

# TU B'SHVAT SEDER

## Instruction manual<sup>1</sup>

### Background to the holiday

#### What are the origins of Tu B'Shvat?

Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for Trees, is not mentioned in the Torah. Its source can be found in the writings of our Sages in the Mishna, in Masechet Rosh Hashana: "There are four new years – the first of Nisan is the new year for kings and for pilgrim festivals; the first of Elul is the new year for tithing of cattle; the first of Tishrei is the new year for years, for shemitta (sabbatical years) and yovel (jubilee years), for planting and for vegetables; the first of Shvat is the new year for trees, according to the ruling of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel, however, places it on the fifteenth of that month." As with all disputes between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, here too the ruling follows Beit Hillel, apparently for two reasons:

1. By the fifteenth of Shvat the rainy season is nearly over, and from now on the fruit begin to ripen: "Henceforth the sap rises and the fruit ripens" (Bavli, Rosh Hashanah, 14 71). This is the turning point for fruits and trees.
2. This date serves as the point in time when rains from the past year no longer accumulate in the earth, and the rains of this year begin to collect. It can therefore be said that: "Until now the trees live from the waters of the past year, from now on they live from the waters of the coming year" (Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah, 81 5"2).

Hence Tu B'Shvat is the beginning of the natural agricultural year for trees.

#### Is Tu B'Shvat a festival?

The most common and widespread custom relates to eating fruit on this day. During the Exile, eating fruit also served to commemorate the yearning for and connection to

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<sup>1</sup> The background material was collated from the 'Zohar' holiday site: <http://www.tzohar.org.il>

the Land. The custom of marking the day spread down through the generations to all Diaspora communities. From testimony found in books such as “Hemdat Hayamim,” published in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which deals with holiday customs, we learn that communities endeavored to gather as many fruits as possible in preparation for this day.

The Tu B’Shvat Seder: this seder is unique to Tu B’Shvat, combining study, blessings, and food. It is customary to eat between fifteen and thirty kinds of fruit, to drink four cups of red and white wine, and to study texts from the sources relating to trees and plants.

The custom of planting: this dates back to the establishment of the Zionist movement and the early settlements. In the course of time it became one of the most cherished customs connected with the day. Apparently the custom of planting originated in Zichron Ya’acov in 1890, when schoolteacher and writer Zev Yavetz took his students to plant trees in honor of the holiday. His explanation was: “In order to cherish the plants of the Land that Hashem planted for our fathers, that they may be replete with their goodness and take pleasure in their beauty.” The action was adopted by Israeli society, and in 1908 the Teachers’ Union declared Tu B’Shvat the festival of planting. Later still, the Jewish National Fund also adopted this date.

#### Introduction to the Tu B’Shvat Seder

The Tu B’Shvat Seder was first observed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Kabbalists from Spain and Portugal arrived in Eretz Israel. They fixed Tu B’Shvat as a holiday in the Hebrew calendar. The custom of observing a Tu B’Shvat Seder is attributed to the noted Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzhak Lurie Ashkenazi – HaAri – who lived in Safed. HaAri Hakadosh, as he was known, introduced a seder known as ‘Tikun Tu B’Shvat’ which consisted mainly of eating fruit and reciting verses, songs and blessings in praise of Eretz Israel. In the course of time this ‘tikun’ grew to resemble the seder which we observe on Pesach, and includes the drinking of four cups of wine, from white, through various shades of pink, and ending with red wine, to symbolize the changing

seasons of the year. Texts from the sources are read, prayers and blessing are recited, and fruit is eaten.

Instructions to the teacher:

The following is a suggested Tu B'Shvat seder.

The seder is divided into four sections, corresponding to the four seasons of the year: action, creativity, creation, and community.

Start off with a general explanation of the festival and its special significance in the State of Israel (the explanation is provided in 'background to the holiday' above).

Each section consists of references to the specific season of the year, a blessing over the wine, a question connected to the symbolic significance of the section, the season, and/or the fruit, a task relating to the volunteer's sphere of activity, a blessing over the fruit connected with the section, and a song.

The songs were selected because they are part of Israeli culture. You can choose which ones to sing and which ones to read. Another possibility is to study the song in pairs, and in this way to initiate a more personal discussion. The songs should be arranged before the meeting, to make sure that the words are photocopied so they can be learned together.

**Tasks and questions: these should be varied in such a way that some of them can be presented to the group, and the volunteers will have the opportunity to respond to the group as a whole, while others can be responded to in pairs or groups of three, thus initiating a more intimate encounter between the volunteers.**

Order of seating: Seats should be arranged in a circle around a table on which are placed the wine, fruits, and other foods relating to the seder.

It is recommended that reading be done around the circle in order to involve all participants.

## TU B'SHVAT SEDER

“There are four new years – the first of Nisan is the new year for kings and for pilgrim festivals

The first of Elul is the new year for tithing of cattle; R' Eliezer and R' Shimon say the first of Tishrei

The first of Tishrei is the new year for years, for shemitta (sabbatical years) and yovel (jubilee years), for planting and for vegetables

The first of Shvat is the new year for trees, according to the ruling of Beit Shammai. Beit Hillel, however, places it on the fifteenth of that month.”

(Rosh Hashana Chapter 1 Mishna 1)

Why did the trees merit a special new year of their own?

They saw that a new year was given to mankind, and they said: It is written in the Torah that ‘man is like a tree in the field.’ Man is likened to a tree and the tree is likened to man. And so, if man has a new year, then according to this ruling the tree should also have a new year.

Seeing that the trees spoke sensibly, their words were accepted. They were asked: in which month should we fix your new year? The trees answered: since we need water, fix it in Shvat, (the zodiac water symbol – aquarius – is known in Hebrew as ילי – water pail).

(Hayman Hayerushalmi)

Midrash Bereshit Raba, Portion 16:

They said to the fruit trees: why does not your voice go forth? They replied, we have no need, for our fruit testifies for us.

They said to the trees that bear no fruit: why does your voice go forth? They replied, would that it were, let our voice go forth and we will see.

R' Hunna said: not for this reason, but because the trees are heavy with fruit, their voice does not go forth, but the trees that bear no fruit, because their branches are light, their voice goes forth.

Maybe the reference here is not only to trees?

- The new year for trees can also serve as another opportunity for man to examine his actions and ask himself: what kind of tree am I? And how shall I present myself in the world?

## **FIRST SECTION      -----      THE WORLD OF ACTION**

### **Four cups: Red wine and white wine:**

#### **Representing the transition from winter to summer**

The first cup – white wine

The white represents the peak of winter:

snow on the Hermon and morning frost on the grass

- What is the peak of winter in our year of action? Experiences of winter ....
- Task: the Hebrew language frequently employs images from nature to describe mankind. Give examples of expressions taken from nature. Give examples in English of expressions taken from nature.
- What is your favorite plant? Why is it your favorite?

Blessing: Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Three kinds of fruit, representing the three stages of materialization in creation

- Fruits whose peel is discarded: citrus, nuts, almonds
- Fruits whose seeds are not eaten: dates, apples, olives
- Fruits eaten in their entirety: figs, raisins

This culinary journey alludes to a journey from the externalized world whose interior, the essence, is not accessible, to a world whose essence is unrelated to its outward appearance, and to the ideal world whose interior and exterior are united – and accessible.

The first fruits are those that represent the world of action, the material world. These fruits require a great deal of protection and must be peeled in order to expose their substance, their secret, and their taste.

### **Waltz in defense of plants**

Words and music: Naomi Shemer

The narcissus is already blossoming in nature reserves  
Spreading its blanket over the coastal plain  
Anemone and saffron flowers, a thousand colors and shades  
But – you're not allowed to pick them.

But the law doesn't apply to me  
Nobody watches over me  
If I had petals  
My situation would be different.

Rare birds are already nesting in the rocks  
Rare trees are separately preserved  
Frightened deer glance at the sign  
That plainly says hunting is forbidden

Sir, watch out – don't touch the iris,  
Mountain tulips are out of bounds!  
Each hill on the outskirts of the city  
Is a fenced open area and registered section.

Sometimes I think that maybe it would be better  
If I were a narcissus or cyclamen  
Or even a porcupine quill someone found  
Look what happens to me on the path:  
Every passer-by picks and plucks

And he receives a blow from a stranger.

If I were an animal or a flower  
My situation would be different!  
I'm the only one without a sign  
There is no fence around me  
If I were – say – a deer  
My situation would be different.

## **SECOND SECTION       -----       THE WORLD OF CREATIVITY**

The second cup – mostly white wine with some red wine

We have added a little red wine to the white wine. During this time winter reigns on earth but the first signs of awakening can be discerned in dormant nature; budding and blossoming trees. A new cycle of life is beginning. The second cup is dedicated to those who work to preserve the continuity of nature and nature itself, from man's negligence and greed. This cup reminds us that if we spoil there will be nobody to restore after us!

Blessing: Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

**Only after the last tree is cut down, only after the last river is poisoned, only after the last fish is caught, only then will we realize that money cannot be eaten!**  
(Indian prophesy)

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first man, He took him to every tree in the Garden of Eden, and said to him: See how pleasant and fine are my creations, And everything that I have created –  
I have created it for you.  
Take heed

That you do not spoil and destroy My world.  
For if you spoil it, there will be nobody to restore it after you.  
(Midrash Kohelet Raba, 7, 19)

“When you come into the Land you will plant every fruit-bearing tree” (Leviticus 19:23). The Holy One, Blessed be He, said unto Israel: Even though you will find it to be full of goodness, you shall not say, we will sit and not plant. But be heedful with your planting... In the same way that what you found was planted by others, so shall you plant for your children. Let no man say, I am old, I have lived for many years, why should I toil for others? Tomorrow I will die!... Therefore let no man put off planting, but just as he found – so shall he continue and plant, even if he is old.”  
(Midrash Tanhuma, Kedushim)

What are the experiences of destruction and what are the experiences of environmental restoration in our world of creativity? What planting have we done in the spirit of this midrash?

### **THIRD SECTION      -----      THE WORLD OF CREATION**

We pour the third cup – mostly red wine with some white wine

This cup marks the Spring. The red wine symbolizes the warmth of the sun and the flowers that appear in this season, as nature awakens from its slumber. The white wine symbolizes the winter rains that have collected within the earth. The warm days overcome the cold days. This cup marks the struggle between the powers of nature. We dedicate the third cup to protecting the nature of the land of Israel and our love for everything that lives and grows in it.

Blessing: Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

Each plant has two identity cards: the botanical and the historical<sup>2</sup>:

1. **The cypress** – the first tree planted by Herzl tells of Herzl and the Zionist Congress. What does Herzl symbolize for you?  
A man of action.... A man of vision?  
Personal vision – What is our own personal vision for the Jewish people? For Israel? For our local Jewish community?
2. **The vine** – tells of Baron Rothschild and the early settlements. Wine – an episode of culture shock, because Baron Rothschild's attempt to introduce the wine culture in Eretz Israel was regarded by some members of the Zionist movement as an endeavor to introduce foreign customs.
3. **The eucalyptus** – tells of drying out the swamps, the fevers and the first aliyot.  
What are our swamps? What does fever represent for us? What does the eucalyptus symbolize today?
4. **The olive** – tells of the establishment of the State. It is the symbol of the country that aspires to peace. What does the olive tree represent for us?

### **Cypress**

Words: Ehud Manor

Music: Ariel Zilber

I saw a cypress

Standing in a field facing the sun

In khamsin (hot, dry weather) and in frost

Facing the storm.

The cypress bowed sideways

The treetop did not break, it bent to the grass

And behold, opposite the sea

The cypress arose tall and green.

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Here is the cypress, alone  
Facing fire and water.  
Here is the cypress, alone  
Reaching to the sky.  
A cypress, alone and strong.  
If only I could learn  
From this one tree.

I am like an infant  
Who cannot withstand the sun.  
In khamsin (hot, dry weather) and in frost  
Facing the storm.

Here is the cypress, alone...

**Your wonders are not finished yet**

Words: Yoram Taharlev

Music: Rami Kleinstein

Small country, beautiful country,  
Homeland without a shirt, barefoot homeland  
Let me sing your songs, beautiful bride  
Open your gates for me, I will pass through them, thanking God.

In the shade of the grove of trees, far from the sunlight  
We will strike roots here together, to the heart of the earth  
To glowing fountains, to pure wells  
Indescribable homeland and a gypsy orphan.

Your wonders are not finished yet  
Your song has not yet sailed  
My heart still beats at night  
And whispers silently to me:  
You are mine only, you are the one  
You are mine, mother and daughter  
You are the little,  
The little that remains.

We will bring the scent of villages in our clothing  
The flocks will move to the chiming of our hearts  
Tranquil silence  
And a lovely ray of light  
She walks to the light  
Barefoot

Your wonders are not finished yet....

#### **FOURTH SECTION      -----      THE WORLD OF COMMUNITY**

We pour the fourth cup – red wine

In summer the sun's warmth spreads over the earth, after overcoming the cold of winter. The fruits have ripened, it's harvest time. The fourth cup is dedicated to the spiritual dimensions of man and nature. The eternal dimension. In its honor we will eat those fruits which are nearly always eaten without loss or waste. This cup is dedicated to the community, to working together in mutual respect and esteem, working together for Israeli society.

Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who creates  
the fruit of the vine.

“We intended to plant a grove as a symbol of our future lives. Different trees with different qualities. Each one fulfills its own particular function in life, with its own special attributes. Together they create the perfect harmony of a shady garden. The trunk of every tree becomes twisted when it grows by itself in a broad expanse. It does not rise up, but spreads sideways. Not so a grove. A mutual influence and the common need to strike roots deep in the ground and strive towards the sun causes the trunk to grow straight and raises it high above its surroundings. The pine tree with its roots that penetrate rock, the olive with its strong trunk and oil-filled fruit, the erect cypress growing ever-upward, the carob with its hardy leaves that do not grow old. They all symbolize communal life rooted in the earth, which stretches from the earth to the light of the sun. Enduring life that cannot easily be moved. Lives filled with the aspiration to rise up. (Sefer Hakevutzah, Kiryat Anavim 1922)

**“Man is but the mold of the landscape of his homeland.” (Saul Tchernichovsky)**

Closing song:

**An every-morning song**

Amir Gilboa

Suddenly in the morning a man rises,  
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk  
Calling out ‘Shalom’ to everyone he meets.

From the sidewalk stalks of grain brush his face  
The maragosa tree wafts its fragrance around his head.  
Sprinkles of dew, and the hills, and ten thousand rays  
Bring the canopy of the sun to its nuptials.

Suddenly in the morning a man rises,  
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk  
Calling out ‘Shalom’ to everyone he meets.

He laughs with the heroism of generations from the hills,  
The battles, shamefaced, bow down low  
Before the splendor of one thousand years that bubble secretly,  
A thousand young years before him,  
Like a cool slice, like a shepherd's song, like a wing.

Suddenly in the morning a man rises,  
He feels he is a nation and begins to walk,  
And he sees that spring has returned  
Making the tree green again after its leaves were shed.

Suddenly in the morning a man rises...

Courtesy of "Mercaz Maase" - <http://maase.org.il/>