

## TU BISHVAT

The fifteenth (Hebrew: *tu*) day of the month of Shevat (hence *Tu Bishvat*) is a minor holiday known as the New Year for the Trees. In ancient times it affected laws related to tithing. After Temple times, it was marked only by the eating of fruit associated with the land of Israel. In modern times, this minor festival has gained new attention and acquired additional meaning. With the return to the land of Israel, *Tu Bishvat*'s connection to the land has been emphasized. Concerns about the environment have added another layer of meaning to a day associated with caring about nature.

An interesting ritual, developed by the Kabbalists, has also become a common way to observe *Tu Bishvat*. Loosely modeled on the Pesah Seder, the *Tu Bishvat Seder* also has four glasses of wine and the ritualized eating of specific foods. These foods are fruits (and nuts) that were seen to symbolize the four worlds of creation. According to Kabbalah, these four worlds move from that which is completely spiritual to the physical world. These worlds are: *azilut*, "emanation"; *beriah*, "creation"; *yetzirah*, "formation"; and *assiyah*, "the physical world." The *Tu Bishvat Seder* ritual proceeds from the most physical world to the most spiritual while eating fruits associated with each world. The physical world is symbolized by fruits and nuts with inedible skins or shells. The inedible represents the *kelippot*, "shells." In Kabbalah, the world begins with a great shattering that scattered sparks of holiness and encased them in shells of impurity or the mundane. Thus in the world of the physical, the holy is hidden by the shells. In the world of formation, we consume fruits that are edible on the outside but have a

pit at their core. In this world, the holy is more accessible, but there remains an element of the inedible/impure. In the world of creation, the fruit is completely edible, and in the world of the spirit or emanation, there is neither fruit nor anything tangible. In the Kabbalistic Seder, there are accompanying texts to be read with each fruit eaten.

The Kabbalistic Seder has served as a model for contemporary *Tu Bishvat* Seders. Some focus on the environment or on Israel. Others employ a simplified notion of the Kabbalistic Seder and retain the movement from the physical world to the spiritual. Some use all three elements, the environmental, Israel, and the spiritual, in these new Seders. Two such Seders are: *Seder Tu Bishvat: The Festival of Trees*, by Adam Fisher (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1989); and *A Tu Bishvat Seder: The Feast of Fruits from the Tree of Life*, by Yitzhak Buxbaum (Jewish Spirit, 1998).

One *kavanah* I have used is to see the four worlds as four approaches to the environment. We begin with conflict between humans and nature, move to a concept of stewardship, then to recognizing the "rights" of animals, and finally to a notion of deep ecology with a profound sense that we are one with the universe. (See "Ecology," pp. 475-86, for more on our relationship to the earth.)

A different *kavanah* views the Seder as the evolution of relationships. We begin by keeping a protective shell around ourselves, not willing to let our soft core, our hearts, be vulnerable. As a relationship develops, we open ourselves up, but there is a place deep inside, that which is most vulnerable, that we still keep protected. Finally, a successful relationship moves to where there is nothing held back. Trust is complete and freely given. In such a relationship, there are moments of union when the border between you and the other person blurs or even disappears. This can be true of relationships with human beings or with the Divine.

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### KAVANAH

In the beginning, we lived in the Garden of Eden, in complete harmony with nature. Then we ate of the tree of knowledge of good

and evil. Feeling naked, we experienced a desire for clothing—the first separation between nature and ourselves. With this first manipulation of the natural world for our benefit, we began our exile. “Cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life, thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you” (Gen. 3:17–18). From a symbiotic relationship we were driven into one of bitter struggle with nature.

In that exile from nature, we also became exiled from our bodies, and death came into the world. In the end our bodies will betray us and deliver us to death. Ironically, only in death do we reach harmony by returning to the earth. As the verse continues, “by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground—for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

In the modern world, we may think that we have mostly won the struggle with nature. We have been able to harness nature to our own needs. Yet we have discovered that in that harnessing we run the risk of destroying this planet. For it is still true, despite all our accomplishments, that in the end nature will run its course and our bodies will return to dust. Both we and this planet are in need of healing. Let us feel the earth’s pain reflected in our pain, for in truth we are part of rather than separate from Mother Earth.

How can we find our way back to the garden guarded by an angel with a fiery sword made up of human hubris and greed?

## PURIM

The festival of Purim (Adar 14) celebrates the story of Esther and Mordecai’s triumph over the evil Haman. Its central ritual is the reading of the Book of Esther in the synagogue. Whenever Haman’s name is read, we try to drown it out with graggers (rattles or noisemakers).

The story itself is a grand farce, filled with absurdly lucky coincidences where the right person is always in the right place at the right time (or, in the case of Haman, in the wrong place at the wrong time). The story comes to a rather grim end when the empowered Jews kill not only Haman but also hundreds of enemies. There are those who have seen the story as supporting attacks on the enemies of the Jewish people. This seems to me a complete misreading of the tone of the tale. For Jews being persecuted in the Middle Ages, Purim was probably a revenge fantasy and a safe but useful venting of anger against anti-Semites. I think that even the massacres at the end of the book reflect a fantastical yet simpleminded view of good guys and bad guys.

The book’s farcical tone is set right at the beginning with the Queen Vashti episode. Called by the dumb King Ahasuerus to dance at his all-male party, she refuses. (The rabbis cleverly suggest that since the text says she was supposed to come with her royal crown, this meant she was to dance wearing *only* her crown. This explains her refusal.) After getting rid of her, the king and his advisers worry that Vashti’s disobedience might set a bad example. Therefore, they issue a decree that wives should treat their husbands with respect. There is nothing more ludi-