

TU BISHEVAT - a basic introduction

Background

“Tu” means 15, and Tu BiShvat means the 15th day of the month of Shevat, which is the full moon falling two months before the full moon of Passover (or three months before in a leap year). This festival is also known as the **New Year of the Trees** or the **Trees’ Birthday**. This time of year is the beginning of spring in the Middle East, when the sap in the trees is beginning to rise and the almond blossoms can form. It’s traditional to eat fruits from Israel on Tu B’Shevat: figs, dates, grapes, olives, pomegranates. It’s also traditional to eat fruits you haven’t tasted in a long time (or ever), and to say the *Shehechyanu* prayer for experiencing something new. While the holiday has changed over the centuries, today in many places it is seen as a time to celebrate the natural world and celebrate our relationship to the Earth.

In the 16th century, the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, created the first Tu BiShvat seder with prayers, readings, wine and fruits. For the Kabbalists, Tu BiShvat was not just a celebration of fruit trees, but also a celebration of The Tree of Life. Like the Passover seder, this seder used experiential learning, **four cups of wine**, and special foods. Each cup of wine represents different aspects of the fruit tree and of ourselves. As the seder progresses, we change the color of the wine in the cups (like the changing of the seasons) - from the whiteness of winter to the fullness of spring. The color gets more and more red and we look forward to the fully red wine of the Passover seder.



Activities

The two most common practices are to hold a **Tu BiShvat seder** and to plant trees (where possible) or sponsor tree planting, especially in Israel. Any activity involving planting seeds or being in Nature or supporting environmental learning and causes is fitting. One thing many people have begun doing in North America is to learn about the Native American peoples that lived in their land and find a way to support those tribes

The Seder

There are many interpretations and ways to find meaning in a Tu BiShvat seder. The four cups can represent the tree’s growth from seed, to sapling, to continued growth, to bearing fruit. Or they can represent the tree’s fruit, branches, trunk and roots. For the Kabbalists the four cups represent the four levels of being from the most physical to the most spiritual. They can also symbolize the kinds of relationships we can have with Nature and with each other, even with God. Most especially, the fruit we eat for each cup has a different kind of symbiosis with us, becoming more complete as we move through the seder. The cups can also represent the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements – all are possible interpretations.

The traditional Tu BiShvat seder also includes a special order for eating **different kinds of fruits**, each kind representing a different way that trees give to us, as well as representing our own spiritual growth. Before eating each kind of fruit, one thing some people do is to ask themselves or each other a spiritual question related to that kind of fruit. The seder here follows that model.

However you celebrate Tu BiShvat, this holiday is an opportunity to savor and appreciate the bounty of this world, and to give thanks for all the ways that trees provide us with food, shelter, beauty, air, and valuable life lessons.

This haggadah draws on the following resources: *Trees, Creation, and Creativity: A Hillel Tu BiSh’vat Seder* (Publication by the Hillel Foundation); *The Trees Are Davening: A Tu BiSh’vat Haggadah Celebrating Our Kinship with the Trees and the Earth*, Dr. Barak Gale and Dr. Ami Goodman; *Seder Tu Bishvat (COEJL): The Festival of Trees*, Adam Fisher (CCAR); *Keshet: Berkeley’s Reform Chavurah Tu B’Shevat Seder* and Rabbi David Seidenberg’s Tu Bish’vat resources (www.neohasid.org). Janet Kaplan Bucciarelli of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation drafted the first edition, which was edited by Rabbi David Seidenberg. Revised in 2018 and 2019.

Blessings to Accompany the Tu BiShevat Seder

1) Blessing for wine: ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, melech ha-olam, borei p'ri ha-gafen.



Blessed be You, who creates the fruit of the vine.

2) Blessing for experiencing something new (Shehechyanu):

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם שהחיינו וקימנו והגענו לזמן הזה

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, she-hechyanu v'kiy'manu v'higi'anu la-z'man ha-zeh.

Blessed be You, who has kept us alive and sustained us so that we could reach this moment.

3) Blessing for the smell of ripe fruit:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם הנותן ריח טוב בפרות

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, hanotein rei'ach tov bapeirot

Blessed be You, who puts good scent in fruit.



4) Blessing for other sweet smells:

Sweet-smelling trees like cinnamon, tree flowers:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם בורא עצי בשמים

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, borei atzei b'samim

Blessed be You, who creates sweet-smelling trees.

Sweet grasses or plants: *Barukh... borei isvei b'samim* ברוך אתה... בורא עשבי בשמים

Blessed be You, who creates sweet-smelling plants.

Any other sweet smells: *Barukh... borei minei b'samim* ברוך אתה... בורא מיני בשמים

Blessed be You, who creates all kinds of sweet-smells.

5) Blessing after eating various fruit and other foods:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם בורא נפשות רבות וחסרונן
על כל מה שבראת להחיות בהם נפש כל חי. ברוך חי העולמים

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, borei n'fashot rabot v'chesronan, al kol ma she-barata, l'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai, barukh chei ha-olamim.

Blessed be You, who creates so many different living things, all needing each other, for all You created, to give life through them to the Soul of all Life.
Blessed be the Life of all worlds.

A VERY BASIC TU BISHEVAT SEDER

The Tu B'Shevat seder is a celebration of our relationship with nature and with fruit trees in particular, and a time for reflection. Today, as we celebrate together, let us envision ourselves as partners in shaping, cultivating, and healing the natural world. The Tu B'Shevat Seder is organized into four sections, each reflecting the seasons and symbolizing different aspects of the trees and our own lives. Each section connects to one of the four worlds of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and represents the stages of transition from the most physical to the most spiritual.

Some song ideas: *She is a Tree of Life / Etz Chayim hi lamachazikim bah v'tomcheha me'ushar. Tzadik katamar yifrach, k'erez bal'vanon yisgeh / The righteous will flourish like a date palm, like a cedar. Da l'kha / Know that every shepherd has a melody and every blade of grass a song* (see neohasid.org for words and tune). For texts and teachings to read and study, go to neohasid.org.

First Cup - The World of *Asiyah* (Actualization) Fruits and nuts with a hard outside and an edible inside *[Pour a glass of white wine, say the blessing, and drink half or more.]*



Although seemingly inedible from the outside, each of the foods eaten at the level of *Asiyah*, when peeled or shelled, hold gifts that transcend their outward appearance. Like winter, where everything lays dormant and hidden, these fruits and nuts contain inside themselves the potential to reveal what is hidden within. Because of their hard exterior, these foods can represent the face we present to others, or the human tendency to judge others by their outer appearance. They can remind us that whoever we are, we all carry a divine spark within. They can represent the ways we separate ourselves from other people. Eating these fruits, we destroy the seed, and our symbiosis with them, our ability to help them, is imperfect.



Discuss: When have you “judged a book by its cover” only to realize that you were mistaken? Or: When have you shown one face to the world while feeling differently inside? Or: What is one new environmental action or practice you can take on for the coming year?



Eat: Walnuts | Almonds | Pomegranates | Coconuts | Pistachios | Pomegranate

Second Cup - The World of *Yetzirah* (Formation) Fruits with pits at their center *[Add a few drops of red wine and fill the rest with white. Drink half or more.]*



We now drink our second cup of wine. Just as each new stream begins with a trickle, each flower with a single bud, just a few drops of color transform the hue of our wine. Although we discard the pits of these fruits, they are the seeds, the means to rebirth. These fruits can remind us that every flowering tree was once bare and that the means to growth can sometimes come from the most overlooked places. We eat the fruit and discard the seed. This can symbolize the potential within us that we have not yet tapped. *Yetzirah* can mean human creativity, which depends so much on what we receive from other people and from the world around us.



Discuss: What is something you have done or created that started out very small and became bigger or more important over time? Or: What parts of yourself have you overlooked that you want to give more attention to? Or: Describe a place in Nature that helps you feel connected to what is important. Or: Who were the peoples that lived in this land before you?



Eat: Cherries | Olives | Plums | Apricots | Avocado | Date

Third Cup - The World of *Beriyah* (Creation)

Fruits that are entirely edible

[Refill the glass so that there is now half red and half white wine. Drink half or more.]



We drink our third cup of wine. We now have half a cup of red wine and half a cup of white - even though the trees will be full and green and their flowers will blossom, their growth is not complete. So much more will be created; so much more is to come. These fruits can remind us of the wholeness of the world, where nothing is wasted and everything nourishes everything else. Just as we can swallow their seeds and give from our own bodies to nurture them, so to do they represent a perfect symbiosis that we can strive for in all our relationships. We can take this time to look at the fruit of our own creations and actions and consider how to deepen our relationships in the world and with the earth.



Discuss: When do you feel truly whole and happy? Or: Describe a moment when the boundaries between yourself and God and Nature seemed to dissolve.

Eat: Grapes | Raisins | Apples | Pears | Blueberries | Raspberries | Fig

Some people will include citrus here, since the peels are edible and we can swallow the seeds.



Fourth Cup - The World of *Atzilut* (Presence, Emanation, Birth)

[Pour a nearly full glass of red wine again and add just a few drops of white. Drink all.]

We now come to our final cup; the drops of white in the red remind us of the first cup of this seder and of the cyclical nature of the seasons. This final cup of *Atzilut* represents what is invisible to the eye. Instead of eating fruit, we may enjoy sweet smells like cinnamon and rosemary. Beyond the cycle of eating is the cycle of breathing, where the stuff of life lives both within and without us at the same time, when it is so much a part of us that we cannot even see it. At this level, all things are already part of each other. We can have this kind of connection with the earth and with God. Like smells, the ways we remember this connection are subtle: the feel of the soil or the smell of dew, the color of the changing leaves, the sounds of birds migrating, or the clasp of a hand. This cup can remind us that even though we have many different experiences of the world and its creatures, and many kinds of relationships, all of it adds up to one world, one living universe, and that we are each one organ of that life.



Discuss: What helps you remember and appreciate what you cannot see?

Smell: Cinnamon | Rosemary | Bay Leaf | Cedar



Here is where you would say the fifth blessing above for eating various fruits. There is also a special blessing one can say after wine or the seven species of the land of Israel.

***Together:* May the New Year of The Trees begin a year of growth; may it be a year of renewal for the trees and for us; may our blessings give strength to the trees, may our eyes be opened to the wonders of creation, and may we nurture the earth that nurtures us.**

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For more information, ideas, other haggadahs and games related to Tu BiShvat, see: jewcology.com, hazon.org, myjewishlearning.com, jewishmuseum.org/kidzone, coejl.org/resources, and neohasid.org. You may need to search using different spellings, like Tu B'Shvat, Tu BeShevat, or Tu Bish'vat. For resources on the Kabbalistic Tu BiShvat seder, or on the mystical tradition in general, visit www.neohasid.org.