

ט"ו בְּשֵׁבַת

Tu BiShvat

Celebrating Tu BiShvat in the diaspora (meaning for those of us who live outside of Israel) helps us to appreciate the great gift HaShem has given us in the Land. His promise, that He would bring us to a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:8, 17, etc.), we see being fulfilled as the crops of the field are harvested, as the many kinds of fruits from the trees are gathered, and as the herds of animals graze and are sustained by the grass in the fields.



On Tu BiShvat, we focus particularly upon the trees which grow so bountifully in the Land of Israel. One of the first trees to show its blossoms is the almond, and this often happens in the month of Shevat. It was for this reason that Shevat was chosen as the month, not only to mark the year of counting produce from trees, but also as the time for a celebration to praise Adonai for His faithfulness and goodness in giving us such a bounty of nourishing food that grows on trees.

Traditionally, the celebration consists of a meal, patterned after the Pesach Seder, since Tu BiShvat, like Pesach, is on the 15th of the month, and since both mark the beginning of a year in our calendar. The month of Nisan, in which Pesach occurs, is the beginning of the year for counting the reign of kings and for the beginning of the festival cycle. Shevat is the beginning of the year for counting tree-years, in order to fulfill the command of the Torah found in Lev 19:23–25. During the time when the Temple existed, when a tree in the Land bore fruit for the first time, the fruit was not to be picked. The same was true for the next two years. Then, in the fourth year, the fruit was to be given to the priests. Only the fruit which the tree brought forth in the fifth year belonged to the owner of the tree and could, from that time on, be picked and eaten.

The celebration meal on Tu BiShvat has four cups of wine, just like the Pesach seder. But in this case, the cups represent the ripening of the fruit on trees. The first cup is white wine, the second pink, the third rose colored, and the fourth dark red. This pictures the pattern of ripening fruit, that grows deeper in color as it ripens. Also incorporated in the celebration are foods that represent the various types of fruit that grow on trees in the Land. These include fruits that are encased in shells or peels (nuts, pomegranates, oranges, grapefruits, bananas, etc.), fruits that have pits (dates, olives apricots, peaches, plums/prunes), and fruits that are entirely edible (figs, raisins, apples, pears, carob, etc.). Having been reminded of these kinds of fruits, the meal is eaten, and afterward, we drink the final cup of Thankfulness, expressing our praise to the Almighty for His constant provision of food.

Tu BiShvat, focusing as it does upon trees, has also traditionally been a time when people plant trees in Israel. Leviticus 19:23 indicates that planting trees in the Land is something HaShem expects us to do. The Jewish National Fund was organized to collect money for planting trees in the Land, and Tu BiShvat is a good time to help in this way.