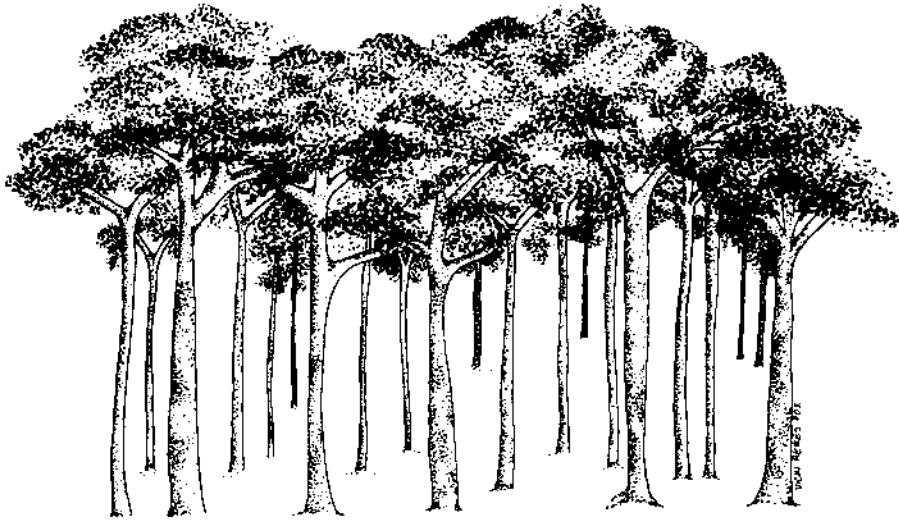


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TU B'SHVAT—THE JEWISH ECOLOGY DAY

AN agricultural holiday that looks forward to the spring season, Tu B'Shvat is the celebration of the earth and its produce. Tu B'Shvat is a Hebrew abbreviation linking two Hebrew letters, *tet* and *vav*, which numerically total fifteen. The name means the 15th day of the winter month of *Shvat*, which usually occurs in January.





In ancient times, Tu B'Shvat was also a tax day, marking the day after which all fruit harvested would be included in the next year's calculations for the tithe, the percent of the harvest that Jewish farmers brought to the Temple in Jerusalem as a contribution.

Tu B'Shvat is based on themes found throughout the Bible and specifically in Genesis, in which humans and God share partnership in concern for the natural environment. Humans take responsibility to care for the earth and God cares for the whole of the universe.

A Talmudic story associated with Tu B'Shvat describes this concern:

Roman Emperor: What are you doing, Old Man?

Honi, the Old Man: I am planting a carob tree.

Roman Emperor: How long will it take before the tree bears fruit?

Honi: About ten years.

Roman Emperor: Surely you do not expect to live that long. You won't be able to enjoy your own tree!

Honi: When I came here, I found trees planted by those who lived before me. I simply am planting as they did, so that those who come after me will enjoy the fruit of my labor.

HOME TRADITIONS

Although Tu B'Shvat begins in the evening, as do all Jewish holidays, no candles are lit as this is a holiday in which there are no restrictions placed on work; it is not a day of rest. There is no particular greeting for the holiday, although "*Hag Sameach—Happy Holiday*" is always appropriate.

Jews celebrate this holiday by eating the seven types of plant produce that are cited in Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and date honey. Today people often add contemporary fruits: oranges, avocados, bananas, and kiwi. Carob, known as *bokser* in Yiddish and as St. John's Bread, is also eaten on Tu B'Shvat.

Based on sixteenth-century mystical traditions, some people celebrate Tu B'Shvat with a *seder*, a home service for the evening or daytime that has a specific order. Themes of the *seder* might include: reclamation of the land of Israel, concern for the earth as a total environment, planting for the future, links between trees and the *Torah*—the Tree of Life—and the human role as caretaker of the earth.

The Tu B'Shevat *seder* is not a fixed ritual. It might be structured like the

Passover seder: with four cups of wine, special fruits as symbols, different sections emphasizing the various themes. Creative potential abounds to enhance this seder with contemporary stories, poetry, and art.



EVERY BLADE OF GRASS HAS AN ANGEL ATTACHED TO IT

Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai said: Three things are equal in importance: earth, humans, and rain. Rabbi Levi ben Hayyata said: And these three words each consist of three letters in Hebrew. Why? To teach that without earth there would be

no rain and without rain there would be no earth. Without either, human beings could not exist.

Midrash, Genesis Rabbah 13.3



SYNAGOGUE TRADITIONS

On Tu B'Shvat, Jews participate in a regular daily service, although synagogues may link readings to biblical texts, such as Genesis 1:11–13, Leviticus 19:23–25, or Psalm 65:10–12. These texts highlight the human relationship to the earth and our responsibility to care for the earth. In addition, temples may emphasize Jewish concern for the land of Israel and encourage people to purchase trees to be planted in Israel.

Some temples celebrate a Tu B'Shvat seder and encourage tree planting and recycling on synagogue grounds.

INSIGHTS

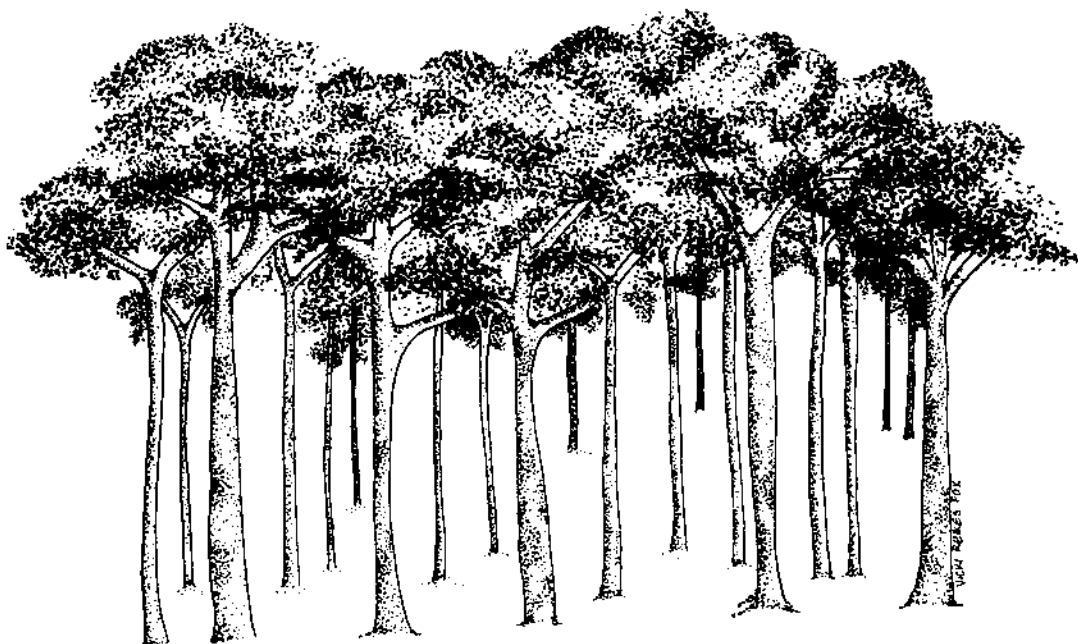
The Human Caretaker

At the time that God created the very first human being, God took him and had him inspect the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to the first human: Look at how lovely and outstanding all my work has turned out to be. Please note that everything I've created I created for you. Think about this carefully and do not damage or destroy my world. For if you do . . . there is no one to repair it (Ecclesiastes Rabba 7:28).



Each human being has the ongoing responsibility to care for the earth. The link emphasized in this text serves to remind each adult and each child that human action counts. If human actions lead to destruction, there is no second chance.

Therefore, by celebrating this holiday, Jews remember and remind others that their concern for the land and its produce is not a trend but a lifetime commitment.



Torah as the Tree of Life

The imagery of trees for Jews is quite important: The Torah itself is often referred to as the Tree of Life. As a tree nurtures, protects, and provides sustenance for those living around it, so the Torah guides, protects, and provides spiritual sustenance. Even the wooden poles used to scroll the entire Torah parchment are called *atzeem*, the Hebrew word for trees.

ACTIVITIES

1. It is a tradition to plant trees in Israel for this holiday, and you, too, can plant a tree—or a forest! Call or write to Jewish National Fund, 42 E. 69th Street, New York, NY 10021, (212) 879-9300 or (800) 542-8733.

In ancient times parents planted a tree when a new baby was born. Today, this custom is reappearing as new parents purchase trees. And if you do so in honor or in memory of someone, JNF will acknowledge this gift to the recipient or the recipient's family.

JNF was established in the 1920s to purchase and develop land in Israel for Jewish settlements. This international organization plays a key role in developing Israeli farming techniques such as irrigation and plant rotation.

2. Explore your home: What products are from trees? Tally your list. Consider the importance of trees for life, for protection, for reflection.

3. Family trees—Tu B'Shvat is another opportunity to draw up the family tree (see the chapter on Sukkot for ideas on this project) and talk about the work our ancestors did to ensure a world for us. What will we do for our children?

4. Make a Tu B'Shvat seder at home.

5. Read *The Butter Battle Book* by Dr. Seuss (New York: Random House, 1984). This poignant story describes the horrors of wars on earth. Share your thoughts regarding our role in keeping the world a safe place to live. Discuss fears and hopes. In addition, you all may enjoy reading *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

6. If you haven't already started, prepare your home for recycling: Separate cans, glass, plastic, paper. Find the nearest recycling center, and as a family get involved in saving the earth.

7. Learn to shop with the earth in mind. Use cloth shopping bags, buy recycled paper and products for your home and office. Each of us has the opportunity to make a difference in our world. Recycle clothes through the Salvation Army or your local National Council of Jewish Women or other social service agency.

8. Plant your own herbs and spices, even if you only have a windowsill. Encourage children to experience caring for a plant, watching it grow, harvesting, and eating the crop. Plant parsley and basil now, use it for your Passover seder later.

9. Visit a tree nursery and learn to identify different trees and the length of time various trees need to grow to maturity. Identify native Israeli plants and vegetables.

10. Join *Shomrei Adamah*, the Keepers of the Earth, a Jewish environmental group. Write to: *Shomrei Adamah*, Church Road and Greenwood Avenue, Wyncote, PA 19095.



RECIPES

FRUIT COMPOTE

½ cup dried apricots

½ cup dried nectarines

½ cup raisins

2–3 chopped and peeled apples

1 cup sweet red wine

½ tsp. cinnamon

½ tsp. cloves

Add all ingredients and cook slowly for several hours. Add water if needed. Let cool to room temperature and enjoy.

Serves approximately 6.