

Tu B'shvat

Trees' new year

It is written in the Mishna, on the chapter about Rosh Hashana – 1:1:

“There are 4 beginnings of the year, and they are: Nissan 1st: Beginning of the year for the Kings and for the Holidays. On Elul 1st: Beginning of the year to separate the tithe of animals. On Tishrei 1st: Beginning of the year for the count of the years, for the count of the sabbatical years, for the count of the years of Jubilee, for the count of the years of new plantations, and for vegetables. On Shvat 1st (according to some students of the Shamai) or the 15th of Shvat (according to some students of Hillel): Beginning of the year for trees.”

Our Sages (ChaZa”L) chose the month of Shvat because it is the rainy season and germination of the fruits in the Land of Israel.

In earlier times, this date was only associated with the delivery of the fruit, which was a form of “paying taxes”, so it had to do with “administrative” ends.

In the few texts that refer to this date, it appears that at the end of the first millennium, special prohibitions were enforced for this day: To not say “Elegies” (hesped), no fasting (ta’anit) and to not say “Tachanun”, to allow the farmers the possibility of having a “leisurely” day to pray and observe the fruits of their labor.

In the sixteenth century, the Kabbalists developed the idea and practice of “Tikkun Tu B’Shvat”, relating the religious life – and Redemption – with nature, and giving this day the level of “holiday” (chag). They established the custom of the “Seder” – festive meal – related with this celebration. Despite the absence of a specific ritual, the basic customs, common to most “Tu B’Shvat Sedarim” are: Sitting around tables decorated with flowers and fruits; drinking 4 glasses of wine or grape juice (white and red); study different texts of the Torah, Mishnah, Midrash, Zohar, among others, related to the topic; and eat foods that correspond the 7 characteristic fruits of the Land of Israel: Wheat, Barley, Grape, Fig, Pomegranate, Olive, Dates.

In the Diaspora

Due to the dispersion of the people in the Diaspora, it became a celebration dedicated to remember with nostalgia the Land of Israel.

In some places, the “Seder” was held and then engaged in the study of texts related to Israel.

For those living in the southern hemisphere, this holiday is very difficult to be celebrated because the Nature cycle is exactly inverse (it’s summer) and is also the time for school holidays, so it’s practically not included in the school curricula.

Nevertheless, one of the suggested celebrations for those who are far away is the “donation of trees” to be planted in the Land of Israel, as a symbolic celebration of this day.

In Israel

The customs in Israel are: Seize the day to walk outdoors, planting trees and conducting the “Seder” eating dry fruits and typical of the Land of Israel.

Moreover, the entire week of Tu B’Shvat is dedicated to the care of Nature, the Environment and Ecology, all driven by different educational organizations.

A curious fact is that the Knesset – the Israeli parliament – began operating at the time of Tu B’Shvat in 1949, the day when a large tree was planted in Jerusalem in the presence of the first President Chaim Weizman.

“For man is like a tree on the field...” (Devarim 20:19).

May we always be able to celebrate with joy and respect for Humanity and Nature!

Chag Sameach !

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