

ECO JUDAISM

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Kabbalistic Tu B'Shevat Seder

*On Tu B'Shevat, you can ponder a world-full of fruits
for hours.*



1. INTRODUCTION

Tu B'Shevat is the New Year for the Trees. As in all other points in the Jewish calendar, Tu B'Shevat offers an opportunity for insight into living and personal growth. Throughout the centuries, Kabbalists have used the tree as a metaphor to understand God's relationship to the spiritual and physical worlds. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, in his 18th century classic *The Way of God*, teaches that the higher spiritual realms are roots that ultimately manifest their influence through branches and leaves in the lower realms.

In the 16th century, the Kabbalists of Tzfat compiled a Tu B'Shevat Seder, somewhat similar to the Seder for Passover. It involves enjoying the fruits of the tree, particularly those native to the Land of Israel, and discusses philosophical and Kabbalistic concepts associated with the day. Among other things, the Seder is a great way to appreciate the bounty that we so often take for granted, and to develop a good and generous eye for the world around us.

The Seder presented here is based primarily on the Kabbalistic work, *Chemdat Yamim*, later published separately under the title *Pri Aitz Hadar*.

PREPARATIONS

To enjoy this experience in your own home, try to prepare the basic items mentioned below. Don't worry if you can't find all these items; do the best you can. Since the order and the contents of the Seder do not follow a specific Jewish law, there is much room for flexibility and creativity.

You will need lots of fruit, including:

- a. The seven species by which the Land of Israel is praised:
 - a. **Figs**
 - b. **Dates**
 - c. **Pomegranates**
 - d. **Olives**
 - e. **Grapes** (or raisins)
 - f. **wheat** and **barley** (in the form of bread, cake or cereal)
- b. Various nuts *with* the shells (walnuts, almonds, pistachios, coconut), and fruits with peels (oranges, pomegranates, avocado)
- c. Other fruits with *edible* seeds (e.g. blueberries)
- d. Other fruits with *inedible pits* (e.g. peaches, plums)
- e. Wine or grape juice, both white and red
- f. charity box



Important note: Since insects are not kosher, check your fruits to make sure they are bug-free. Bugs are especially common in figs, dates, and dried apricots. To check, split the fruit in half and look carefully before eating.

2. THE SEDER BEGINS

The leader asks:

Why do we celebrate the New Year for fruit trees on Tu B'Shevat?

All say:

Since the Holy Temple was destroyed, the Jewish people could no longer bring the First Fruits (*Bikkurim*) to Jerusalem. On Tu B'Shevat we offer instead the fruit of our lips, to praise God for all the fruit trees in the world.

A participant says:

Tu B'Shevat marks a new period for taking tithes, a portion of which is given to the poor. Therefore:

When a person is privileged to eat in the presence of God, he must show his appreciation by giving charity to the poor and feeding them, just as God in His bounty feeds him. (Zohar – Parshat Trumah)

At this point it is appropriate to pass around a 'pushka' to collect tzedakah. After the Seder, the money should be donated to a worthy cause.

A participant says:

The Mishnah in Tractate Rosh Hashana says that Tu B'Shevat is New Year for the TREE (singular). This reference to a singular tree alludes to The Tree – the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

And God said: 'Let the earth put forth grass, herb-yielding seeds, and fruit trees bearing fruit of its kind.' 'Fruit tree' means the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which put forth blossoms and fruit. 'Bearing fruit' is the tzaddik, the basis of the world. 'Of its kind' means all the human beings who have in them the spirit of holiness, which is the blossom of that tree. This is the covenant of holiness, the covenant of peace – and the faithful enter into that kind and do not depart from it. The Tzaddik generates, and the tree conceives and brings forth fruit of its kind. (Zohar – Bereishit 33a)

Meditation:

One should intend that he is eating at the celestial table before God, in the Garden of Eden before the Divine Presence. (Raishit Chochma – Shar HaKedusha)

Take a few moments and think deeply about being in the company of God... sitting at His table... experiencing the sublime spiritual pleasure of a relationship with the Creator Himself.

Discussion questions:

A) When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, they were permitted to eat only fruits and vegetables. Only after Noah's Flood did God permit meat. In what ways is it considered spiritually higher to eat meat? And in what ways is it considered spiritually higher to be a vegetarian?

B) There were two trees in the centre of the Garden: the Tree of Life (representing Torah and eternal life) and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (representing death and distortion). Another way of expressing this distinction is that the Tree of Life is objective wisdom, while the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is personal experience. Why would Adam and Eve have chosen to eat from the latter, especially since God had explicitly instructed them not to?

A participant says:

Man's very name – Adam – is derived from the word Earth, *adama*. While man is at once the pinnacle of creation, the master and caretaker of the world, he is also dependent on the earth for his most basic needs. The Torah, in outlining the negative commandment of destroying fruit trees, refers to man himself as a tree of the field ([Deut. 20:19](#)). Our sages learn from this verse a prohibition against any needless destruction. In other words, fruit trees serve as the archetype for man's relationship and responsibility to his environment.

It was through a mistake in eating fruit that caused Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. Eating fruit is a metaphor for our interaction with this world. Correct usage leads to a perfected world and spiritual bliss. Misuse leads to destruction and spiritual degradation. The Seder of Tu B'Shevat is our opportunity to rectify the past iniquity and return once again to our rightful place within the Garden.

All say:

Adam and Eve erred by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. To correct this mistake, we eat our fruit today with pure intentions, as if from the Tree of Life.

A participant says:

Rabbi Chaim Vital wrote:

My teacher [the holy Arizal] used to say that one must intend while eating the fruits [at the Tu B'Shevat Seder] to repair the sin of Adam who erred by eating fruit from the tree.

Partaking in the physical world inappropriately, for its own sake, lowers us spiritually and diminishes our enjoyment. The solution is to engage in the physical world as a means to a worthy end – i.e. appreciating the greatness of God who created all.

3. THE SEDER CONTINUES

A participant says:

In the Talmud, Rabbi Abbun said: In the next world, a person will be judged for all the fine fruit that he saw but did not eat.

Rabbi Elazar fulfilled this teaching. Although he was very poor, he saved up small coins which he kept in a special pouch, to purchase new fruits as they came into season. He tried to make a blessing over every kind of fruit at least once a year.

Why is one held accountable for not eating a new fruit when presented with the opportunity?

Because each life form, even fruit, is entrusted to a specific angel. By saying a blessing over a fruit, we empower that angel to reproduce more of that fruit. One who refrains from partaking of a fruit deprives the world of the spiritual influence that the blessing would have provided. (Chemdat Yamim)

The Talmud says that someone who eats and doesn't say a blessing is considered a thief. Why? Because every aspect of God's creation is inherently holy. So when one eats a piece of fruit, he is depriving the world of a piece of holiness. A blessing re-infuses the world with holiness. Eating without a blessing, however, lowers the level of holiness in the world without replacing the loss – and is regarded as theft. (Maharal of Prague)

A participant says:

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidut, was once visiting the home of Rabbi Yaakov Koppel. When Rabbi Yaakov danced in front of his Shabbos table for an hour, the Baal Shem Tov asked to explain this unusual custom. Rabbi Yaakov replied: Before I taste physical food, I absorb the food's spiritual essence. In doing so, I become so excited that I sing and dance!

The leader says:

Everything in the physical world is a metaphor for a deeper spiritual concept.

Eating is to the body, what knowledge is to the soul. When we eat, we internalize the good part of the food – and through that we grow and develop. Similarly, when we learn a new piece of information, we must chew it over, digest it, and integrate it into our very being. Only then can we truly grow in wisdom and spirituality.

4. GRAIN PRODUCTS

Now comes the part we've been waiting for: drinking wine and enjoying other delicacies!

Wheat and barley are the first two of the seven species connected to the greatness of the Land of Israel, as it says: A land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olives and honey ([Deut. 8:8](#)).

We begin by eating bread or cake. When Tu B'Shevat falls on Shabbat, it is appropriate to incorporate the Seder into one of the Shabbat meals, using challah as the bread.



The leader says:

Before saying the blessing, let us pause and reflect on our good fortune. God has given us innumerable blessings, enabling us to enjoy this food. God could easily have arranged for humans to be nourished by photosynthesis like plants, or by eating bland oatmeal, or by taking pills. Instead, He created a seemingly endless variety of appetizing and nourishing foods for us to enjoy. He gave us taste buds, and many miraculous organs with which to eat and digest the food.

A blessing is a thank-you note to our Creator. The sages say: Who is the wealthy person? The one who is happy with what he has. The more we appreciate our gifts, the more sincere is our thanks, and the more sublime is our pleasure.

If eating **cake or cereal**, recite the following blessing:

Baruch Atah Ado-nai, Elohai-nu Melech HaOlam, boray minay mezonos.

Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, Who creates species of nourishment.

If eating **bread**, begin with the washing of the hands, twice on both hands and say:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי	Baruch ata Adonoy,
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם	Eloheinu melech ha-olam,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו	asher kideshanu be-mitzvosav
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל נְטִילַת יָדַיִם:	ve-tzivanu al netilas yadayim.
Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, Who made us holy with His commandments and commanded us in the washing of the hands.	

As we raise our hands, we remind ourselves that the food we are about to eat – even though it was made by a human being – ultimately comes from God. As the verse says: He would feed him with the finest wheat ([Psalms 81:17](#)).

Without speaking from the time of the washing, we then recite the blessing on the bread:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי	Baruch ata Adonoy,
אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם	Eloheinu melech ha-olam,
הַמּוֹצֵא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.	ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.
Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.	

A participant says:

The verse says: 'When you eat the bread of the Land, you shall bring an offering to God' ([Numbers 15:19](#)). This refers to the waving (*tenufah*) of the Omer. *Tenufah* can be read as *tenu feh* – give a mouth. The mouth is symbolic of the honor we give to God. Hence the Omer was waved to show that we give to God this mouth, since the chief praise of God is when the Jewish people give Him honor and glory.

Why was the Omer made from barley and not from wheat? Because barley ripens first. Wheat (*chita*) is the more perfect food, being symbolic of the elimination of sin (*chet*). There are those who say that wheat is the plant with which Adam sinned. (Zohar – Balak 189a)

Meditation:

Savor each bite of the cake or bread. Appreciate that God loves us and created everything for our good.

5. FRUIT

On Tu B'Shevat, we eat the fruit by which God Himself praises the Land of Israel. As the verse says: The trees have borne their fruit, fig tree and vine have yielded their strength. Children of Zion be happy, rejoice in the Lord, your God. ([Yoel 2:22-23](#))

*If you have a preference, eat the fruits in the order you most enjoy. Otherwise the order of eating should be: **olives, dates, grapes, figs, pomegranates.***

Say the following blessing and then eat one of the fruits:

Baruch Ata Adod-nai Elohai-nu Melech HaOlam boray pri ha-aitz.

Blessed are you God, King of the Universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree.

If there is a seasonal fruit at the table which you have not yet tasted this season, say the following additional blessing before eating the fruit:

Baruch Ata Ado-noi, Elohai-nu Melech HaOlam, sheh-he-che-yanu vi-kee-yimanu vi-hee-gee-yanu laz-man ha-zeh.

Blessed are You God, King of the Universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Take each fruit one by one, as the appropriate paragraph below is recited. Enjoy the many flavours and textures. Reflect on the reality that the Creator of time and space wants us to take pleasure in everything that He put into the world.

Participants take turns saying the following paragraphs:

Olives:

God called your name 'a green olive tree, nice and beautiful fruit.' ([Jeremiah 11:16](#))

Your children shall be like olive plants around your table. ([Psalms 123:3](#))

Rabbi Yehoshuah Ben Levi said: Why is Israel compared to an olive tree? Because just as the leaves of an olive tree do not fall off either in summer or winter, so too the Jewish people shall not be cast off – neither in this world nor in the World to Come. (Talmud – [Menachot 53b](#))

The Sages taught: Just as olive oil brings light into the world, so do the people of Israel bring light into the world. (Midrash – Shir HaShirim Raba 1:2)

Dates:

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree ([Psalms 92:13](#)). The righteous are fruitful and sweet, just like a date palm.

Your stature is like a palm tree ([Song of Songs 7:8](#)). Just as the palm tree doesn't bend or sway, so too the Jewish people.

No part of the palm tree is wasted. The dates are for eating; the Lulav branches are for waving in praise on Sukkot; the dried thatch is for roofing; the fibres are for ropes; the leaves are for sieves; and the trunk is for house beams. So too, every one of the Jewish people is needed. Some are knowledgeable in Bible, others in Mishnah, others in Aggada (homiletic understanding of the Torah). Still others perform many mitzvot, and others give much charity. (Midrash – Bamidbar Raba 3:1)

Grapes:

Just as a vine has large and small clusters and the large ones hang lower, so too the Jewish people: Whoever labors in Torah and is greater in Torah, seems lower than his fellow [due to his humility]. (Midrash – Vayikra Raba 36:2)

Figs:

Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of 'He who tends a fig tree will eat its fruit'? ([Proverbs 27:18](#)) Why is the Torah compared to a fruit tree? Figs on a tree do not ripen all at once, but a little each day. Therefore, the longer one searches in the tree, the more figs he finds. So too with Torah: The more one studies, the more knowledge and wisdom one finds. (Talmud – [Eruvin 54a](#))

Pomegranates:

Let us get up early to the vineyards. Let us see if the vine has flowered, if the grape blossoms have opened, if the pomegranates have budded. There I will give you my love.

If the pomegranates have budded. These are the little children who study Torah and sit in rows in their class like the seeds of a pomegranate. (Midrash – [Shir HaShirim Rabba 6:11](#))

For discussion:

Rami Bar Yechezkel once came to Bnei Brak and saw goats grazing under a fig tree. Honey was dripping from the figs and milk from the goats – and they became intermingled. He said: Behold, a land flowing with milk and honey! (Talmud – [Ketubot 111b](#))

Ask participants to share a story or experience he/she had while in the Land of Israel.

6. WINE

At the Tu B'Shevat Seder, it is traditional to drink four cups of wine, similar to the Passover Seder.

- *First Cup – pure white*
- *Second Cup – pale pink (white with a drop of red wine)*
- *Third Cup – darker pink (with more red added)*
- *Fourth Cup – almost totally red (with only a drop of white)*



A participant says:

White wine represents nature in potential. Red wine represents nature in full bloom. On this day, we begin to leave the winter behind and move into a period of renewal and life.

It is stated in the Zohar: Wine has two colors – white and red. White is from the right side [of kindness]; red from the left side [of strength and judgment].

As we progress from white to red, we move from potential to actuality. We are able to appreciate God's judgment as well as His kindness. We see God's design and goodness in the world with increasing clarity.

A participant says:

Wine rejoices the heart of man. This refers to the wine of Torah. *Yayin* (Hebrew for wine) equals 70, the numerical value of *Sod*, meaning secret. [Wine represents the hidden aspects of the Torah.] (Zohar – Parshat Pinchas).

A participant says:

The Talmudic section dealing with agriculture is called trust in God. When a farmer plants a seed, trust in God gives him the strength to survive the winter. On Tu B'Shevat he begins to see that trust rewarded.

Similarly, when we plant a seed for personal growth, it requires trust and patience to survive the 'cold,' before we see the fruits of our labor.

We will now drink four cups of wine (or grape juice) in conjunction with four different categories of fruit. Each of these pairs correspond to each of the four spiritual realms (from lowest to highest):

- action – *asiah*
- formation – *yetzirah*
- creation – *briah*
- emanation of pure Godliness – *atzilut*

Each level becomes more spiritual and connected to the Creator. As we eat, we elevate the fruits – and ourselves – through the various levels, rising higher and higher.

A participant says:

The Almighty said: Although wine can be a source of trouble in this world, in the future I shall make it only a source of joy, as it says: 'And it shall come to pass on that day, that the mountains will drip with sweet wine' ([Yoel 3:18](#)). (Midrash – Vayikra Raba 12:5)

Pour the first cup of wine (all white):

All say the following blessing, and then drink from the wine (if you haven't already done so during Kiddush):

Baruch Ata Adon-ai Elohai-nu Melech HaOlam boray pri ha-gafen. Blessed are you God, King of the universe who creates the fruit of the vine.

Slow down and really enjoy the taste of the wine. The most prestigious universities offer courses in wine tasting. There's a lot to appreciate in life. Be a connoisseur!

The leader says:

We now eat **fruits with inedible shells or peels**. For example: nuts, pomegranate, oranges, avocado. The edible part of the fruit corresponds to perfection and purity, while the inedible is connected to deficiency and impurity. This is parallel to the realm of action (*asiah*), the lowest of the spiritual worlds – a world which is enveloped by materialism, just as the fruit is enveloped in its peel/shell.

A participant says:

Rabbi Tarfon compared the Jewish people to a pile of walnuts. If one walnut is removed, each and every nut in the pile is shaken and disturbed. So too, when a single Jew is in distress, every other Jew is shaken. (Midrash – Shir HaShirim Raba 6:11)

A participant says:

As it is the virtue of a nut to be closed in from all sides, so too the Heavenly Chariot which goes out of the Garden of Eden is hidden on all sides. And just as the four sections of a walnut are united at one side and separated on the other, so are all parts of the Heavenly Chariot united in perfect union – and yet each part fulfils a specific purpose. (Zohar – Shmot 15b)

Meditation:

As you toss away the peels and shells, see one of your bad character traits (anger, impatience, etc.) being tossed away. In your mind's eye, picture the bad trait as the shell. Then, as you toss it away, feel the trait leaving you. That's not the real you. The real you is the fruit... delicious and nourishing. See the trait going into the garbage.

7. CUPS 2, 3, 4

Drink the second cup – pale pink (white with a drop of red).

The leader says:

We now eat **fruits with inedible pits**. For example: dates, olives, peaches, plums, cherries. This stage is comparable to the realm of formation (*yetzirah*).

The edible parts of the fruit represent holiness. Pits represent impurities which have penetrated the holiness.

As the colour of the wine begins to get darker, we can start to see potential turn into reality. The inedible part has now moved from the outside to the inside of the fruit. This is an advancement toward purity. In addition, the inedible part is no longer waste; it is a seed with potential to grow.

Meditation:

Imagine one of your bad traits as this seed. **Really** see it. Then, see that trait growing and developing into something great. This trait no longer holds you back, but propels you forward. Many great people have turned their faults into assets. You too can become great.

Drink the third cup of wine (dark pink).

The leader says:

Now we eat **fruits that are completely edible**: blueberries. This is the realm of creation (*briah*), the highest level in the created world. (The three lower worlds – *asiyah*, *yetzirah*, and *briah* – are referred to as *ma'aseh bereishit*, the act of creation.)

Meditation:

Things are coming close to their full potential. Even the seeds are now edible. They not only have future potential, but are also delicious and ready to eat right now.

Think about an area of life you would like to improve. Picture your ideal self. Realize that's the real you. Now, for the rest of Tu B'Shevat, actually be that person. Act as if you're already there. The experience can be transformational.

Drink the fourth cup (red with a drop of white).

The leader says:

We now taste the fruit on the table **with the best fragrance**. This is comparable to the realm of pure Godliness (*atzilut*). This level is called the *ma'aseh merkava*, the act of the Chariot. The prophet Ezekiel saw a Chariot in his vision relating to the mysteries of creation.

A participant says:

In [Leviticus 23:40](#), the Esrog is described as *pri aitz hadar* – fruit of the majestic tree. The Esrog is the most spiritual of all trees, as its fruit and bark both have fine taste and smell.

On Tu B'Shevat, when all trees are judged, it is fitting to pray for a beautiful Esrog during the coming Sukkot.

A participant says:

The sense of smell is the purest and most elevated. It is through the nose that God invested Adam with a soul, as it says, God breathed into man's nostrils a breath of life ([Genesis 2:7](#)). Since there is no perceptible physical matter to smell, it is the most spiritual and Godly of the five senses. Burning the fragrant incense was designated as the holiest act of the Jewish year – performed by the Kohen Gadol in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

8. CONCLUSION

The leader says:

Eating 12 different fruits is significant, since this corresponds to the 12 different arrangements of the four-letter ineffable Name of God. Upon eating the 12th fruit, we recite the verse:

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, nor shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit each person under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken ([Micah 4:3-4](#))

Eating 15 different fruits is also significant, since this is the numerical value of *Yud-Heh*, the Name of God which connects the physical to the spiritual, between this world and the next world. In the Holy Temple, the Levites would sing each of the 15 Shir HaMa'alot Psalms as they ascended each of the 15 steps.

After-blessing:

After enjoying all the wonderful pleasures that God has given us, we complete the process with a meaningful, heartfelt thanks to the Creator.

Those who ate bread say the full Grace After Meals. Otherwise, we say the three-faceted blessing – including the relevant lines for cake, wine, and/or fruit, plus the special insertion for Shabbat if applicable. The text of these blessings are found in the ArtScroll Siddur (www.artscroll.com).

A participant says:

Rabbi Abba taught: There is no more revealed redemption – no greater indication of the impending redemption – than that which the verse ([Ezekiel 36:8](#)) states: And you, mountains of Israel, you shall give forth your branches and you shall bear your fruit for my people Israel, for they shall soon come. (Talmud – [Sanhedrin 98a](#))

Rashi explains: When the Land of Israel will give fruit bountifully, this is an indication of the impending redemption, and there is no greater indication than this.

Conclusion:

We come to the end of the Tu B'Shevat Seder. We have only touched the surface of the true meaning of the holiday and of the significance of trees and fruit in God's creation. That is the beauty of the Jewish calendar. Each year we celebrate the same holidays, yet each year we grow and develop many new insights.

The rest of the evening is spent singing and learning Torah. Next year in Jerusalem!