



Tu B'Shevat – New Year of the Trees January 15, 2014 / 15 Shevat 5774

The following Rabbinic materials collected by the "Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life" (COEJL) and commentary were provided by Dr. Mike Miller for Tu B'Shevat.

Source of Tu B'Shevat

The primary textual source for the holiday of Tu B'Shevat is the tractate of Rosh Hashanah in the Mishnah, which states: "There are four New Years. On the first of Nissan is the the New Year for kings and for festivals. On the first of Elul is the New Year for tithing cattle. Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Shimon say on the first of Tishrei. On the first of Tishrei is the New year for years, for Shmittah and Jubilee years, for planting and for vegetables. On the first of Shvat is the New Year for trees. According to the school of Shammai. The school of Hillel say, on the fifteenth thereof." (M. Rosh Hashanah 1:1)

Why New Year for Trees?

Jews in Israel had to give a percentage of their harvest in the form of tithes., Tu B'Shevat, the New Year for trees, served as the cut-off date regarding the designation of tithing years. (See Maimonides, Yad He-Hazakah, Hiklkhoh Terumot 5:11) In this sense, Tu B'Shevat was analogous to the start of a new fiscal year.

Why 15th Shevat?

Both of these events-the cessation of the rain and the rise of the sap within trees-mark the end of winter and the onset of Spring, when trees again begin to drink water from the soil and to reproduce their leaves and seed. Thus, Tu B'Shevat is a holiday which takes place in winter and foretells the coming of Spring. In fact, the fifteenth of Shevat is precisely the middle of winter.

In the 1600's, Kabbalists in Safed instituted a Tu B'Shevat seder modeled after that of Passover, in which blessings were recited over four cups of wine and different types of fruits were blessed and eaten. Tu B'Shevat seders have become a common part of contemporary Tu B'Shevat celebration.

Observe and celebrate the annual cycle of trees and the coming renewal of Spring:

Tu B'Shevat is a fitting time to renew our connection to the natural world, and to learn more about trees and natural cycles. The rabbis designated Tu B'Shevat a semi-holiday. The life of other creatures, the gift of living on this good Earth, and the changing seasons are cause for celebration!

Tu B'Shevat, the date for tithing, reminds us that the earth does not belong to human beings to exploit at our will. Rather, the world belongs to its Creator, and our use of its riches must be in accordance with God's will. In this sense,

Tu B'Shevat is a time to reassess our relationship with all of Creation, and to examine our patterns of consumption.

Food for Thought:

1. Is our use of tree products and other resources governed by ethical and religious values?
2. Do we take proper care of those in need?
3. Are we appropriately reverential, or wasteful?

From the Editors: Join the discussion of these questions and commentary in Mentschen, the FJMC's online forum.

The editor of this special edition, Dr. Michael W. Miller, received a Ph.D in Analytical Chemistry from Northeastern University. He has had a career in college teaching, industrial research, consulting and environmental laboratory standards development. Mike retired from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Office of Quality Assurance after 21 years. The office is responsible for assuring that the chemistry data received by the Department is of Known and Documented Quality and the Department had the procedures to accurately interpret and apply the data. He help write the national and state laboratory standards and traveled the county inspecting laboratories. Mike is still active in the organization that develops laboratory standards. He is active in many organizations that work to protect the environment and public health. He is a long time active member of Temple Beth O'R-Beth Torah Men's Club Clark, NJ. He is a past president and current Program VP and Ritual Chair.