

Context

For those coming new to Jewish life, Tu BiShvat is often a surprise. The idea of marking a “New Year for Trees” can seem strange in the modern world – out of step with a rationalist approach to religious life, and lacking relevance for those living in urban settings.

In this essay, Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers, Community Educator at Reform Judaism explores the origins of this minor festival, and reflects on ways in which it continues to resonate for us as Reform Jews today.

Content

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1 tells us that there is more than the one New Year that we expect at Rosh Hashanah. One of these is a new year for trees. It is called Tu BiShvat as this is the 15th of the month of Shevat (טו being the number 15).

Why is there a new year for trees? It might seem a little redundant today, but Leviticus 19:23 suggests we shouldn't eat fruit from a tree in its first 3 years, and in the fourth year we were supposed to take a tithe of the fruits to the Temple. But we're not expected to remember when each tree has its actual birthday, instead we count every tree as having a birthday on Tu BiShvat – it is an agricultural tool, to help us know when produce could be consumed.

We don't take offerings to the temple anymore, and Reform Jews generally aren't keen to do so again, and arguably these were laws intended for the Land of Israel not for Jews farming in the diaspora, so today we find other meanings for Tu BiShvat. It is a wonderful opportunity to appreciate the gifts and bounty of our world, and of trees in particular, especially when we no longer live the agricultural lives of our ancestors. In today's world of mono-culture crops, declining bee populations, and factory farming, it is important to remember that if we continue to over use and misuse our precious resources we will be left in serious trouble, or our grandchildren will! And so for many communities Tu BiShvat has become a time for celebrating the environment, and rededicating ourselves to the task of healing and clearing up the mess we have created on earth.

Tu BiShvat is also thought of as the date that the sap begins to run once again through the trees as they begin to emerge from their winter sleep. Certainly within days or weeks of Tu BiShvat, blossom will begin to appear on the trees in Israel, and often in the UK too. So for many Tu BiShvat is a moment to celebrate our own emergence from the darkness of winter in a spiritual sense, and to look forward to the coming growth of spring, as well as being a to reflect on how our own lives are impacted by the changes and cycles in nature.

Celebrating Tu BiShvat has, as with all festivals, varied over the centuries. There are plenty of siddurim (prayer books) that make no mention of the festival at all. These days it is increasingly common to find Tu BiShvat being celebrated with a special seder, modelled on that held at Pesach. The Tu BiShvat Seder has its roots in sixteenth century Kabbalistic rituals in Tzfat, Northern Israel. While the Kabbalists depicted the various emanations of God in a structure they compared to a tree, there was little work done to connect these emanations to earthly trees. However the Kabbalists who had been exiled from Spain and found themselves in Israel, were able to connect the Land itself to God's presence. They designed a seder that celebrated the produce of Israel, and also explored spiritual themes.

The seder had been widely taken up in the Sephardi and Mizrahi world until relatively recently, when Ashkenazi communities also began adopting the practice.

There are many different sederim to be found online, which usually consist of a variety of fruits and wines. These used to represent different parts of the Tree of Life or the Kabbalistic understanding of God. Today the seder is more often used to remind us of the importance of looking after our world, and celebrating the produce of Israel. Fruits will often honour the produce of Israel, but are also there to teach us about our own behaviour. Many different interpretations are offered through the seder, making it a wonderful learning opportunity. For example one custom has become that we eat fruits with an inedible shell or skin and an edible inside to represent those parts of us that are hard on the outside but hide a sweet interior, those with inedible seeds or stones to represent our hard heartedness, and those that are fully edible to celebrate our wholeness. One might also eat exotic fruits to remember our connection to Jews around the world, home grown species to remember our community here, and seeds to remind ourselves how important we all are as seed planters and nurturers.

Tree planting has become a common way to mark the festival today, either within local communities, or in Israel, either establishing or re-growing Israeli forests, or replanting destroyed olive groves on the West Bank. It is also common to try to eat or honour the seven species of the land of Israel (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates), and thus our connection to the land and her agriculture through our festivals.

In an age where environmental concerns are ever more pressing, Reform Judaism has tried to ensure that Tu BiShvat is an opportunity to really engage with how we care for the earth and how we make this a meaningful part of our Jewish practice. In 2007 Rabbi Neil Amswych compiled 'Journeys to Tu BiShvat'ⁱ which suggest practices in the days of Shvat leading up to the celebration of the trees, to help us think about how and why we protect the trees and our wider environment. He draws on ancient customs and modern needs, crafting a unique new approach to enhancing our engagement with Tu BiShvat and the issues raised by her celebration. On Tu BiShvat 2018, a number of Reform synagogues were involved in the launch of EcoShuls – a project encouraging synagogues to reflect on ways to improve their environmental impact.

Tu BiShvat may have moved a long way from her original purpose, but continues to be an opportunity for us to find meaning, connection, and to challenge us to meet the environmental challenges humanity has created head on.

Contemplation

Tu BiShvat, in common with other Jewish calendar celebrations, shows us the remarkable journey that a festival can take. A date that is grounded in a specific historical and sociological context – the agricultural cycle of the Ancient Near East – comes to have meaning for Jews living in 21st Century Britain.

For many, the most powerful resonance of this day in our calendar is in providing an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with nature, and our impact on the environment. How do we take this annual reflection and turn it into practical changes in our lives? How do our habits, homes and institutions reflect Judaism's classical concern with the wellbeing of the natural world?

ⁱ <https://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/festivals/tu-bishvat/journeys-to-tu-bishvat/>