



A Tu B'Shvat Seder

by Juliette Hirt



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For Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory

Introduction

In Hebrew, *tu* means “fifteen,” and *Shevat* is a month that falls in late winter, as the season shifts toward spring and the tree sap begins to rise, in the land of Israel. *Tu B’Shvat* is the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat.

It’s a perfect time for thoughtful contemplation: the last Hannukah candles burned down weeks ago, and we find ourselves in a limbo of low light and dull landscapes. What better time to hunker down like the trees, rest, take stock, and set our intention for *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).

While this *seder* (*seder* means “order”) is modern, it owes its existence to millennia of Jewish history and traditions.

In ancient Israel, Tu B’Shvat marked the New Year of the Trees, which was the beginning of the year for purposes of assessing a fruit tithe. In later years, it was celebrated with feasts of fruit and nuts.

The Kabbalists were the first to adopt a Tu B’Shvat *seder*, which included glasses of wine and specific fruits eaten while reflecting on certain Jewish texts. Consuming fruits on this day with the right *kavanah* (intention) was believed to release the divine sparks in the fruit, and bring the world into greater harmony.

In modern times, Tu B’Shvat has been adopted as a tool of environmental activism. In Israel, it’s a national holiday on which adults and children have planted millions of trees over the years. In its simplest form, Tu B’Shvat is celebrated as the joyful birthday of trees. Even young children help plant seeds and saplings, sing songs, and eat birthday cake.

The theme of this *seder* is intention. Consider choosing an intention to reflect on during the *seder* and hold in your mind when eating the fruit. Your intention might be religious or secular, specific (care for a particular sick friend), personal (intending to live more peacefully), or grand (protection of the world’s forests). Please enjoy!

B’shalom,
Juliette

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Initiation



Everything is still.
Trees lie in contemplation,
Gathering their strength.

Take a moment now,
To listen to the silence.
Feel the sap rising.

Leaves will soon unfurl,
Breathing life into us.
Life to life to life.

Take a moment now,
To listen to your breathing.
Form your intention.

– *Anonymous*



Root



Root

► *Pour white wine. Distribute fruit with neither shells nor pits (grapes, figs, apples, pears, quince, strawberries, sorbs, carob).*

Selected readings

Look around you. It's winter, and the trees have withdrawn into themselves. Not doing, simply being. "Be still and the earth will speak to you." *Navajo proverb*



There is hope for a tree;
If it is cut down it will renew itself;
Its shoots will not cease. *Job 14:7—9*



The humble seed, so tiny and helpless, falls to the earth and awaits its fate. But being beaten down and ground into the dirt is not an ending, only the beginning. "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds."

— *Mexican proverb*



Lightning strikes a tree.
Branches ignite, glow with flame.
The tree is consumed.

Still, a brighter light
Is hidden deep in the roots,
Protected from harm.

When the right time comes,
Fresh green shoots surprise us all,
Heading for the sun.

— *Anonymous*



In stillness, there is power. Darkness holds the possibility of light. "Only in the darkness can you see the stars." *Martin Luther King, Jr*



Entirely edible fruits

Select a fruit you've not yet eaten this year.

Now we will eat entirely edible fruits. They have neither hard shells that protect them, nor hard pits that shape them. But somehow, entirely vulnerable, and completely soft, they thrive. Kabbalists teach that as we chew the fruit with *kavanah* (right intention), we release the divine sparks of life to return to the Holy One. Through this simple act, we contribute to *tikkun olam* (the repair of the world).

TOGETHER: We bless the ruler of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season.

(*Shehecheyanu*): ברוך אתה יי, אלהנו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam,
shehecheyanu, vekiymanu, vehigianu lazman hazeh*

TOGETHER: May our vulnerability open us to our deepest intentions. We hold our right intentions in our minds as we eat this soft fruit.

(*HaEtz*): ברוך אתה יי, אלהנו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, borei p'ri ha-etz

Form your intention. Eat the fruit, as if eating fruit for the first time.

White wine



The white wine reminds us of winter. The trees are asleep, silently gathering their strength.

TOGETHER: May we, too, find strength and tranquility in the winter months. We are thankful for the seasons, for the trees, and for the fruit of the vine.

(*HaGefen*):

ברוך אתה יי, אלהנו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam,
borei p'ri hagafen*

Drink the white wine, with gratitude.



Trunk

Trunk

- ▶ *Pour pale pink wine. Distribute fruits with pits (olives, dates, cherries, jujubes, plums, apricots, hackberries, lotus fruit, uzerar)*

Selected readings

A certain rebbe had a close disciple who fell into a long period of staleness, which troubled him deeply. He felt as if all meaning had been drained from his life, and when he prayed, his prayers turned to chalk and died in his mouth.

[The rebbe] took him out of the village to a deep dark forest [and said to his student], “As you are entering the forest, ask God to give you the answer to your dilemma. Then... You must pay very close attention to the path through the forest. Otherwise you’ll get lost and never come out alive.”

So the student entered the forest, asking God for the answer to his struggle... [Then,] as the rabbi had instructed him, he devoted all his attention to the path. Soon, he began to take great pleasure in this path; he took pleasure in the fall of his foot on the cool forest floor. He took pleasure in the path itself – a verdant, mossy path of deep, brilliant green.

When he finally came out of the forest, he was smiling broadly. The rebbe asked, “Did God give you answer?” The student started to weep... “[Alas!] I put all my attention on the path, and after a while I took so much pleasure in what was in front of my face, that I forgot about the question altogether!”

“In that case,” the rebbe said, “I would say that God gave you your answer after all.”

Rabbi Alan Lew (z”l)



Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.

John Muir



The Wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet learned to ask.

Nancy Wynne Newhall

Fruit with pits

In a moment, we will eat fruit with pits.

What is at the very center? Where is your core? Are you even asking the right question?

The kabbalists relate the pit to evil forces in the world. In humans, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) can express itself as a hard kernel of wrongness that is difficult to control or dislodge.



The pit is also a symbol of strength, and hope. After the flower has faded, the fruit has dropped, and the flesh has started to rot, it is the pit that breaks open, giving rise to the stalk that will one day become a tree.

TOGETHER: Forming intentions can bring us to the heart. Intentions can open doors, and bring us to a path. With the strength of the core of our being, we form our intention.

Form your intention. Eat the fruit.

Pale pink wine



Pale pink flowers announce the beginning of spring. Cherry and plum trees explode in delicate blossoms, just in time to feed the bees as they emerge from hibernation.

TOGETHER: May our hopes blossom, as the winter thaws.

Drink the pale pink wine, with gratitude.



Branch

Branch

► *Pour deep pink wine. Distribute fruit with a tough exterior (pomegranates, nuts, citrus, coconut, pine nuts, peanuts)*

Selected reading

We who have become cynical,
Hard shelled,
Whom life has raised with its tough fist of despair
And disappointment and heartache, and grief.

We who have learned to protect our souls, and toughen our hearts
To compose ourselves
In the face of relentless expectation.

We who move through the world
With cautious numbness,
Determined to succeed and keep moving

It is precisely for each of us,
This holy day of Tu B'Shvat.

This is our day of creative awe
When out of the frozen snow-hardened planet
Emerge tender, succulent, green shoots of hope
And buds, and swollen bulbs of promise—

That despite our best efforts to craft protective armor
We are awed by new life.
By the plants' new roots and tendrils.
Awed that they—
And we—
Might open ourselves to the coming spring
And grow.

Rabbi Michael Adam Latz

Fruit with tough exteriors

Hard shells protect.

Kabbalists teach that trees like the almond and pomegranate have their roots in the lower realms of reality, where evil battles good. The fruit needs shells to protect it from harm.

How is your shell? Strong or weak?
Thick or thin? Or are we even asking
the right questions?

TOGETHER: May our sweet inner selves be well-protected from evils of all kinds. And may our own shells serve us, and not merely entrap us.

Form your intention. Eat the fruit.



Deep pink wine



As winter yields to spring, and spring to summer, our world will change in ways we cannot begin to imagine. Seeds will become saplings. Saplings will become towering trees.

TOGETHER: We give thanks for the turning of the seasons, for the birth of spring, for the growth of trees.

Drink the deep pink wine, with gratitude.



Bounty

Bounty

Selected readings

One day, Honi the Circle Maker was walking on the road and saw an old man planting a carob tree. “Do you think you will live to eat the fruit of this tree?” he asked. “Perhaps not,” the old man replied. “But when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.”

Taanit 23a



He [who avoids evil ways] shall be as a tree planted beside rivers of water, bringing forth fruit in its season, never wilted by drought. Whatever he does will prosper.

Psalms 1:3



Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.

John Muir



The festive meal

TOGETHER: The bread we will eat is the bounty of *ha'aretz* (the land). Each grain of wheat has burst like magic from a slender stalk. Each grain holds a whole world of promise inside it. For this bounty, we are thankful.

(*HaMotzi*): ברוך אתה יי, אלהנו מלך העולם, המוציא לחם מן הארץ

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz.

Try eating in silence,
and enjoying every bite!



Red wine



Pour the red wine.

Lightning strikes a tree.
Branches ignite, glow with flame.
The tree is consumed.

Still, a brighter light
Is hidden deep in the roots
Protected from harm.

Just when all seems lost,
Fresh strong shoots surprise us all,
Shooting for the sun.

We, too, may be burned.
May think we won't recover.
Ashen and bent low.

TOGETHER:

Yet we will hold tight.
We will hold our intentions,
In our roots and in our bones,
And we will give thanks.

– Anonymous

Drink the red wine, giving thanks.

Closure

TOGETHER: We have come to the end of our *seder*. We have blessed the wine, and eaten the fruit, releasing the ethereal sparks to return to their Source. We honor our own intentions, and the intention of each other person.

TOGETHER: May all the sparks scattered by our hands, or by the hands of our ancestors, or by the transgressions of the first human against the fruit of the tree, be returned and included in the majestic might of the Tree of Life.

Pri Etz Hadar

(Etz chayyim): עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאושר

Etz chayyim hee lamachazikim bah v'tomcheiha meushar





