

ט"ו בִּשְׁבַת

Tu BiShvat

Tu Bishvat is the 15th of the month of Shevat. We use the Hebrew letters ט and ו together for the number 15: ט is the ninth letter of the *aleph-bet*, and ו is the sixth letter. Together they make 15 (9 + 6). The reason we do not write the number 15 with the letters י and ה (as might seem most natural) is because this would spell out the Name of God, which we are careful to reverence, and use only to refer to the Almighty. So we use a different combination to refer to the number 15.

In the Hebrew year, there are four “new years!” In the Mishnah, *Rosh HaShannah* 1.1, we read:



There are four new years: (1) the first day of Nisan is the new year for kings and festivals; (2) the first day of Elul is the new year for tithing cattle. R. Eleazar and R. Simeon say, “It is on the first day of Tishri.” (3) The first day of Tishri is the new year for the reckoning of years, for Sabbatical years, and for Jubilees, for planting and for vegetables; (4) the first day of Shebat is the new year for trees, in accord with the opinion of the House of Shammai. The House of Hillel say, “On the fifteenth day of that month [is the new year for trees].”

So Nisan 1 is the beginning of the year for the cycle of festivals, Elul 1 is the new year for tithing flocks, Tishri 1 is the new year for counting the Shemitta and Yovel, and for tithing crops, and the 1st or 15th of Shevat is the new year for tithing fruit from trees. Since Shammai and Hillel debated over the exact date, it shows that the reckoning of Shevat as the month for tithing trees existed in the time of Yeshua. Moreover, since the tractate *Rosh HaShannah* has comments in both the Babil (Babylonian Talmud) and the Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud), this indicates that the month of Shevat was well established in the tradition of the community by the end of the 1st Century CE. The issue of whether the exact day was the 1st or the 15th, debated between Shammai and Hillel, was most likely similar to the month of Nisan. The month of Nisan marks the first month of the festival cycle, but the 14th/15th day is the actual day when the first festival of the year (Pesach) actually occurs.

As is most often the case, the *halachah* put forth by the Sanhedrin in the time of Shammai and Hillel followed Hillel, and so the 15th of Shevat was celebrated as a minor festival, commemorating the bringing of the first fruits of trees in their fourth year of their bearing fruit to the Temple as an offering (cf. Lev 19:23-25). The reason Ellul 1 was never celebrated as a minor festival is because there was no Torah command which reckoned the giving of the firstborn animal after a period of four years like was true with fruit from trees. The firstborn of the flock was to be given immediately in the year it was born, or an equivalent amount of money was to be substituted (cf. Deut. 12:6,17; 14:23; 15:19).

In memory of the command regarding the tithing of fruit, we celebrate *Tu BiShvat* by eating fruit from the various kinds of trees that are grown in the Land of Israel.