

The February Seder

By Robert L. Cohen

It's a Jewish New Year, but it's not Rosh Hashana. Celebrants drink four cups of wine and read from a "Haggada," but it's not Passover. Since it's a Jewish occasion, though, there's a focus on food and (serious) talk—and on the ramifications of both.

Happy Tu Bishvat—the Jewish New Year for Trees. And welcome, if you're one of a growing number of Jews, to a Tu Bishvat Seder—a ritual banquet with sixteenth-century mystical antecedents and a lot to say, apparently, to today's Jews.

It is for many a means of connection to the Land of Israel and its special beauty and richness; for others, a reminder of our responsibility to the natural world and to each other; for still others, an exquisite meditational experience. For those who have made conducting a Tu Bishvat Seder a specialty of their Jewish lives, it contains within it the possibility of attaining a greater harmony

with the cosmos and the Creator—and thereby (as, indeed, the mystics put it) "fixing the world."

In the Mishna, the fifteenth day of Shvat—"Tu" is transliterated Hebrew for the letters *tet* (9) plus *vav* (6)—is merely designated as the fiscal new year of trees for purposes of tithing the fruit yields. (Fruits appearing after this date were reckoned as part of the next year's produce.) The date is not arbitrary: By this time in the Land of Israel, the heavy rains are over. Water begins to flow in the ground—and sap to rise in the trees. Trees and plants begin to bud: Spring is coming.

Almost no law governs the day's observance—but layers of graceful custom have arisen, in different Jewish communities, to set off Tu Bishvat as a minor holiday and a festive day. The most universal has been simply eating fruits—sometimes specifically 15 kinds of fruit, and especially those native to the Land of Israel.

In Eastern Europe, obtaining and eating dried fruits and *bokser* (carob) in the midst of a cold, desolate winter reflected a poignant yearning for the Holy Land. It was largely the descendants of these Ashkenazim who began the Israeli tradition of planting saplings on Tu Bishvat—or, in the diaspora, giving money to the Jewish National Fund to enable afforestation of the Holy Land.

Sefardic Jews developed more elaborate rituals to observe Tu Bishvat, which they called *Las Frutas* (the Feast of Fruits). Children were given bags of fruit to wear as pendants around their necks; in some countries, the rich would host lavish feasts for the whole village, at which as many as 100 different kinds of fruits, nuts and vegetables were consumed.

It was sixteenth-century Sefardic kabbalists (Jewish mystics) in Safed, creators of the Friday-night Kabbalat Shabbat service, who devised a ritual meal for Tu Bishvat modeled after the Passover Seder: a banquet of four cups of wine and four courses of fruit, consumed with the appropriate blessings over a festive table decorated with



Courtesy of Daniel Howarth

Daniel Howarth's papercut memorializes a tree planted by Theresienstadt children on Tu Bishvat

flowers and candles, and accompanied by the reading and study of passages on trees and fruits from the Torah, rabbinic commentaries and the Zohar—the kabbalists' interpretation of the hidden meanings of the Torah. And it is this tradition, still practiced in many Sefardic homes (especially among Turks, Moroccans and Iraqis) but unknown to most Jews, that is enjoying a renaissance: at a "New Age" *minyán* in Berkeley, California, and an Israeli folk-dance weekend in the Catskills; at Orthodox synagogues in New York and Skokie, Illinois; in Jewish community centers and creative Jewish schools, and in Hadassah chapters as well.

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Jonathan Wolf, a modern Orthodox Jew, will be conducting his thirteenth Tu Bishvat Seder this year on Manhattan's Upper West Side. (He also conducts model Seders for New York's Lincoln Square Synagogue.) Wolf uses a *tikkun* or *seder*—either word is used for the "program book" or, loosely, "Haggada," as well as the meal itself—that he has compiled from rabbinic commentaries, the prophets and the *Song of Songs* in addition to the *P'ri Ets Hadar* (The Fruit of the Goodly Tree), the first published liturgy for Tu Bishvat. He also includes songs and poetry (Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" in both Yiddish and English), along with instructions for a "trees sing-down" and other games.

For Wolf, the holiday is especially rich: It is "the post-biblical holiday corresponding to entering the Land of Israel" after we left Egypt (Pesah), received the Torah (Shavuot) and wandered in the desert (Sukkot). Accordingly, it highlights not only the importance of building the land, but the duty to "preserve, protect and respect God's world"—all that is now conveyed by the word "ecology." Wolf notes that the Torah's injunction against destroying fruit trees even in wartime (*bal tash'hit*) was

generalized by the rabbis to a prohibition of any waste or needless destruction.

Wolf also sees *tzedaka*—our just obligations to the poor—as implied in Tu Bishvat, because gratitude toward the Source of our land and its fruits should impel us to share our bounty—and because the laws of *tzedaka*, in fact, derive from agricultural laws. (The Zohar, he notes, calls *tzedaka* "*ilana d'hayei*"—the tree of life.) As the Sefardim established a *ma'ot perot* fund to provide food for the poor on Tu Bishvat, so Wolf collects *tzedaka* donations from Seder participants, to assist needy Jews and non-Jews and to support the work of Israeli and American environmental organizations.

Claire Sherman, a Jewish ceramic artist in Berkeley, was first exposed to a Tu Bishvat Seder at Hebrew Union College in Israel, whose annual observance revolves around a well-known *tikkun* compiled by Rabbi Hank Skirball and others. She has now produced her own *tikkun* based on Skirball's and other compilations.

Sherman relishes the challenges of fruit acquisition in the Bay Area: Pomegranates from the fall are saved until the holiday; *etrog* marmalade is made right after the previous Sukkot (as per Eastern European custom) for eating at the Seder. Once, a lemon tree planted on a previous Tu Bishvat furnished lemons—an *etrog* substitute—for lemon marmalade.

Like other Tu Bishvat hosts, Sherman tries to make sure that each celebrant will enjoy at least one fruit for the first time that year to be able to recite a *Sheheheyanu* prayer. For Sherman's Seders, participants bring the "core" fruits while Sherman shops around for exotic curios—last year, a cherimoya (a tropical fruit resembling an artichoke).

Sherman invites members of area *havurot*, students of Jewish mysticism and other artists to her Seders; last year,

Centerpieces: A nineteenth-century Tu Bishvat Seder plate, on display in Jerusalem's Israel Museum, and a poem from a holiday "Haggada"



It's almond-blossom time in Israel
The earliest flowers of springtime
Have burst in the land of my people
snow is deep in america
even though the groundhog
couldn't see his shadow

It's almond-blossom time in Israel
Tu B'Shevat, holiday of trees, is ended
Cedar saplings grow strong in the soil
washington's birthday
changed to next monday
yesterday was lincoln's

It's almond-blossom time in Israel
White flowers with tiny red hearts
Form an arbor in biblical treetops
tomorrow i will eat
a box of chocolate candy
to celebrate st valentine

It's almond-blossom time in Israel
A girl has climbed an ancient bough
To sit in a sunlit photograph
an american box elder
spreads naked branches
across my backyard

participants enjoyed singing Israeli songs with tree- and nature-related texts, such as "*Eretz zavat halav*" and "*Nad ilan*."

For Sherman and others, though, the Seder is essentially a spiritual gathering, conducted according to what she calls "hasidic time, which is even slower than Jewish time." (Indeed, the kabbalists believed that thoroughly chewing the fruit and multiplying the blessings said over them would increase the "sparks" of Divine energy released by the Seder.) "I love this holiday so much, why not do it more often?" was Sherman's feeling last year—so she conducted *two* Seders, on Friday night (which was Tu Bishvat last year) and after Shabbat.

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Both Wolf and Sherman speak of how accessible the Tu Bishvat Seder is, and how open to creative infusion. Just how "user-friendly" this observance is is made clear by the experience of Debra Cantor, a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who was first introduced to it in the early 70's when she was doing Conservative youth-group programming at Tu Bishvat—"an otherwise fallow time in the Jewish calendar," she notes.

As a rabbinical student, Cantor has twice been approached by Orthodox families whose daughters' bat mitzvas nearly coincided with Tu Bishvat; both girls chose, as a study project, to produce under her guidance elaborate, illustrated *tikkunim*. With her assistance, they then conducted Seders to mark their bat mitzvas.

Cantor and other creative Jewish teachers have similarly guided schoolchildren in creating Tu Bishvat "Haggadas" composed, in part, of their own poems and reflections on trees. Seders for children, such as Harlene Appelman and Jane Shapiro's *A Seder for Tu Bishvat* (Kar-Ben), often include "Four Questions" (and answers) about the holiday, in loose imitation of Passover.

For Cantor, the appeal of the Tu Bishvat Seder lies in its unique combination of the familiar—the Seder formula of eating, studying, singing and good company—with the exotic and mystical. It is a "meditational meal," she finds, "a reflective, mellow sort of experience," and it requires that kind of mood in the participants.

That mood is set, not only by the liturgy chosen—many Seders include stories, poetry (Rahel's "*Artzi*"; Edna St. Vincent Millay's "City Trees") and such folk songs as David Mallet's "Garden Song"—but by the resonant symbolism of the wine and fruit. The four cups of wine—each of which is filled prior to eating a course of fruit and drunk, with a blessing, afterward—proceed from a white wine through pink, rose, and deep red (tinged with white) shades, reflecting the changing seasonal colors of Israel's fields and landscapes.

In many traditional Seders, the first fruit course comprises the seven species which the Bible associates with the Land of Israel: wheat and barley—sometimes in the form of cake, crackers or *halla* (Turkish Sefardim eat a cracked wheat pudding called *moostrahana*), followed by

olives, dates, grapes, figs and pomegranates.

The succeeding three courses are composed of fruits with inedible shells, like most nuts (walnuts and almonds, being mentioned in the Bible, are especially desirable); those with an inedible pit, like peaches and cherries; and those that are wholly edible (except perhaps for a few small seeds), such as apples, pears, carobs and quinces. (Some sources reverse this order.) The kabbalists likened these to three of the four levels of creation: action, formation and creation. Contemporary celebrants, in Claire Sherman's Seder and others, sometimes see in the presence or absence of hard shells or tough pits aspects of the human personality as revealed in relationships of greater or lesser security or vulnerability.

Such comparisons are not as fanciful as they might seem, given the Jewish sources' penchant for comparing righteous (and, occasionally, unrighteous) men and women and the whole Jewish people to trees and fruits: "The fruit of the tree of loveliness—that is Israel" (*Vayikra Rabba* 30:11). "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree" (*Psalms* 92:13).

"Our sages had a 'thing' about trees," notes a Tu Bishvat Seder produced by Neot Kedumim (the Biblical Landscape Reserve in Israel). And, indeed, today Israeli children are frequently named after trees: Oren, Tamar, Hadassah.

The Torah itself is likened in the *Book of Proverbs* (3:18) to "a tree of life" ("to those who grasp it"). "For us," says a *tikkun* produced by the Jewish Women's Resource Center of the National Council of Jewish Women, New York Section, "Judaism is the tree planted by . . . our mothers and fathers."

The imperative of their Seder would seem to be (in Bob Dylan's words) "Strap yourself to the tree with roots"—as the commitment called for in the Skirball Seder is "to replant and rebuild and renew the people of Israel in the Land of Israel." For kabbalists (and for some "New Age" celebrants), the point of the Seder seems to be nothing less than to renew the flow of life itself—for they see Tu Bishvat as the birthday of *the Tree*: the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden.

And that may not be too ambitious a goal. For there is something timeless, something indestructible, evoked by trees and their planting. "We plant trees whose fruit we will not eat," notes a Seder compiled by Debra Cantor and her Brookline, Massachusetts, Hebrew school students. "We plant trees in whose shade we will not sit. . . . The man who fears that the world will end tomorrow, or next year, does not plant trees."

So it is fitting that Jews, the indestructible people, for whom faith in the future is almost an emblem, do plant trees, and make of a banquet of their fruits a spiritual gathering. "A people that can celebrate the advent of spring when the earth is covered with ice and snow," wrote one philosopher of the Jewish people—"such a people is an eternal people." ■