

Dear Families,

*Tu BiSh'vat* is a holiday honoring tress, the environment, and the land of Israel. Interestingly, the connection between trees, Jews and the Land of Israel traces all the way back to the Bible. The first commandment God gave the people of Israel when they entered the land was to plant trees: "when you enter this land (Israel), you shall plant fruit-bearing trees" (Leviticus 19:23).



In describing the beauty and bounty of the land the people were to enter, seven species of plants were mentioned, four of which grow on trees: "for the Lord God will lead you into the good land, a land flowing with waters....a land of wheat and barley and vine, of fig and pomegranate, the land of the olive and date-honey" (Deuteronomy 8:7-8). To this date, these are the treats we eat to celebrate *Tu BiSh'vat*. Additionally, many people add the fruits that have more recently become associated with Israel, including apples, citrus fruits, carob, and almonds. [Almond trees are the first "fruit" to blossom in Israel - usually right around *Tu BiSh'vat* - they have become the "poster species" for the holiday.]

The history of *Tu BiSh'vat* is rooted in Jewish laws that outline the first years of a fruit tree's life:

- Years 1-3: Farmers did not harvest the fruit of the tree; this practice actually helped a tree bear more fruit in later years.
- Year 4: All of the tree's produce was dedicated to God.
- Years 5 and beyond: The farmer was then allowed to eat from the tree. Even so, he was required to give a portion of the fruit to the Temple priests, the Levites and the poor.

Because of these laws, designating a single "birthday of the trees" was important so that Jewish farmers in ancient Israel would know the birthday of each tree. Thus, the early rabbis selected one day as the marking point for all trees: the 15<sup>th</sup> (abbreviated in Hebrew as *Tu*) of the Hebrew month of *Sh'vat*. Any tree planted from one *Tu BiSh'vat* to the next aged an entire year on that date.

[For example, a tree planted on the 1st of *Sh'vat* became a year-old fourteen days later on the 15th of the month. Three years and fourteen days after it was planted, the farmer could begin to eat from that tree.]

*Tu BiSh'vat*, as we know it today, had its start in the late 1800's. It was then that the *halutzim* (early pioneers) arrived in Israel to rebuild the land, to transform it and make it their own. As if by sacred duty, they began planting. In 1884, on *Tu BiSh'vat*, the *halutzim* held the first public tree planting ceremony in Israel. Together, they planted hundreds of trees including almost 800 *etrog*<sup>1</sup> trees. Almost 25 years later, the Israel Teachers' Union decided to dedicate the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month of *Sh'vat* for students to plant trees. Since then, *Tu BiSh'vat* has become the "tree planting holiday" when students and citizens alike celebrate the reunion of Jews with the land of Israel - and the role the trees have played.

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<sup>1</sup> An *etrog* is the yellow citron used on *Sukkot*, along with the leafy *lulav*.

The custom of the *Tu BiSh'vat seder* originated in 16th Century *Tzfat* (Safed) Israel. Using mystical interpretations of the Bible, rituals were developed for rejoicing over trees in a format loosely based on the *Pesah seder*. For example, the *Tu BiSh'vat seder* includes drinking four cups of wine - just as on Passover - but in this case, they represent seasonal change.

- The first: white wine, representing winter
- The second: mostly white wine, but mixed with some red, representing early spring, when the sunlight begins to warm the deep cold
- The third: half red and half white wine, representing spring, when life takes root deeply in the red earth
- The fourth: red wine, representing the full rebirth of spring and summer

Those who celebrate with a *Tu BiSh'vat seder* also eat fruits and nuts that come in different forms: those with a non-edible outside (shell or peel), those with a non-edible inside (seeds or pits), those that are completely edible, and those that are eaten as seeds.

### THINGS YOU CAN DO AS A FAMILY



The Jewish National Fund (JNF) is the agency that is responsible for selling and planting trees in Israel. In honor of *Tu BiSh'vat*, purchase a tree by calling JNF at 1-800-542-TREE or by going to [www.jnf.org](http://www.jnf.org).



In Deuteronomy 8:7-8, we learn of seven species growing in Israel: wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive and date-honey. With your children, visit a grocery store and buy each of the fruits that grow on trees in Israel. [Feel free to add oranges, apples, almonds and carob.] How does each one look? Taste? Feel? Can you eat the whole fruit? Are there seeds? Tell your child that at this time of year, when we celebrate the birthday of the trees and eat these fruits, we think about Israel, a special place for Jews.



As a family, take a walk outside and look at the trees in your neighborhood (now is a good time of the year to be able to see all the birds nests). With your children, discuss the importance of trees (bearing fruit, providing shade, homes for animals and birds, etc.). What would the neighborhood be like without trees?



There is a Jewish value called *בַּל תִּשְׁחִית בָּל* (*Bal Tashhit*; not destroying trees...and the environment). Talk with your children about what it means to "not destroy the trees or the environment." How can they help guard the earth and the environment?

For additional background information, family activities, and holiday recipes, see:  
<http://www.iccathisnewmonth.org> (click on *Shevat*)  
or <http://uahc.org/educate/parent/> (click on *Tu Bi'shvat*)



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