

Tu B'Shvat and Vegetarianism

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Tu B'Shvat is arguably the most vegetarian of Jewish holidays, because of its many connections to vegetarian themes and concepts:

1. The Tu B'Shvat Seder in which fruits and nuts are eaten, along with the singing of songs and the recitation of Biblical verses related to trees and fruits, is the only sacred meal where only vegan/ fruitarian foods (not requiring the death of any life-form, even a carrot) are eaten as part of the ritual. This is consistent with the diet in the Garden of Eden, as indicated by God's first, completely vegetarian, dietary law:

And God said: "Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree that has seed-yielding fruit--to you it shall be for food." (Gen.1:29)

2. The Talmud refers to Tu B'Shvat as the New Year for Trees. It is considered to be the date on which the fate of trees is decided for the coming year. In recent years, one of the prime ways of celebrating Tu B'Shvat, especially in Israel, is through the planting of trees.

Vegetarianism also reflects a concern for trees. One of the prime reasons for the destruction of tropical rain forests today is to create pasture land and areas to grow feed crops for cattle. To save an estimated 5 cents on each imported fast food hamburger, we are destroying forest areas in countries such as Brazil and Costa Rica, where at least half of the world's species of plants and animals live, and threatening the stability of the world's climate. It has been estimated that every vegetarian saves an acre of forest per year.

3. Both Tu B'Shvat and vegetarianism are connected to today's environmental concerns. Many contemporary Jews look on Tu B'Shvat as a Jewish earth day, and use Tu B'Shvat seders as occasions to discuss how Jewish values can be applied to reduce many of today's ecological threats. When God created the world, S/He was able to say, "It is very good" (Genesis 1:31). Everything was in harmony as God had planned, the waters were clean, the air was pure.

However, what must God think about the world today? What must God think when the rain God sends to nourish our crops is often acid rain due to the many chemicals poured into the air by our industries? when the ozone layer that He provided to separate the heavens from the earth is being depleted at such a rapid rate? when the abundance of species of plants and animals that God created are becoming extinct in tropical rain forests and other threatened habitats, before we are even able to catalog them? when the fertile soil that God provided is rapidly being depleted and

eroded? when the climatic conditions that God designed to meet our needs are threatened by global warming? An ancient midrash has become all too relevant today:

In the hour when the Holy one, blessed be, created the first person, Gode showed the human the trees in the Garden of Eden, and said: "See My works, how fine they are; Now all that I have created, I created for your benefit. Think upon this and do not corrupt and destroy My world. For if you destroy it, there is no one to restore it after you." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28)

Today's environmental threats can be compared in many ways to the Biblical ten plagues, which are in the Torah portions in the weeks immediately preceding Tu B'Shvat: When we consider the threats to our land, water, and air, pesticides and other chemical pollutants, resource scarcities, threats to our climate, etc., we can easily enumerate ten modern "plagues."

The Egyptians were subjected to one plague at a time, while the modern plagues are threatening us simultaneously. The Jews in Goshen were spared the Biblical plagues, while every person on earth is imperiled by the modern plagues. Instead of an ancient Pharaoh's heart being hardened, our hearts today have been hardened by the greed, materialism, and waste that are at the root of current environmental threats.

God provided the Biblical plagues to free the Israelites, while today we must apply God's teachings in order to save ourselves and our precious but endangered planet. The Talmudic sages assert that people's role is to enhance the world as "co-partners of God in the work of creation" (Shabbat 10a). They indicated great concern about preserving the environment and preventing pollution. They state: "It is forbidden to live in a town which has no garden or greenery" (Kiddushin 4:12; 66d). Threshing floors had to be placed far enough from a town so that it would not be dirtied by chaff carried by winds (Baba Batra 2:8). Tanneries had to be kept at least 50 cubits from a town and could be placed only on the east side of a town, so that odors would not be carried by the prevailing winds from the west (Baba Batra 2:8,9). The rabbis express a sense of sanctity toward the environment: "the atmosphere (air) of the land of Israel makes one wise" (Baba Batra 158b).

Again, vegetarianism is consistent with this important Jewish environmental concern, since modern intensive livestock agriculture contributes to many current environmental problems, including soil erosion and depletion, air and water pollution, the destruction of habitats, and potential global warming.

4. Both Tu B'Shvat and vegetarianism embody the important teaching that "The earth is the Lord's" (Psalm. 24:1) and that people are to be stewards of the earth, to see that its produce is available for all God's children. Property is a sacred trust given by God; it must be used to fulfill God's purposes. No person has absolute or exclusive control over his or her possessions.

The concept that people have custodial care of the earth, as opposed to ownership, is illustrated by this ancient story:

Two men were fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership and bolstered his claim with apparent proof. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the rabbi. The rabbi listened but could come to no decision because both

seemed to be right. Finally he said, "Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land." He put his ear to the ground and, after a moment, straightened up. "Gentlemen, the land says it belongs to neither of you but that you belong to it."

With their concern about the preservation and expansion of forests and their focus on plant-based foods, both Tu B'Shvat and vegetarianism, reflect this important Jewish teaching.

5. Tu B'Shvat and vegetarianism both reflect the Torah mandate that we are not to waste or destroy unnecessarily anything of value. It is interesting that this prohibition, called bal tashchit ("thou shalt not destroy") is based on concern for fruit-bearing trees, as indicated in the following Torah statement: When thou shalt besiege a city a long time, in making war against it to take it, thou shall not destroy (lo tashchit) the trees thereof by wielding an ax against them; for thou mayest eat of them but thou shalt not cut them down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of thee? Only the trees of which thou knoweth that they are not trees for food, them thou mayest destroy and cut down, that thou mayest build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it fall. (Deut. 20:19-20)

This prohibition against destroying fruit-bearing trees in time of warfare was extended by the Jewish sages. It is forbidden to cut down even a barren tree or to waste anything if no useful purpose is accomplished (Sefer Ha-Chinuch 530). The sages of the Talmud made a general prohibition against waste: "Whoever breaks vessels or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs up a fountain, or destroys food violates the prohibition of bal tashchit" (Kiddushin 32a).

In summary, bal tashchit prohibits the destruction, complete or incomplete, direct or indirect, of all objects of potential benefit to people. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch states that bal tashchit is the first and most general call of God: We are to "regard things as God's property and use them with a sense of responsibility for wise human purposes. Destroy nothing! Waste nothing!" (Horeb; Chapter 56, #401) He indicates that destruction includes using more things (or things of greater value) than is necessary to obtain one's aim. (Horeb; Chapter 56, #399)

The important Torah mandate of bal tashchit is consistent with vegetarianism, since, compared to plant-based diets, animal -centered diets require far more land, water, energy, and other agricultural resources.

6. Tu B'Shvat reflects a concern about future generations. In ancient times it was a custom to plant a cedar sapling on the birth of a boy and a cypress sapling on the birth of a girl. The cedar symbolized strength and stature of a man, while the cypress signified the fragrance and gentleness of a woman. When the children were old enough, it was their task to care for the trees that were planted in their honor. It was hoped that branches from both types of trees would form part of the chupah (bridal canopy) when the children married.

Another example of the Jewish concern for the future that is expressed through the planting of trees is in the following story: Choni (the rainmaker) was walking along a road when he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him: "How many

years will it take for this tree to yield fruit?" The man answered that it would take seventy years. Choni then asked: "Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat of its fruit?" The man answered: "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planned for me. So I will do the same for my children."

Vegetarianism also reflects concern about the future since this diet puts a minimum of strain on the earth and its ecosystems and requires far less water, land, energy, and other scarce agricultural resources than animal-centered diets.

7. It is customary to recite Psalm 104, as well as other psalms, on Tu B'Shvat. Psalm 104 indicates how God's concern and care extends to all creatures, and illustrates that God created the entire earth as a unity, in ecological balance: "...Thou [God] art the One Who sends forth springs into brooks, that they may run between mountains, To give drink to every beast of the fields; the creatures of the forest quench their thirst. Beside them dwell the fowl of the heavens; ... Thou art the One Who waters the mountains from His upper chambers; ... Thou art The One Who causes the grass to spring up for the cattle and herb, for the service of man, to bring forth bread from the earth.... How manifold art Thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is full of Thy property...."

Vegetarianism also reflects concern for animals and all of God's creation, since for many people it is a refusal to take part in a system that involves the cruel treatment and slaughter of 9 billion farm animals in the United States alone annually, and, as indicated above, that puts so much stress on the earth and its resources.

8. Both Tu B'Shvat and vegetarianism are becoming increasingly popular today; Tu B'Shvat because of an increasing interest in and concern about nature and environmental issues, and vegetarianism because of increasing concern about health, the treatment of animals, and also the environment and the proper use of natural resources.

9. On Tu B'Shvat, the sap begins to fill the trees and their lives are renewed for another year of blossom and fruit. A shift toward vegetarianism means, in a sense, that there is an increased feeling of concern for the earth and all its inhabitants, and there is a renewal of the world's people's concerns about more life-sustaining approaches.

In 1993, over 1,670 scientists, including 104 Nobel laureates — a majority of the living recipients of the prize in the sciences — signed a "World Scientists' Warning To Humanity." Their introduction stated: "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about."

The scientists' analysis discussed threats to the atmosphere, water resources, oceans, soil, living species, and forests. Their warning: "we the undersigned, senior members

of the world's scientific community, hereby warn all humanity of what lies ahead. A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided.

With the world's ecosystems threatened as never before, it is important that Jews increasingly discover the important ecological messages of Tu B'Shvat. Similarly, it is also urgent that Jews and others recognize that a shift toward vegetarianism, the diet most consistent with Tu B'Shvat, is not only an important individual choice today, but increasingly it is a Jewish imperative since the realities of modern intensive livestock agriculture and the consumption of animal products are inconsistent with many basic Jewish values, as well as a societal imperative, necessary for economic and ecological stability.

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