

A STUDENT'S GUIDE

TU B'SHVAT

2021

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WHAT IS TU B'SHVAT

Tu B'Shvat is a Jewish holiday in the Hebrew month of Shevat, usually in late January or early February. The name Tu B'Shvat is derived from the Hebrew date of the holiday, which occurs on the 15th day of Shevat. "Tu" stands for the Hebrew numerals "tet vav" טו which is 15. The festival marks the "New Year of the Trees," which coincides with the start of the Israeli spring.

Tu B'Shvat is one of four New Years mentioned in the Mishnah (oral tradition). In recent times, the festival has come to be associated with ecology, climate activism, and environmentalism.

In the Middle Ages, Tu B'Shvat was celebrated with a feast of fruits in keeping with the Mishnaic description of the holiday as a "New Year."

There are many customs associated with Tu B'Shvat and different traditions celebrate it in their unique way. Some of the most common customs are to eat fruits from Israel, planting trees, and cleaning up your local environment.



THE KABBALISTIC FOUR GATES

According to Jewish mysticism, “Kabbalah”, in order to pass into the new year, the Tu B’shvat seder is celebrated with four gates to pass through: actualisation (עשייה Assiyah), formation (יצירה Yetzirah), creation (בריאה Briyah), and presence (אצילות Atzilot) . Each gate is connected to one of the four sections of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, and is represented with a glass of wine and a kind of fruit that symbolizes each world.

1

Hard shell nuts with edible insides, like almonds should be eaten with the first cup which symbolises actualisation.



2

Pitted fruits like plums and apricots are eaten with the second cup of wine which symbolises formation.



3

Fruits that are entirely edible, such as raisins and figs are eaten with the third glass of wine to symbolise creation.



4

The fourth glass of wine represents birth and is symbolised by smelling herbs and spices such as cinnamon and rosemary.



WAYS TO PRACTICE ENVIRONMENTALISM IN YOUR DAY-TO-DAY LIFE

Tikkun Olam features prominently in what we learn from the time of Tu B'shvat. As the earth regenerates and spring comes into bloom we learn again the need to take care of our precious planet and its resources. As a consequence, Tu B'shvat has become known as the environmental festival. Organising as Jews to prioritise the wellbeing of our environment, both local and global, is key. Below are some individual and collective steps that you can take and implement the message of Tu B'shvat into your daily life.

THE INDIVIDUAL

- Practice recycling in your home - look up your local councils recycling facilities and guidelines to make sure your household waste can be effectively recycled.
- Plant trees - Join your local environmental groups on facebook and see if tree planting events are happening in your area. You can also download and use the internet browser Ecosia, which takes the revenues from your google searches to plant trees around the world.
- Practice sustainable living by eating foods grown sustainably and packaged in an environmentally friendly way (minimising waste).
- Make a donation to your favorite environmental cause.

THE COLLECTIVE

- Join your university's zero carbon or climate action society. These groups work to hold your university accountable on climate action goals, their investments in fossil fuels, and ensuring climate justice. Bringing a powerful Jewish voice to the cause of climate action is a great step to take to ensure your university takes the environment seriously.
- Organise with your local community by actively collecting litter from the pavement/roadside/local park and making your shared spaces healthy and clean.

A TU B'SHVAT 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.

It is customary to say the shehecheyanu blessing before every new fruit you taste, find the translation and transliteration below.

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם שהחינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehecheyanu
v'kiy'ma v'higianu laz'man hazeh.

In English: Praise to You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this season.

FIRST CUP – THE WORLD OF ASIYAH (ACTUALISATION)

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.”