

# Tu B'Shvat

Tu B'Shvat or the "New Year of the Trees" is Jewish Arbor Day. The holiday is observed on the 15th (Tu) of the Jewish month of Shvat.

There are four new years described in the Mishna. The Rabbis discussed Rosh Hashanah, the 1st day of Nissan, Passover, and Tu B'Shvat. In the 16th century, the Kabbalists, mysticists, of the Israeli city of Tzfat, created a Tu B'Shvat seder, somewhat similar to the seder for Passover. It engages and involves enjoying the fruits of the tree, particularly those native to the Land of Israel, and discusses concepts associated with the day. Among other things, the seder is a great way to appreciate the bounty that we so often take for granted, and to develop a good and generous eye for the world around us

Everyone is encouraged to create an original creative Tu B'Shvat seder since there are no specific laws or order.



# Tu B'Shvat

## Texts to Discuss

*“When God created the first man, God took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him ‘See My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are. And everything that I created, I created it for you. Be careful not to spoil or destroy My world — for if you do, there will be nobody after you to repair it.’”*

This Midrash singles out the trees to represent the natural world, the work of the Creator. Why should trees be singled out by God telling people not to destroy creation? How does this text guide us regarding the serious environmental challenges we face today?



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## Texts to Discuss

*“God planted a garden [of trees] in Eden’.  
So you, too, when you will enter the land  
of Israel, planting trees should be your first  
involvement.” (Genesis 2:8)*

Trees are also singled out as symbols of a favorable environment for human beings. During the creation of the world and the entrance of the Jewish people into the land of Israel, the Midrash stresses the importance of first preparing the necessary life-support system. Why?



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## Texts to Discuss

*One day as [a man named] Choni was walking along he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him "how many years will it take until it will bear fruit?" The man replied, "not for seventy years". Choni asked him, "do you really believe you'll live another seventy years?" The man answered, "I found this world provided with carob trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants." (Talmud Taanit 19a)*

Planting trees is a long-term investment which may not bear fruit immediately. Thus, the instruction to plant trees is an instruction to think beyond the present moment to the needs of the future. When one is settling a new land, one might have other, more pressing needs than "planting trees!" But the Midrash teaches us that planting is key to our responsibility. What does this teach us?



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## Texts to Discuss

*“When you besiege a city for many days to wage war against it to capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for you may eat from them, but you shall not cut them down. Is the tree of the field a man, to go into the siege before you. However, a tree you know is not a food tree, you may destroy and cut down, and you shall build bulwarks against the city that makes war with you, until its submission.” (Deuteronomy 20:19-20)*

The Torah teaches us that we are not to cut down fruit trees in wartime. This message, beginning with trees, is so fundamental that it has become the basis of the teaching of “baal tashchit” - the overall prohibition against needless destruction. What does this communicate to us?



# Trees in Jewish Thought

Trees are so important in Jewish thought that the Torah itself is called “a Tree of Life.” Jewish wisdom about trees has much to teach us about how we relate to God’s creation, and to all the natural resources upon which we rely. Perhaps this Torah wisdom can help us think more wisely about using these resources carefully, and living in a more sustainable way.

Jewish wisdom about trees teaches us that:

- We need to think and prepare for the future, and not only focus on our short-term needs.
- We must avoid needless waste.
- Trees are an important part of our life support system.
- We have no right to take out our human aggression on trees or other parts of the natural world.
- Trees are an essential piece of preparing and maintaining a good environment for human beings.
- When we use our resources in a responsible way, this brings holiness.

These teachings apply not only to trees, but to all our resources. They apply not only to ancient Israel, but to our troubled, environmentally stressed modern world. Bringing this wisdom into our daily lives can help us become more cognizant of the precious resources we have been given, and more careful about how we use them. In so doing, we will take better care of our world, sanctify our daily actions, and bring joy to creation. Then the words of the Psalmist will be fulfilled: “The heavens will be glad and the earth will rejoice ... then all the trees of the forest will sing with joy-before God.”



# Thank You Trees!

The Talmud says that someone who eats and doesn't say a blessing is considered a thief. Why? Because every aspect of God's creation is inherently holy. So, when one eats a piece of fruit, he is depriving the world of a piece of holiness. A blessing re-infuses the world with holiness. Eating without a blessing, however, lowers the level of holiness in the world without replacing the loss - and is regarded as theft.  
*(Maharal of Prague)*

A blessing is a thank-you note to our Creator. The sages say: Who is the wealthy person? The one who is happy with what he has. The more we appreciate our gifts, the more sincere is our thanks, and the more sublime is our pleasure.



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## Activities

- 1.** Weather permitting, pick fresh fruits and vegetables at a local farm.
- 2.** Plant trees or seeds in mini pots for your windowsills and deliver as gifts. Decorate the mini pots first to beautify the mitzvah, hiddur mitzvah.
- 3.** Start an herb garden in mini pots to replant outside or buy an aero garden, a hydroponic system.
- 4.** Hang a birdfeeder and feed them. If you have birdfeeder, get a bird bath.
- 5.** Prepare recipes and/or eat the seven significant species of the land of Israel: wheat, grapes, barley, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates on Tu B'Shvat to appreciate our connection to Israel and nature.
- 6.** Organize a park clean-up to collect litter.
- 7.** Consider Tu B'Shvat as a new period for taking tithes, a portion of which is given to the poor. Consider giving charity to the poor and feeding them, just as God in God's bounty feeds him.
- 8.** Consider planting a tree in Israel or in your backyard.

