

קיצור סדר ט"ו בשבט

A Short Seder (for) Tu BiShvat

celebrating the Festival of the Trees!

God led Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, "Look at My works. See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world — for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you." —Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

Today is the full moon of the month of Shvat: the New Year of the Trees. In Leviticus we read that new trees should not be harvested for three years; the fruit of a four-year-old tree should be set aside as a gift to God; and the fruit of a five-year-old tree may be eaten. The Talmud established this day as the birthday of all trees to help us fulfill that commandment.

Jewish tradition teaches that on this day, the sap begins to rise and trees begin to nourish themselves for the season ahead. We'll follow the practice of the Jewish mystics in eating fruits and nuts, mindful of the miracle of trees which give us food to sustain us, and we'll do a little learning along the way.

1. Fruits with shells (symbolizing winter & the physical world)

In winter we layer ourselves in clothing, just as the earth is insulated by snow. The first fruits we eat symbolize the winter season; they have hard shells and vulnerable insides, like us when we're dressed for the cold. The medieval Jewish mystics understood these fruits to connect us with our experiences in the physical world.

Some of these fruits have special symbolism in Jewish tradition: like the walnut. Rabbi Tarfon likened the people of Israel to a pile of walnuts. If one walnut is removed, each and every walnut in the pile will be shaken. When a single Jew is shaken, every other Jew is shaken and affected. (Avot D'Rabbi Natan) Likewise, when a single species is endangered, the entire ecosystem is shaken and affected.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
creator of the fruit of the tree.

A Teaching From Torah

The Torah teaches, "When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, swinging an ax against them. You may eat from them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" (Deuteronomy 20:19-20).

2. Fruits with pits (symbolizing springtime & emotions)

Next we eat fruits which have no protective shells, but which have a hard pit inside. Eating these fruits connects us with springtime. In spring, we will lose our protective attire and let the sun shine on us! But these fruits contain pits, reminding us that each of us is still tied to the hard stone of ego. We still feel the need to protect some part of ourselves deep inside. For the Jewish mystics, these fruits were connected

with the world of emotions.

Many of these fruits have special significance in Jewish tradition too: like the olive. The olive tree is a sign of hope that, despite the enormity of destruction, life can be restored. When the great flood began to subside, Noah sent out a dove. "The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a leaf it had picked from an olive tree." (Genesis 8:11).

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Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
creator of the fruit of the tree.

A Teaching From Another Tradition

Teach your children
what we have taught our children —
that the earth is our mother.
Whatever befalls the earth
befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.
If men spit upon the ground,
they spit upon themselves.

This we know.
All things are connected
like the blood which unites 1 family.
All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth
befalls her sons & daughters.

This we know.
The earth does not belong to us;
we belong to the earth.

We did not weave the web of life;
We are merely a small strand
in it. — Chief Seattle

3. Soft fruits (symbolizing summer & consciousness)

Now we bless and eat soft fruits, connecting with the warmth of summertime. Sometimes we develop hard shells to protect ourselves; sometimes we are available to a point, but keep a toughness or hardness inside ourselves; but in our closest relationships we are like these fruits, with no inner stone and no outer façade. For the mystics, eating these soft fruits was an opportunity to delight in the world of the mind.

Some of these fruits have special significance in Jewish tradition too: like the fig. The fig symbolizes an era of peace and security and an ideal vision for the future. The rabbis asked, "Why were the words of Torah compared to the fig tree?" They answered, "Since all the figs do not ripen at the same time, the more one searches the tree, the more figs one finds in it." So it is with the words of Torah — the more we study them, the more sweet morsels we find.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְרֵי הָעֵץ.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
creator of the fruit of the tree.

A Teaching From Talmud

A Talmudic story is told about Honi, who saw an old man planting a carob tree with the help of his grandchild. Honi laughed. "Foolish man," he said, "do you think you will still be alive to eat the fruit of this tree?" The old man replied, "I found trees in the world when I was born. My grandparents planted them for me. So, too, I am planting for my grandchildren."

4. No fruits at all (symbolizing autumn & the essence of reality)

We have eaten fruits with hard shells—fruits with hard insides—fruits which are soft all the way through. We have thought about our bodies, about our hearts, and about our minds. Now we are entering the world of spirit. There is no fruit we can eat which would adequately represent this realm.

In this spiritual world, we become aware of God's love, mercy, and wisdom perceived with our hearts, not our senses. Our hearts are full and we praise the Source Who renews all creation.

In Jewish tradition, this is the day when sap begins to rise to nourish the trees for the year to come. Here where we live, those who have maple trees may soon begin to tap them to harvest their sap. In a way, the maple sap is the essence of the maple tree... so we will mark this step on our journey by tasting a tiny sip of maple syrup, celebrating the trees and the sap which gives them life.

A Question To Ponder Before We Bless & Eat:

Here are three possible blessings for maple syrup. Which one is right: the blessing for fruit of the tree (because sap comes from trees), the blessing for fruit of the earth (because the sap is nourished by the earth, and isn't exactly a "fruit" of the tree), or the third blessing which we say over things which don't have their own specific blessing? Discuss, bless, & taste!

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
creator of the fruit of the tree.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
creator of the fruit of the earth.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָ בְּדַבְּרוֹ.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Source of all,
through whose word all things come into being.

Saying Thanks

Take a moment to think about what we've eaten and what we've learned. Think about where the fruits came from: where they grew, who worked to harvest them and bring them here, all the different people who helped to make this meal happen without even knowing it. Think about the texts we've read, the people who wrote them, their hopes and their dreams for those words. And then we'll say thanks by reading together:

The Blessing Over Snacks:

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, source of all being, for trees and for the fruits of trees, for the beauty of the fields and for the good world you have given us. Be gracious, Adonai our God, to Israel Your people, and to Jerusalem and the land which contains it -- and also to the other many inhabitants of this earth, other peoples and other nations, and the many wondrous animals and plants of our various ecosystems. Help us to make Your holy places holy, for You are God Who makes all things good.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God,
for trees and their fruits!