

The Four Faces of Tu B'shvat

By Jeremy Benstein

We are a peculiar people, scheduling our nature festival in the dead of winter. But Tu B'shvat, the festival of trees and their fruit, didn't start out as a Jewish Earth Day, or even Arbor Day. And while the almond trees usually do clothe Israeli hillsides with white and pink blossoms at this time of year, the day isn't about aesthetic nature appreciation. A closer look at the varied "incarnations" of this minor holiday through history reveals four facets of our inter-dependence with trees and the natural world to contemplate and to celebrate.



The Economic: We derive physical sustenance from nature, quantifiable in economic terms.

Up through Mishnaic times, Tu B'shvat, the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shvat, was comparable to "Tu B'April" for Americans — a date relevant to calculation of taxes. The exact middle of winter was chosen as the end of the arboreal fiscal year: tithes on fruit after this date belonged to the next year. So the Mishnah in Tractate Rosh Hashanah labels it "the New Year of the trees."

The Israelites didn't sweat over tax forms, though, worrying about getting a check to some priestly IRS. Economics and spirituality, environment and society, were more integrated: part of the fruitful bounty received from God via trees was 'returned to God' via the priests and the Temple, while part was redistributed to care for the poor.

After the Exile, with no trees of our own to tithe, the date's significance waned. Like a tree, the holiday remained dormant — blooming again over a millenium later. The midrashic inclination of the Jewish people couldn't let the idea of a "new year for trees," with all of its metaphoric potential, wither away without transformation and reinterpretation.

The Spiritual: The natural world is the ground of our spiritual lives, source of symbolism and meaning.

The kabbalists therefore gave Tu B'shvat a second efflorescence. They taught of the cosmic Tree of the Sefirot, the divine emanations, conceived as no less than the blueprint for the creation of the world and a map of the mind of God.

The Tu B'shvat seder was born of their innovative ritual creativity. Like the Pesah seder, this festive meal centered on four cups of wine and symbolic foods. But here, the wine

progresses from white to red, symbolizing quiescence to full flowering, or masculine to feminine. And the foods eaten at this uniquely vegan Jewish feast are all fruits – from those with thick peels or pits, symbolizing gross physicality, through pure unprotected fruit such as figs, suggesting a more spiritual realm. The wines and fruits signify the four worlds or levels of creation in kabbalistic thought, often labeled as the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual.

The National-Political: The particular landscapes of our homelands are a source of collective memory, identity and expression.

With the Zionist return to the land, Tu Bishvat was transformed yet again. In a new act of ritual creativity, Jewish schoolteachers of pre-state Palestine made Tu Bishvat a day of tree planting, a festival of reforestation efforts, re-rooting and reconnecting to land and landscape.

Today, tree planting, in person or by proxy, remains the most prevalent observance of Tu Bishvat. (I like to think of the plantings as collective atonement for the massive combustion of everything wooden that takes place in Israel at the ubiquitous bonfires of Lag Ba'omer, Tu Bishvat's "evil twin" in this regard.) Though trees have unfortunately become a political pawn in the national struggles over this land, with aggressive plantings and uprootings taking place on both sides, the visceral significance of actually rooting a tree in the soil establishes an undeniable physical connection with the land.

The Ecological: We are part of an interconnected, inter-dependent universal web of life

Universalizing this connection leads directly to the latest metamorphosis: Tu Bishvat as Jewish Earth Day. Building on the activism of the Zionists, the day has become a framework for Jews (particularly North American, but not only) to focus their concern with environmental issues of potentially global import. From ecology we learn that trees in the Amazon basin are integral to our health and well-being, confirming the ancient insight of *ha beha talia*, the interdependence of all things. As part of this new interpretation of the holiday, the mystic seder has gained newfound prominence, affirming the deep spiritual as well as physical significance of the natural world in our lives.

The Synthesis: Integrating these fragmented relationships can heal ourselves and the world.

Taken alone, each component can easily get out of whack: the economic can become merely utilitarian; the spiritual, overly abstract; and the national, as mentioned, risks degenerating into chauvinism. An overarching, contemporary social-environmental perspective provides a unifying synthesis. In their seder, the kabbalists aimed at uniting all the realms and worlds. In our many-layered Tu Bishvat, we too can strive to integrate and deepen the four interlocking realms that define our relationship to life and land:

economic, spiritual, national-political and ecological. Each can, indeed must, inform and help guide the others, together creating a healing, balanced, sustainable, and sustaining whole.

Moreover, in celebrating Tu Bishvat we can integrate the particular: the personal, fruit-giving tree of the Mishnah, and the replanted national trees of Israel, with the universal: the life-giving global trees of the ecosphere and the Life-giving cosmic tree of Kabbalah. And while Tu Bishvat gives us a profound festive opportunity to celebrate and reflect on these relationships, in the face of deepening environmental crises in Israel and around the world we need to affirm and integrate them more than once a year.

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