

# Tu B'Shvat Seder

From Hagshama Department of the World Zionist Organization

By Rivka Zuckerman  
Ilana Sobel  
Adapted for WLCJ

## According to the Mishnah there are four new year.

*These new years are not necessarily marked by religious ceremonies today, but have been absorbed into the formal Jewish calendar. They are: the first of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the Jewish calendar; the first of Iyar, recording the reign of the kings of Israel; the first of Elul, celebrating the tithing of cattle; and the fifteenth of Shevat, marking the new year for trees.*

The Kabbalists of sixteenth century Tsfat began the custom of holding a Tu B'Shvat seder. Like on Pesach, the Tu B'Shvat seder includes four cups of wine, four questions, specific foods and story-telling. Over time, different communities have added their own customs and the Tu B'Shvat seder has developed into a unique expression of appreciating the land.

### Why is this day different from all other days?

We begin our seder traditionally, by asking four questions designed to help us understand the significance of this day.

- Our other holidays honor events and people. Why does this holiday honor trees?
- Ordinarily, we eat whatever fruit is in season. Why, today, do we specifically eat fruit that is grown in Israel?
- We usually take the environment for granted. Why, today, do we focus on conservation?
- It's winter. Why are we thinking about planting when spring is several months away?

### FIRST CUP

The first cup of wine is composed entirely of white wine, symbolizing the barrenness of the winter. Raise the cup in your right hand and recite together the blessing over the wine.

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam she'hechyanu, ve'ki'yemanu,  
ve'higyanu laz'man ha'zeh*

Over the course of the seder, we will eat five fruits from three different categories, giving us fifteen fruits (representing the fifteenth of Shevat).

The three types of fruits correspond to three types of characters.

- Some people are like fruits that are edible inside and inedible on the outside; they are difficult to get to know, but you are rewarded when you peel away the top layer.
- Other people are like fruits that are edible on the outside, but have an inedible pit; you meet them quickly, but you will never know them completely.
- Then there are those fruits that are edible inside and out, like the people with whom you form quick and lasting friendships.

We do not discard fruits because of an inedible peel or pit; likewise, all kinds of people are worth knowing.

The fruits that we eat tonight also correspond to the kabbalistic notion of different worlds. According to this mystical doctrine, there are four worlds or levels of creation: **EMANATION, CREATION, FORMATION, and ACTION** (our world of physical reality).

The first fruits we eat tonight are fruits with inedible peels, which symbolize the world of **ACTION**: pomegranates, almonds, tangerines, kiwis, walnuts, pistachios, pine nuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, peanuts, grapefruits, coconuts, and oranges.

**First we eat fruits of Israel.** Lift up the fruit in your right hand and recite together the blessing: (if you are eating a fruit that you have not eaten in at least a year, recite the second blessing as well)

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam she'hechyanu, ve'ki'yemanu, ve'higyanu laz'man ha'zeh*

We look now at the first question: Our other holidays honor events and people. **Why does this holiday honor trees?**

In ancient times all-importance was attached to the first born, both in the case of man and animals, and also to the first fruits in nature, including trees, wheat and barley. People saw in the first fruits and first crops God's gift to man, and so they arrived at two conclusions: that the first born is more important than those who follow after, and that the first-born and the first fruits should be sacrificed to God in thanksgiving, and by virtue of this sacrifice god would bless both those who follow the first-born and the crops that grow after the first yield.

**The law of *orla*** also stems from the idea of offering the first fruits to God. This law states that one must not eat of the fruit of the tree in the first three years

**"and in the fourth year all its fruits will be sacred to the Lord, and in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit".**

(The first day of Tishrei determines the age of the plant in connection with the law of *orla*, but has no influence in determining the implementation of the commandments concerning the fruits, which are determined only from Tu B'Shvat)

In ancient days, there was a custom of planting a cedar tree for a baby boy, and a cypress tree for a baby girl. As the children grew, they tended the trees, and the trees grew along with the children. When they married, they used the wood for the poles in their *huppah*. This carried the tradition of loving trees from generation to generation in a concrete and special way.

One day, Honi was walking along, and saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi knew that the old man would not live to see the fruits of his labor. He asked the man: "Why do you bother to plant a tree if you will never see its fruits?" The man answered: "I will not see this tree full grown, but my children will and their children will. I plant this tree for them."

## **SECOND CUP**

The second cup of wine is 2/3 white and 1/3 red wine, symbolizing the approach of spring. The red signifies the emergence of color. Raise the cup in your right hand and recite together the blessing over the wine.

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

We now take fruits from the second category. These fruits are edible on the outside, but have inedible pits, symbolizing the kabbalistic world of **FORMATION**: olives, dates, peaches, persimmons, avocados, apricots, loquats, plums, cherries, and mangos.

Once again, we eat first from the fruits of Israel. Lift up the fruit in your right hand and recite together the blessing: (if you are eating a fruit that you have not eaten in at least a year, recite the second blessing as well)

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam she'hechyanu, ve'ki'yemanu,  
ve'higyanu laz'man ha'zeh*

We turn now to the discussion of the second question: Ordinarily, we eat whatever fruit is in season. **Why, today, do we specifically eat fruit that is grown in Israel?**

The original purpose of Tu B'Shvat was to mark tithing responsibilities.

### **THIRD CUP**

The third cup of wine is 1/3 white and 2/3 red, symbolizing the progression of spring. The ground has warmed to allow the seeds to take root and the plants have started to grow. Raise the cup in your right hand and recite together the blessing over the wine.

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

Now we take the fruit from the third category, those fruits that are completely edible, symbolizing the Kabbalistic world of **CREATION**: grapes, figs, carobs, etrogim, apples, strawberries, lemons, raspberries, and pears. The Torah may be compared to the fruits in this category.

Every part of these fruits is good to eat, and every part of the Torah is good to study and learn from.

Once again, we eat first from the fruits of Israel. Lift up the fruit in your right hand and recite together the blessing: (if you are eating a fruit that you have not eaten in at least a year, recite the second blessing as well)

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam she'hechyanu, ve'ki'yemanu,  
ve'higyanu laz'man ha'zeh*

We turn now to the third question: We usually take the environment for granted. **Why, today, do we focus on conservation?**

**Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai** once said:

**"If you have sapling in your hand, ready to plant, and the Messiah comes, plant the tree first and then go to greet him."**

The Torah commands us to leave fruit trees standing when we attack a city in wartime. We are also commanded to observe the mitzvah of Peah, so that the poor may glean from the fields.

### **FOURTH CUP**

The fourth cup of wine is all red, symbolizing the arrival of summer. The trees are in full bloom and filled with fruit. Raise the cup in your right hand and recite together the blessing over the wine.

*Barukh Atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam borei peri hagafen.*

The fourth kabbalistic world of **EMANATION** is purely spiritual and cannot be symbolized in any concrete way, therefore it is not represented by physical food. The world of Emanation relates to God's love, mercy, wisdom and other essential and omnipresent realities which people perceive with their hearts rather than their five senses.

We now turn to our last question: It's winter. **Why are we thinking about planting when spring is several months away?**

*Tu B'Shvat* marks the traditional turning point between the rainy season and the beginning of spring.

After Israel was conquered by the crusaders, the Jewish population there was almost completely destroyed and the remainder were dispersed. The tradition of celebrating Tu B'Shvat lapsed. In addition, much of the rich literature of the *Geonim* (rabbis of the Talmud) was lost, and with it the literature on Tu B'Shvat. In spite of this, a vestige of the Tu B'Shvat celebration remained in the customs of the Jews of Eastern Europe, among which was the custom to eat fruits.

<http://www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=209>