

ECO SYNAGOGUE

This resource has been generously shared by:

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Tu B'Shevat Seder

Here is a suggested format for a Tu B'Shevat Seder. It is a very loose formula in order to allow for improvisation and the maximum time for discussion.

For something more structured, the Seder described by Rabbi Mark Goldsmith follows the traditional kabbalistic Seder.

Still, I have followed the traditional structure of the Pesach seder, in dividing the event into 4 blessings over four kinds of food, with four texts and four questions for consideration.

Ideally all the food and fruits should be local. Ask friends who are attending if they have bake bread, or have made jams or bottled or frozen garden produce.

The classical texts are shared with gratitude to *Sefaria*; modern texts come from an eclectic choice of reading on trees and tree-lore.



Part 1 – Shehecheyanu, Blessings for Reaching this Season.

You will need wine or grape juice

Read the following: Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1

There are four new years. The first of Nisan is the new year for kings and pilgrimage festivals. The first of Elul is the new year for tithing cattle. Rabbi Elazar ad Rabbi Shimeon say: the first of Tishrei. The first of Tishrei is the new year for years, sabbaticals and jubilees, for planting and vegetables. The first of Shevat is the new year for trees, according to the School of Shammai. The School of Hillel say: on the fifteenth.

And this explanation from Sefaria:

On the first of Shevat is the New Year for the tree; the fruit of a tree that was formed prior to that date belong to the previous tithe year and cannot be tithed together with fruit that was formed after that date

This ruling is **in accordance with the statement of Beit Shammai**. But **Beit Hillel say:** The New Year for trees is **on the fifteenth of Shevat**.

Then pour a glass of wine and say the following berachot

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן

Blessed are you, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה:

Blessed are you, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us and brought us to this season.

For discussion and conversation:

Do we have a favourite tree? A tree special to us since childhood? Or a favourite moment to be in a forest, woodland, or orchard? *Please share your thoughts.*

Part 2 – Our dependence on the soil



You will need bread: - ideally, ask someone to bake a loaf, or even different kinds of loaves, from different kinds of local organic flour.

Wash hands and make motzi

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ

Blessed are you our God, Sovereign of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth

Text to discuss: Ecclesiastes 5:8

מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂדֵה וְעֹבֵד

[Even] the king is subservient to the field.

Commentaries:

Rabbi Yosef Kara (1065 – 1135) Even a king needs grain.

Rashbam, Samuel ben Meir (c. 1085 – 1158) Even a king has to work the land.

How aware are we of our dependence on the land? How much do we take it plenty for granted? How can we rediscover and deepen our relationship with the soil and with growing food?

Based on Tosefta: Bava Kama 10:2

A farmer was clearing stones from his field and throwing them onto a public thoroughfare. A pious man rebuked him, saying: 'Worthless fellow! Why are you clearing stones from land which is not yours and depositing them on property which is yours?' The farmer scoffed at him for this strange reversal of the facts. In the course of time the farmer had to sell his field, and as he was walking along the public road, he fell on those same stones he had thoughtlessly deposited there. He then understood the truth of the pious man's words: the damage he had wrought in the public domain was ultimately damage to his own property and well-being.

How much as societies and governments do we care about the public good? How much time, money and effort are we prepared to devote to it, in comparison to what we devote to our private and personal benefit?

Part 3 – Fruits of the trees – and the Blessings Trees Bring

You will need a fruit, or, ideally different kinds of fruits. The custom has been to taste fifteen different kinds, as Tu B'Shevat is the 15th of the month. Some even ate thirty varieties! But thinking environmentally, it is more appropriate to share local produce if possible. As January / February is the wrong time of year for produce in the UK, ask friends if they have preserved, bottled or frozen fruits from gardens or allotments.

Say the berachah over fruits of the trees:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ

Blessed are you, our God, Sovereign of the universe, who creates the fruit of trees

Text to discuss: consider this passage from Daniel and discuss what blessings and benefits trees give us.

Daniel 4:7-9

I saw a tree of great height in the midst of the earth; The tree grew and became mighty; Its top reached heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the earth. Its foliage was beautiful And its fruit abundant; there was food for all in it. Beneath it the beasts of the field found shade, and the birds of the sky dwelt on its branches; all creatures fed on it.

Then consider the prohibition of Bal Taschit, 'do not destroy,' based on the Torah's prohibition against cutting down fruit trees, and which rabbinic teaching expanded to involve all kinds of needless destruction,



Deuteronomy 20:19-20

When in your war against a city you have to besiege it for a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the axe against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you under siege? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for construction works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been subdued.

Commentary

Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1089 – 1164)

In my opinion...this is the correct meaning: that from [the trees] you get food, therefore don't cut them down, "for man is the tree of the field," that is – our lives as human beings depend on trees.

For Discussion:

Were it known that trees take in carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen, might the Torah have legislated differently?

And a more challenging issue: What intrinsic value do trees have? The issue is well presented by Elion Schwartz: 'The central point, then, is how one is to evaluate "needless," or "wanton" destruction. As we have seen, there is some tension as to whether it is to be evaluated according to the effective use of human beings, or whether there is an inherent value which exists apart from human use, which must be balanced alongside human wants and needs. (in *Trees, Earth, and Torah*, ed. A. Elon, N. M. Hyman and A. Waskow, p. 93)

Part 4 – How Trees Communicate

The rabbis regarded smell as the subtlest of the senses and instituted different blessings for various kinds of pleasant savours.

You will need scented leaves, or a twig from a shrub with winter-scented flowers, (eg. Winter honeysuckle, mahonia, daphne, winter sweet) or some early daffodils.

Say the blessing, then enjoy the perfumes:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא עֲשׂוֹבֵי בְשָׁמִים

Blessed are you God, sovereign of the universe, who created fragrant plants

Texts:

Consider the following passages

All of the trees, plants and spirits that dwell in nature conversed with one another. The spirit that lives in the trees and nature conversed with the humankind, for all of the beings in nature were created for mutual companionship with people. *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 13:2*

Then this passage from In Search of the Canary Tree, by Lauren Oakes (p. 147)

(Ernestine and Cathy are traditional weavers, Tlingit women living in northern Alaska)
“We communicate,” Ernestine said. “The trees and I, we communicate. They talk to her, too,” she added, pointing to Cathy. Then she looked at me again. “It’s just you have to learn how to listen.”

“Working with cedar, mentally, you’re connected to the Earth the whole time you’re touching the weaving,” Cathy said. “You’re connected to your ancestors at the same time.’

“It becomes a spiritual connection,” Ernestine added...

Ernestine and Cathy object strongly, when Lauren Oakes talks about setting aside land as ‘wilderness’ in order to protect it. They describe ‘wilderness’ as ‘a curse word’:

“Wilderness” had severed the relationships she and her people had cultivated with the natural world...Just as a curse word divides two people in conversation, setting aside nature tore it apart from humanity...This approach was only logical to people who had lost that connection and already severed relationships. (p. 150)



For discussion

Do trees talk to us? To each other? Do they communicate with us, and / or we with them? How can we learn to listen? If we could translate what they ‘say’ into human language, what might it be?