



Tu B'Shevat literally means "15 of Shevat;" Shevat is the name of one of the months in the Hebrew calendar. The New Year of the Trees occurs on this Hebrew date.

History of Tu B'Shevat

As with most of the Jewish Holidays, the exact origin of Tu B'Shevat is open to speculation. Some suggest that Tu B'Shevat started out as some sort of nature folk festival that got integrated into the religion. Others suggest that Tu B'Shevat started out as merely the date used in calculating the tithe on tree fruit and evolved into a minor holiday.

Tu B'Shevat is not mentioned in the TaNaCH, the Bible. (TaNaCH is the acronym for Torah-Prophets-Writings in Hebrew.)

Tu B'Shevat is first mentioned in the Mishna, completed circa 200. The Mishna is part of the Talmud; it is the earliest material included in the Talmud. The only mention appears in tractate Rosh Hashana 1:1, which states there are four new years. Only two of the new years listed have any observances associated with them today: Rosh Hashanah, a major Holiday, and Tu B'Shevat.

A translation of the Mishna Rosh Hashanah 1:1 with copious commentary follows.

*The four new years are: On the first of Nisan, the new year for the kings and for the festivals; On the first of Elul, the new year for the tithing of animals; in the first of Tishrei. On the first of Tishrei, the new year for years, for the Sabbatical years and for the Jubilee years and for the planting and for the vegetables. On the first of Shevat, the new year for the trees, these are the words of the House of Shammai; The House of Hillel says, on **the fifteenth thereof.***

The 1st of Nisan - Jewish Kings who become rulers during any part of the year preceding Nisan 1 get credit for a full year of rule. This was important in biblical times, since dates in documents were of the form "in the 7th year of the reign of King Bob." Nisan is called the "first month" of the year in the Torah, although the New Year, Rosh Hashana, occurs in the "seventh month." The start of the annual Festival cycle was felt to start with the "first month." Nisan 1 has no significance today.

The 1st of Elul, the month preceding Tishrei, is the new year for the tithe of cattle. But Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Simon disagree, saying Tishrei 1 should be the date. (Their opinion was rejected.) The tithe is a 10% tax, in this case payable in cattle. Elul 1 was the start of the "fiscal year" for figuring the tithe on cattle. Animals born during one "fiscal year" were not to be used as tithe for those born during another. This tax was "paid" by taking the tithed animals to the Temple, where they were slaughtered by priests, and then eaten by their owners (!) and their guests.

The 1st of Tishrei is the: New year for years, *that is, Rosh Hashanah.*

New year for Sabbatical years. *Every 7th year, according to the Torah (Lev. 25), land in Israel is not to be cultivated. This was apparently observed, even under great duress during the struggle of the Maccabees.*

New year for Jubilee years, *which according to the Torah, were to occur every 50th year. During a Jubilee year, land was to be returned to its original owner, and all Jewish slaves were to be freed. It was apparently never observed. (There is a tradition that states each year of the Babylonian exile was for an unobserved Jubilee year.)*

New year for planting trees. *According to the Torah (Lev. 19:23), the fruit of a tree is not to be used until four years pass after its planting. Tishrei 1 was used in calculating the number of years passed since a tree's planting. This date is not associated with planting trees today; that association is now with Tu B'Shevat.*

The new year for tithing vegetables. *Tishrei 1 marked the beginning of the "fiscal year" for figuring the tithe, a 10% tax payable in vegetables, on vegetables. Veggies harvested in one "fiscal year" were not to be used as tithe for those harvested in another. The owners didn't get to eat this tithe. It went to the government on behalf of the Temple; every 3rd year it was to be given to the poor.*

The 1st of Shevat says the School of Shammai, but the School of Hillel disagrees, and says the 15th of Shevat. *The proper date of the new year of the trees is thus yet another of the famous disputes between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai, and as usual the opinion of Hillel's followers eventually prevailed. Fruit that budded during one "fiscal year" was not to be used as tithe on that which budded during another."*

The Mishna does not mention any observances or celebrations associated with Tu B'Shevat; it is presented as merely a date important in figuring the tithe on fruit.

Commentary in the Talmud on this mishna provides a rationale for why the 15th of Shevat makes sense as a new year for trees. It states that by this time most of the winter rains have fallen in Israel, and the fruit of the trees begins to form.

After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, and the exile of most Jews from the land of Israel, Tu B'Shevat took on a new character. At some point along the line, it became a widespread custom to eat fruits that grow in the land of Israel on Tu B'Shevat. In this fashion, the holiday evolved into a means for Jews to maintain a connection to the land of Israel. This custom of eating fruit from Israel continues to this day.

In the 16th century, Sephardic Kabbalists [mystics] invigorated the holiday by composing a Tu B'Shevat seder, based upon the Pesah seder. (The Sephardic Jews originated from Spain, exiled in 1492 and dispersed to almost any land that permitted their entry.)

The Sephardic seder did not catch on among Ashkenazic Jews. A well-known guide to Jewish practice (the *Kitzur Shuchan Aruch*), written by an Ashkenazic rabbi around 1865, has only the following to say about Tu B'Shevat. "*Tu B'Shevat is the New Year of the Trees. The Tachanun prayers [penitential prayers included in the traditional weekday liturgy] are not recited, and it is customary to partake of different types of fruits.*"

In modern times, Tu B'Shevat has taken on additional meaning. With the establishment of the State of Israel, reforestation efforts became a priority. It is a popular custom today to donate money on Tu B'Shevat to the Jewish National Fund to pay for the planting of trees in Israel.

Due to the increased environmental awareness of recent decades, Tu B'Shevat has taken on the character of a Jewish mini "Earth Day." A Holiday for trees inspires reflection on the human impact on the environment.

The Tu B'Shevat Seder

The Kabbalists sought to integrate a mystical view of the world into traditional Judaism. The heyday of the Kabbalah was the 300-year period from 1500 to 1800. During this time, the Kabbalah was widely accepted as the "true" form of Judaism.

One legacy of the Sephardic Kabbalists is the Tu B'Shevat seder, created in 16th century Safed, in what today is Israel.

The Kabbalists inherited a custom of eating fruit, particularly those of the land of Israel, on Tu B'Shevat. What they did was to create an elaborate structure for eating the fruit and imbued the fruit with symbolic meaning.

The Tu B'Shevat seder is loosely based on the Pesah seder. Just like the Pesah [Passover] seder, there are four glasses of wine drunk during the seder. At the Tu B'Shevat seder, however, the color of the wine in each glass is varied. The first cup is all white wine; the second is mostly white mixed with some red; the third is mostly red mixed with some white; and the fourth is all red wine. (Grape juice can be substituted for wine.)

The Pesah seder liturgy is largely concerned with the story of the exodus from Egypt. A good part of the Tu B'Shevat seder liturgy is composed of excerpts mentioning trees from the TaNaCH [Bible], Talmud, and other sources.

The Kabbalists had a belief that Creation is composed of four separate worlds, or levels. Fruits are used during the seder to symbolize these worlds. The four worlds are:

1. assiyah: "action" --- our world, the lowest level,
2. yezirah: "formation" --- the second lowest level,
3. beriah: "creation" --- next to highest level, and
4. azilut: "emanation" --- highest and purest level.

The 16th century Kabbalists in Safed were very interested in these four levels, so it comes as no surprise they get a "starring role" in the seder.

The first set of fruits eaten during the seder symbolize assiyah, our level. These fruits all have an inedible outer shell, such as nuts. The edible part of the fruit represents holiness. In our world, holiness is hidden, and we have sought it out. The fragile holiness must be protected within our world.

The second set of fruits eaten during the seder symbolize the level of yezirah. These fruits are edible on the outside, but have pits on the inside, such as peaches. The edible portion symbolizes holiness. At this level, holiness can be left exposed, but its inner core, its "heart," must still be protected.

The third and final set of fruits eaten during the seder are completely edible and symbolize the level of beriah. Holiness at this level needs no protection. (Some of the fruits included in this group are not actually considered totally edible by most people, such as apples and oranges; small seeds are ignored in the symbolism.)

What about the symbolism for the highest level, azilut? The Kabbalists felt azilut was so pure and spiritual that there was nothing in our world that could possibly be used to symbolize it. Thus, no fruits are assigned to represent it during the seder.



The Blessing for Fruit

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגָּפֶן.

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

Blessed is the Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.

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

Blessed is the Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

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

Blessed is the Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the earth.