fruits that are entirely edible

[Refill the glass so that there is now half red and half white wine. Drink half or more.]



We drink our third cup of wine. We now have half a cup of red wine and half a cup of white - even though the trees will be full and green and their flowers will blossom, their growth is not complete. So much more will be created; so much more is to come.



These fruits can remind us of the wholeness of the world, where nothing is wasted and everything nourishes everything else. We can take this time to look at the fruit of our own creations and actions and consider how to deepen our relationships in the world and with the earth.



Discuss: When do you feel truly whole and happy?

Eat: Grapes | Raisins | Apples | Pears | Blueberries | Raspberries

Fourth Cup - The World of Atzilut (Presence, Emanation, Birth)

[Pour a nearly full glass of red wine again and add just a few drops of white. Drink all.]



We now come to our final cup; the drops of white in the red remind us of the first cup of this seder and of the cyclical nature of the seasons.



This final section represents what is invisible to the eye. *Instead of eating fruit, we may enjoy sweet smells like cinnamon and rosemary.* Beyond the cycle of eating is the cycle of breathing, when something lives both within and without us at the same time, when it is so much a part of us that we cannot even see it. At this level all things are already part of each other. We all have this kind of connection with the earth and with God. Like smells, the ways we remember this connection are subtle: the feel of the soil or the smell of dew, the color of the changing leaves, the sounds of birds migrating, or the clasp of a hand.



Discuss: What helps you remember and appreciate what you cannot see?

Smell: Cinnamon | Rosemary | Bay Leaf | Cedar

May the New Year of The Trees begin a year of growth; may it be a year of renewal for the trees and for us; and may our blessings give strength to the trees and may our eyes be opened to the wonders of creation, and may we nurture the world that nurtures us.

1Adapted from the following resources: Trees, Creation, and Creativity: A Hillel Tu BiSh'vat Seder (Publication by the Hillel Foundation); The Trees Are Davening: A Tu BiSh'vat Haggadah Celebrating Our Kinship with the Trees and the Earth- Dr. Barak Gale and Dr. Ami Goodman (Publication by the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life); Seder Tu Bishvat: The Festival of Trees - Adam Fisher (Publication by Central Conference of American Rabbis - 1989); Keshet: Berkely's Reform Chavurah - Tu B'Shevat Seder. Many thanks to Rabbi David Seidenberg (www.neohasid.org) for his help and input.