



Tu B'Shvat: A Lesson in Radical Imagination

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Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism

Tu B'Shvat is a minor Jewish Holiday that begins on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Shevat and is referred to as the “New Year of the Trees.” Starting in the late 1800s and accelerated by the advent of the State of Israel in 1948, Tu B'Shvat came to be associated with the practice of planting trees in Eretz Yisrael. But if we situate this seemingly innocent, modern practice in its historical and political context, we learn that it has played a large role in the historical and ongoing displacement of Palestinian people. However, there is so much more to Tu B'Shvat than this modern and deceptively violent practice! We invite you to explore one alternative understanding of this holiday that shifts the focus from planting trees to growing our spiritualities.



A Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael / Jewish National Fund poster from 1950, celebrating Tu B'Shvat.

Trees Turned Soldiers

Taya Amit, "[The Story of Palestine's Colonization, and Resistance, Is Embodied in the Trees.](#)"

Taking a symbol of peace, and changing it into one of violence, ... the Israeli settler state has turned forests into a tool to erase Palestinian homes and memories. This dates as far back as 1901, when the Jewish National Fund (JNF) was created. With the purpose of buying, and taking, Palestinian land, the JNF has planted over 240 million trees, most of which are pine. The celebrated forests planted by JNF are, in fact, tools for the disappearance of Palestinian villages. The Lord Sacks Forest, the South Africa Forest, the Carmel Forest Spa resort — [all built on the ruins of Palestinian lives.](#)

... There are two important ways in which the JNF was able to take with such force. Firstly, ... being disguised as an environmental NGO, global outrage was kept at bay as the JNF stormed through Palestinian land... Secondly, as [Braverman](#) points out, **the festival of Tu B'Shvat was turned into a propaganda machine where the once religious ritual of valuing trees became about planting them.**... Here, we see just how political a tree can be — transformed from a natural being into a soldier defending a settler state.

... With the non-native pine tree being tactically planted for its fast-growing nature and [European aesthetics](#), detrimental biological effects have taken form. These foreign trees often cannot adapt to local soils, ... they acidify the land, making the ground inedible for Palestinian shepherds to graze their flocks on; and the trees are vulnerable to wildfires, as demonstrated by the worst fire in Israel's history, the 2010 Mount Carmel fire.

Now that we understand the violent consequences of this modern way of celebrating Tu B'Shvat, we might be tempted to reject the holiday entirely. But we encourage you to draw from the Jewish tradition of building new from the old, rather than simply throwing it out. The meaning and lessons that Hasidism has been able to draw from this holiday are valuable tools for reflection that we can bring to our own lives and political organizing. But first, let's look back to the original rabbinic source that establishes this holiday in the first place.

Retracing Roots

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1.

There are four new years. On the 1st of Nissan is the New Year for the Kings and the pilgrimage festivals. On the 1st of Elul is the New Year for animal tithes.

אַרְבַּעָה רֵאשִׁי שָׁנִים הֵם. בְּאֶחָד בְּנִיסָן רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה
לְמַלְכִים וְלְרִגְלִים. בְּאֶחָד בְּאֵלוּל רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה
לְמַעֲשֵׂר בְּהֵמָה.

But Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say, it is on the 1st of Tishrei. On the 1st of Tishrei is the New Year for years and sabbatical years, and for planting and for tithing vegetables. Beit Shammai¹ said that on the 1st of Shvat is the **New Year of the tree**. Beit Hillel says: It is on the 15th [of Shvat].

רבי אלעזר ורבי שמעון אומרים, באָהד בתּשְׂרִי.
בְּאָהד בתּשְׂרִי ראש השָׁנָה לְשָׁנִים
וְלְשָׁמַטִּין וְלִיבּוּלוֹת, לְנִטְיָעָה וְלִירְקוֹת. בְּאָהד
בְּשִׁבְט, ראש השָׁנָה לְאֵילָן, כְּדַבְּרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי.
בֵּית הֵלֵל אומרים, בְּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ:

Translation by Gashmius Staff.

The Mishnah establishes four “New Years” across the Hebrew calendar, the last of which is “New Year of the Tree.” Note how the first three of these New Years were all about plural things (i.e. Kings, Festivals, years, etc) and this last one is about a singular “tree.” This grammatical discrepancy provides a jumping off point for discovering the mystical undertones of the Holiday.

Rav Tzvi Elimelech Shapira of Dinov, *Bnei Yissakhar* (1783 - 1841)

[The Mishnah specifically says] “New Year for the Tree” [singular], not “for the trees [plural]” unlike every other New Year in the Mishnah. This hints at what we received from our Rabbis — to pray on Tu B'Shvat for a kosher and very beautiful etrog that the Holy Blessed One arranged for you to receive when that mitzvah's time arises [ie., Sukkot]. This is because [Tu B'Shvat] is the day that the sap wakes up in the trees, according to the merit of all of Yisrael.

How good and pleasant it is that a person should pray on this day — which is the beginning of the [tree's] flowering process — for the etrog that the Holy Blessed One will arrange for them to receive in the time when it's needed [ie, in nine months at Sukkot]. [If they do this, then] their prayer will be fruitful. And this is what the Tanna² alluded to by saying in the singular “for the tree”: to teach about the only tree in the Torah [which has its own] mitzvah [ie, the etrog].

"ראש השנה לאילן", לא אמר "לאילנות" כמו
באינך. יש לרמז מה שקבלנו מרבתינו להתפלל
בט"ו בשבט על אתרוג כשר יפה ומהודר שיזמין
הי יתברך בעת המצטרך למצוה. כי הנה זה היום
אשר עולה השרף באילנות, והוא כפי הזכות של
כל אחד מישראל.

הנה מה טוב ומה נעים שיתפלל האדם ביום ההוא
ראשית יסוד הצמיחה, שיזמן לו הי יתברך לעת
המצטרך עת הפרי עץ הדר, והנה תפילתו תעשה
פירות, וזה שרמז התנא באומרו לשון יחיד
"לאילן", להורות על האילן המיוחד המבואר
בתורה למצוה.

Translation by Gashmius Staff.

¹ Beit Shammai & Beit Hillel: The “Houses” of Shammai and Hillel were two schools of thought (named after the sages who founded them) during the Mishnaic period.

² Mishnaic Rabbi

Rav Tzvi Elimelech notices the peculiar singularity of “tree” in the language of the Mishnah and takes the stance that the *Tannaim*³ were alluding to the only tree that has a unique mitzvah (or action/commandment) tied to it: the Pri Eitz Hadar, or the *etrog*⁴ tree. Worshiping with an etrog on Sukkot is one of the central practices of the holiday, with people going out of their way to secure kosher and beautiful etrogim. Now that’s all fine and dandy, but why are we talking about Sukkot in Shevat? Sukkot doesn’t take place for another 8-9 months!

Rav Tzvi Elimelech is teaching that on Tu B'Shvat, G-d hand-selects the etrog that each of us will receive when Sukkot rolls around in nine months. Therefore, Tu B'Shvat is actually the perfect time to envision and *daven*⁵ for the future. The text is pointing toward this quasi-gestational period in which our etrog is conceived on Tu B'Shvat and birthed into the world on Sukkot. It emphasizes the importance of imagination and intentional forethought while simultaneously upholding the necessity of patience while the fruits of our labor are incubating. This tradition recognizes that complete and meaningful transformation will not be immediate. Nevertheless, substantial results and change *can* come about in consequential and realistic time frames if we first imagine it and then sow the necessary seeds.

Reflection Questions:

1. What do I need to do to merit a beautiful etrog for Sukkot? (literally and metaphorically)
2. Where am I going to be in nine months? *Who* do I want to be in nine months, and how am I going to get there?
3. What kind of world do I want to live in?
4. What actions can I take and/or processes can I set in motion that will positively impact my community in a substantial way nine months from now?

Radical Imagination

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

Imagination is a radical tool that allows us to draft the blueprint that we use to guide us toward the more equitable and just world that we so desperately need.

[continued on the next page ...]

³ *Tannaim*: Mishnaic Rabbis

⁴ *Etrog*: A Citron (fruit), it is one of the four species relevant during the holiday of Sukkot.

⁵ *Daven*: Yiddish for “pray.”

Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, & Beth E. Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now*, page 16.

A *now* practice... refuses to let go of the visionary—that which does not yet exist—and the radicalness of the imaginary as a space for what is yet unthinkable, at the edge of the possible. We say yes to Octavia Butler’s brilliant speculativeness: we will dream our way out; we must imagine beyond the given... And as our beloved now deceased comrade Rose Braz noted in a 2008 interview, “A prerequisite to seeking any social change is the naming of it. In other words, even though the goal we seek may be far away, unless we name it and fight for it today, it will never come.

What kind of etrog do you dream of? What kind of etrog does our community and/or world need? Right now is the time that we must daven for it and then we must share those visions with each other. Once we’ve done that, we must get to work. We must allow our visions to prompt our immediate action. Even our “small actions” have the potential to become substantial and can build upon each other if we water them and sustain them through their incubation periods.

Rav Tzvi Elimelech has provided a framework in which we can combine our imaginations and actions with resilience and time so that we may cultivate beautiful etrogim in abundance over the span of our lives. Not only for ourselves, but for each other and for those who come after us.