

TU BISHEVAT

Tu Bishevat is an ancient Spring fertility festival. It was celebrated as a prelude to Spring and a time for planting trees. The holiday is nature-based and not theistic so the rabbis never put much importance in it. It was revived by the birth of Zionism and the passion of the pioneers to rebuild a Jewish state by cultivating the land. The holiday became largely a project of those living outside the state to plant trees in Israel.

Today, the holiday has taken on the meaning of protecting the environment, a value that Humanistic Jews hold dear. With the development of Tu BiShevat seders, the holiday has become more interesting ritually and fun for both children and adults.

A TU BISHEVAT SEDER

What is Tu BiShevat?

Tu BiShevat (literally the 15th day of the Jewish month of Shevat) has a long history. Some scholars believe that in its most ancient form, the holiday celebrated the Near Eastern goddess Asherah, whose symbol was a tree. Asherah was a popular fertility deity and consort of the Canaanite God El. Asherahs are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, though they are not described in detail, and were likely symbols, poles or wooden objects made from trees.

During the Temple period (until 70 CE), farmers of fruit were taxed in the form of tithes. Tu BiShevat was likely a tax collection day for fruit, whereupon it was agreed that the tax year would begin and end. Tu BiShevat became the “new year for trees.” It is unknown whether other festivities accompanied the tithing. After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), when tithing was no longer possible, little is known of how the day was recognized, except that in Ashkenazi synagogues special psalms were added to the liturgy. The idea that Tu BiShevat was something more than a simple legal requirement, that it marks the end of the heavy rain season in the land of Israel when the sap starts to rise in the trees and the earth begins its slow emergence from deep winter, may account for why the festival stayed in existence among the Jewish folk.

It was during the flourishing era of Jewish mysticism, around the 16th century, that Tu BiShevat re-emerged as a more popular and meaningful festival, first among Sephardi Jews. Mystical significance was attributed to ideas of the rebirth of the natural world in spring, and the Tu BiShevat seder, a service of ingesting symbolic foods around a festive meal, was created. The symbolic cups of wine and food are associated with the mystical worlds of creation and the human personality types. (See below). The festival gained popularity and spread throughout the Sephardi world and eventually became part of the Ashkenazi custom as well.

Since the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Tu BiShevat has also come to be associated with planting trees in Israel. Like the mystical rebirth of earth celebrated in the most ancient roots of the holiday, Tu BiShevat is associated with the birth of the Jewish state today. Most recently, as awareness of the environment has become a more pressing concern for many people, Tu BiShevat has become a “Jewish Arbor Day,” a day on which we recognize our ethical obligations to care for the planet and its inhabitants. The theme of a new year for trees, a time of recognizing our connection to the earth, is a most popular Tu BiShevat theme today.

All these themes—fertility, trees, rebirth and renewal, obligation to heal the world, earth-awareness and the interconnected web of life—are included in the seder, just as on Passover all the symbols have many layers of meaning created from the most ancient times to the present. Tu BiShevat is a wonderful family holiday on which to gather, sing, dance, eat and celebrate the earth and our connection to it.

Why a Seder? Aren't those just for Passover?

The word “seder” means “order” and describes the order of service for a celebration. Most often associated with Passover, a seder is a wonderful way to celebrate a holiday with family and friends at home. Some form of the holiday Tu BiShevat has been celebrated since ancient times. The idea of conducting a seder for Tu BiShevat developed during the height of Jewish mystical creativity in the 16th century. The Kabbalists, or Jewish mystics, introduced this custom, based on the Passover seder, with symbolic foods, a festive meal and important ethical lessons blended into a wondrous and joyful celebration.

What will we need for the Seder?

Table setting: The table for a Tu BiShevat seder should be set in a festive way. It is said that in the 16th century Sefat, the city of Jewish mystics in Palestine, tables were set with white cloths, scented water and candles. You might decorate the table with flowers, branches, pine cones, stones or other natural objects from your area that remind you of your connection to the earth. This is a great place to be creative and involve children. You may wish to create a Tu BiShevat seder plate, decorated for the holiday, on which to put symbolic foods.

Wine/grape juice: Four cups are drunk at the Tu BiShevat seder. One white, one pink, one light red, one dark red. You can use different wines or juices, or you can mix in the following manner: the first cup is all white wine or juice. The second is white with a splash of red. The third is red with a splash of white and the fourth cup is all red. This progression marks the movement through the seasons from winter through spring to summer, the rebirth, growth and flowering of the earth and the human spirit.

Symbolic foods: Three types of foods are eaten symbolically at the seder: fruits with inedible shells, such as nuts, oranges, grapefruit, pomegranates, coconuts; fruits with inedible pits, such as dates, olives, apricots, peaches, plums/prunes; and fruits that are entirely edible, such as figs, raisins, strawberry, apple, pear, carob.

Festive Meal: You may wish to plan the seder around a festive meal, often vegetarian.

Copy of the service: Every participant should have a copy of the readings and songs you will sing. You may wish to ask people to bring a favorite reading or story on a nature theme to add to the seder. There is no wrong way to celebrate a Tu BiShevat seder, so feel free to bring in readings, music and ideas that reflect your own beliefs and ideas about the holiday. Some families plant indoor seeds or saplings on this day or include innovative ideas to involve children and friends. As with Passover, it is great to involve everyone in a “round robin” in reading the service. NOTE: If you do not know the songs that are suggested in this text, you can substitute any good sing-along song you know. The most important thing is to get everyone involved in some way.

OUTLINE OF A TU BISHEVAT SEDER

(Designed to be changed and adapted, the seder can include a candle light-ing as well as readings and songs interspersed between the four cups of wine and three types of fruits.)

Welcome/Explanation of Tu BiShevat Seder

The rabbis taught that there were four new year holidays. The fifteenth of Nisan, in the spring, is the new year for kings and feasts. We call this Passover. The first of Elul, in late summer, is the new year for animals born that year. The first of Tishri, Rosh Hashanah, is the new year for counting years, and the fifteenth of Shevat is the new year for tithing the fruits of trees. Today/tonight we celebrate Tu BiShevat, the new year for trees.

The new year for trees is celebrated in the Jewish month of Shevat because in the land of Israel much of the heavy rain season has passed and the sap is beginning to rise in the trees. The time of ripening has not yet begun.

Tu BiShevat is a holiday with many names. It has been called *Hamisha Asar BiShevat*, the fifteenth of the month of Shevat. It is also called *Hag Hailanot*, the festival of trees, and *Hag HaPeirot*, the festival of fruit. In the Sephardi community the holiday has been called *Frutes*, the feast of fruits, or *Rosasana dos Arbores*, the Rosh Hashanah of Trees. All these names remind us that we have a special connection to the earth and the very beginning of spring, even though it still feels like winter.

First Cup: White Wine/Juice – The Cup of Memory

The first cup of wine we drink is white, symbolizing the winter. As we fill our cups we remember the beauty of winter: the quietness of a snow-fall, the infinite variety of snowflakes, our joy in playing winter games, the warmth of home and family, and the natural cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth. We remember that the wine began as a grape on the vine, and the sun, rain and the earth that produced it. We are grateful for all the people who tend the vine, crush the grapes, and make this wine. We remember our ancestors and relatives who lifted their cups in celebration as we lift our cups and say:

Blessed are those who create the fruit of the vine.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAGAFEN

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

First Fruit – Edible Inside, Inedible Outside

(almonds, pomegranates, oranges, grapefruit)

Each of the three types of fruit we eat can teach us about the world, about nature, and about ourselves. The first fruit we eat is a fruit with a hard outer shell that cannot be eaten. The shell protects the fruit inside, just as a baby is protected in the womb, and a child is protected by his/her parents. Some compare such fruits to people and the human spirit: within each of our sometimes hard shell, there is a soft, tender, or compassionate part of us beneath the shell.

Blessed are those who bring forth the fruit of the tree.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAETZ

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְּרֵי הָעֵץ

Second Cup: White with a Splash of Red – Cup of Hope

The second cup of juice is white with a splash of red, or light pink. This cup is the cup representing the beginnings of spring, of hope. We know even in the coldest days of winter that spring will come and with it the rebirth of the earth. This is a time of hopeful anticipation. Even in the darkest of times our people never lost hope. We also remember to hope when times are dark, or difficult, as we lift our cups and say:

Blessed are those who create the fruit of the vine.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAGAFEN

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

Second Fruit – Edible Outside, Inedible Inside (Pit)

(dates, olives, apricots, peaches, plums/prunes)

A Jewish legend says: the date palm is filled with blessing, for every part of it can be used, every part of it is needed. We eat its fruit of dates, its branches adorn the sukkah, its fronds are used for thatching, its fibers for ropes, its webbing for sieves, its strong trunk for building. Let us celebrate that each one of us has a special role to play in making the world a better place. We are complex people and the many parts of us are needed and valued, at home and in our communities.

Blessed are those who bring forth the fruit of the tree.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAETZ

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְּרֵי הָעֵץ

Third Cup: Red with a splash of white – The Cup of Diversity

Our third cup is red with a splash of white, symbolizing spring in all its glory. This is the cup of diversity. As the earth reawakens from its winter slumber, we celebrate the variety inherent in nature. We celebrate that the world is filled with peoples of many colors and religions. Some of them are public heroes whose names and stories we know. Some of them are the quiet heroes of everyday life. We celebrate the richness of human culture.

We raise our cups to honor our ancestors and Jewish culture and all the good people throughout the world who have made our earth a better place.

Blessed are those who create the fruit of the vine.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAGAFEN

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן

Third Fruit – Entirely Edible

(figs, raisins, strawberry, apple, pear, carob)

Our third fruit is one that is entirely edible, such as raisins, figs, or strawberries. Our seder teaches us about caring for the earth now and in the future. Have you heard this famous Jewish story? Once upon a time an old man was planting a fig tree by the side of the road, when a younger man happened by. He laughed at the old man and said, “Don’t you realize it will take twenty years for that tree to grow and bear fruit. You will be long dead by then!” The old man replied, “When I was a small child, I ate fruit because those who came before me planted trees. Am I not obliged to do the same for the next generation?”

We eat this fruit to honor the entirety of our experience, what has come before us and what we will experience in the future. We take this moment and pause as we silently remember those who are no longer living but whose good deeds and ideas still live on in our memory and inspire us to enrich the lives of those who follow.

Blessed are those who bring forth the fruit of the tree.

B’RUCHIM BORAY P’RI HAETZ

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְרֵי הָעֵץ

Fourth Cup: All red – The Cup of Hope and Strength

The fourth cup is the cup of hope and strength. Spring has blossomed into summer. This seder reminds us that the strength and power to care for ourselves, the earth and all living things is within us. We think about all our skills, talents and achievements — all that we can do to bring hope to our lives and the world.

As we raise our cups in gratitude, we dedicate ourselves to use our strength for good and bring hope to those less fortunate than ourselves.

Blessed are those who create the fruit of the vine.

B'RUCHIM BORAY P'RI HAGAFEN

בְּרוּכִים בּוֹרְאֵי פְרֵי הַגָּפֶן

Closing Song: Where is my light?

Notes: You might wish to ask guests to bring a favorite poem or story about nature to fill in the readings. Also, you can ask the children to think of a list of the fruits that have an inedible shell, etc., as you go through the seder. If you want to simplify the seder, you can get a book like *Earth Prayers from Around the World: 365 Prayers, Poems and Invocations for Honoring the Earth* by Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon and intersperse reading selections with eating the fruit and drinking the wine. Another good source is *A Choice Garden of Fruit: 200 Classic Jewish Quotes on Human Beings and the Environment* by Rabbi David E. Stein. Since there is no law regarding a Tu BiShevat seder, this is a wonderful time to let your family's creativity blossom!

Staff of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, revised by Rabbi Miriam Jerris