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# ❧ TU B'SHVAT ❧

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## When a Tree is No Longer Just a Tree

Unlike Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, Tu B'Shvat – the New Year for trees – is not a Torah-mandated festival; and unlike Chanukah and Purim, it is not even a rabbinic festival. Nevertheless, it has received partial festival status and it is commemorated by a number of fascinating customs.

The day of Tu B'Shvat is associated primarily with eating fruit. However, this special day offers far deeper meaning than the “fruit parties” might suggest. In this class we will explore that meaning, seeking to understand the essence of the day and its unique customs.

This class will seek to answer the following questions:

- ❧ What is the significance of Tu B'Shvat in Jewish law?
- ❧ What rituals are performed to commemorate the day?
- ❧ What is the symbolism of eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat?
- ❧ Why do some people pray on Tu B'Shvat to find a beautiful etrog for Sukkot?
- ❧ Why do many Jewish sources use trees as a metaphor for people?

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## SECTION I. TU B'SHVAT IN JEWISH LAW

Tu B'Shvat is unique since it is not an official festival like the other holidays with which we are familiar. On the surface, its significance in Jewish law relates to the application of various agricultural laws found in the Torah. As a result of this significance, it was ordained that Tu B'Shvat be marked as a somewhat festive occasion. Its deeper significance, however, is shrouded in mysticism and transcends the mere legalities of the day. Nevertheless, Tu B'Shvat is a day that is replete with important lessons and symbolism, and if properly utilized, it provides a valuable opportunity to absorb important Jewish ideals and spiritual energies.

### PART A. THE NEW YEAR FOR TREES

Tu B'Shvat is defined by the Mishnah as the New Year for trees. In this section we will seek to understand the halachic significance of this event.

#### 1. **Mishnah, Rosh HaShanah 1, 1 – Tu B'Shvat is one of the “New Years” on the Jewish calendar.**

The four New Years are:

On the first of Nissan, the New Year for the kings and for the festivals;

On the first of Elul, the New Year for the tithing of animals;

Rabbi Elazer and Rabbi Shimon say this is on the first of Tishrei;

On the first of Tishrei, the New Year for [the count of] years, for the Sabbatical years and for the Jubilee years and for saplings and vegetables; On the first of Shvat, the New Year for the trees, according to the House of Shammai;

The House of Hillel says, on the fifteenth thereof (Tu B'Shvat).

ארבעה ראשי שנים הם.

באחד בניסן ראש השנה למלכים ולרגלים.

באחד באלול ראש השנה למעשר בהמה. רבי אלעזר ורבי שמעון אומרים, באחד בתשרי.

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באחד בשבט, ראש השנה לאילן, כדברי בית שמאי.

בית הלל אומרים, בחמשה עשר בו.

The practical significance of each New Year, as taught by the Talmud and commentators, is to separate one yearly cycle from another. The New Years listed by the Mishnah determine the changeover points of the yearly cycles. In order to observe certain laws in the Torah properly, it is important to be aware of which yearly cycle a tree or its fruit belongs to. What are these laws?

### PART B. TITHES

The most basic significance of the New Year of trees is for the laws of tithing (percentages of the crop that are given to the Kohanim [priests], the Levites, and the poor). The Torah requires that three tithes be separated from all produce grown in the Land of Israel. The first, known as *terumah*, is given to a Kohen. The second, known as *ma'aser rishon*, is given to a Levite. The use of the third tithe differs depending on the year. In

certain years, the tithe is brought to Jerusalem and consumed by its owner, whereas in other years, it is given as a gift to the poor. Until the tithes are separated, it is forbidden to eat the produce.

### 1. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 14:22 – The Torah gives us a mitzvah to tithe our produce.

Take a tithe of all the seed crops that come forth in the field each year.

עשר תעשר את כל תבואת זרעך היוצא השדה שנה.

As the words “each year” imply, the produce of one year may not be tithed together with that of another year. The deciding date in determining to which year a particular fruit belongs is Tu B'Shvat: fruit that has grown to a certain stage of development called *chanatah* before Tu B'Shvat is counted as belonging to the previous year's crop; any that ripen to this point thereafter will belong to next year's crop.

### 2. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Rosh HaShanah 15b – Tu B'Shvat is the cutoff date for determining which tithing year the fruit of a tree belongs to.

A tree whose fruit has begun to bud before the fifteenth of Shvat is tithed [with the fruits of] the past year, whereas [if the fruit begins to bud] after the fifteenth of Shvat it is tithed [with the fruits of] the coming year.

אילו שחנמו פירותיו קודם חמשה עשר בשבט - מתעשר לשנה שעברה, אחר חמשה עשר בשבט - מתעשר לשנה הבאה.

One might ask: Why, in fact, does the Torah require the tithes of each year's produce to be taken from produce of that very year? Why should it make a difference if produce from the New Year is used as the tithe for produce of the previous year, or vice versa? In general, the tithes are a percentage of the total amount of produce, so the recipient of the tithes will receive the same amount regardless of which year the produce came from.

One answer to this question highlights a fundamental principle about the Torah's view of charity, and yields an important understanding of why we celebrate Tu B'Shvat, a day whose significance lies mostly in the realm of agricultural law.

### 3. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Darash Moshe, Parshat Beshalach, p. 52 – The Torah requires us to tithe each year's produce separately in order to remind us that the tithes are not a gift that we opt to give, but are a payment we are obligated to make.

I said a reason for the joy and for our celebration on the New Year for Trees, which applies only to the laws of tithes, which we may not separate from one year's produce on that of another year. The tribe of Levi was not given an inheritance and the rest of the Jewish people received their portion. Thus, the tithes that we give them are not merely a charitable gift from the rest of the nation but an obligatory payment, like a rental payment. But since it is a sort of obligation wherein a person can give it to whomever he wants, and there is no one who can sue for it or take it from the field when the owner does not give it, a person might make a mistake and think that it is a gift that he is giving. Therefore, there

אמרתי טעם על השמחה בעצם ושגם עתה אנו שמחים בר"ה לאילנות, אשר הוא שייך רק לדיני מעשר שאין מעשרין משנה על חברתה. שהנה ידוע ששבט לוי לא נטל נחלה וכל ישראל לקחו נחלתם, וא"כ בעצם המעשרות שנותנים להם אינו טובה מהישראל בעצם אלא חובה כשכירות, אבל מאחר שהוא שכירות כזה שתלוי בו ליתן למי שירצה ואין לזה תובעין ואין לוקחין ממנו השדה כשלא יתן, טועה האדם לומר שהוא מתנה מאתו, ולכן יש שמתעצלין מליתן המעשרות, ואף שיתן היה מקום לחוש שיאחר מליתן עד שיראה אולי בשנה האחרת לא יצמיח ועוד יפסיד מהקרן שעלה לו בחרישה וזריעה, ואף אם גם בשנה האחרת יצמיח בטוב יחשוש אולי בשנה השלישית לא יצמיח וכן עד סוף ימיו, עד שפתאום

are some people who are negligent in giving tithes, and even if a person gives, there is room to fear that he might delay giving them out of fear that his crops might not grow the following year and he might lose some of the money that he invested in plowing and planting. Even if his crops do grow well in the following year, he might be afraid that in the third year, they will not grow well. This can continue until the end of his life, when his time suddenly comes and he will no longer be able to fulfill the precept and pay off his debt.

Therefore the Torah commanded us not to take tithes from the produce of one year from that of the next, so that a person will be compelled to give tithes every single year and will see that it is obligatory. This is the reason that there is a New Year for the laws of tithes, and that it is the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shvat for trees, for it is a great joy for a person when the remaining nine tenths of his crop become his.

יבא אידו ולא יוכל שוב לקיים ולשלם חובו,

לכן צוותה תורה שאין מעשרין משנה על חברתה, וא"כ מוכרח בכל שנה לשלם המעשרות ורואה שהוא חוב. זהו הטעם די"ר לדין מעשרות, ובאילנות הוא יום ט"ו בשבט, שהוא שמחה גדולה שבו נעשה ה-ט' חלקים שלו ממש.

The lesson we learn from the obligation to give tithes promptly also applies to giving *tzedakah*, charity.

#### 4. **Ibid.** – We should adopt the same attitude regarding charity as in tithing.

Nowadays, as well, a person must know that the world was truly created for all people and that everyone essentially has an equal share in it, but when one person is wealthy and another person is poor, God has given the portion of the poor one to the wealthy one. Consequently, it is not really his, but if he fulfills the requirement that God placed upon him and gives charity to the poor, whose portion he has received, then he will acquire his own portion and it will be truly his. But since no one can lay claim to the charity, he might push off giving the portion of charity from his profits, in case he will suffer a loss the next day or the following year, until suddenly his time comes and he will see that he never paid his dues and he really has lived on theft throughout his life.

Therefore, a person must learn from the laws of tithes that he should at least not delay from one year to the next. Rather, every year he should calculate [how much charity he owes] and give that amount to charity. If he makes a weekly

והנה גם בזה"ז צריך האדם לידע כי בעצם נברא העולם לכל בני"א ויש לכל אחד חלק שווה בעצם, אך כאשר זכה אחד מאיזה טעם ואחד נתחייב מאיזה טעם נתן הקב"ה להזוכה גם חלק המתחייב, וא"כ הוא בעצם אינו שלו, אך אם יקיים התנאים שהתנה עמו הקב"ה שיתן צדקה להעניים שלקח חלקם יזכה בחלקו ויעשה שלו ממש, אך מחמת שאין לזה תובעים אפשר שידחה מליתן חלק הצדקה מהריוח, שיאמר אולי למחר יפסיד או לשנה אחרת יפסיד או אחרי זמן רב, עד שפתאום יבא אידו וימצא שלא שילם שכירותו ואכל כל ימיו גזל,

לכן צריך ללמוד ממעשר שלכל הפחות לא יאחר משנה לחברתה, ובכל שנה יעשה חשבון ויתן חלק הצדקה, ואם יעשה בכל חודש או בכל שבוע יהיה יותר משובח, וכ"ש אם יעשה החשבון בכל יום שודאי

or monthly accounting, it is even better, and certainly if he makes a daily accounting. This is a lesson that he learns from Tu B'Shvat, when the remainder becomes ours, and we can ask God to give us and all of the Jewish people more and more.

משובת. וזה הלימוד יודעין אנו מדין ט"ו בשבט שבוה  
נעשה הנשאר שלנו ויכולין אנו לבקש מה' שיתן לנו  
ולכל ישראל כהנה וכהנה.

In this quote, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein reveals a fundamental principle about the Torah's concept of charity. A person who gives tzedakah should not feel that he is acting out of his own generosity and giving a gift that he is not obligated to give. On the contrary, God gives wealthy people assets that rightfully belong to the poor, expecting them to distribute those assets accordingly. This is the philosophy underlying the Torah's requirement to separate tithes from each year's produce. This is also a reason for the joy of Tu B'Shvat. On the day on which we conclude our separation of tithes and charity from our property, we cement our ownership of the remainder of our assets, those which God actually allotted to us.

## PART C. ORLAH

The fruit of a tree may not be eaten during the first three years after its planting. In the fourth year, the fruits are holy and must be eaten in Jerusalem; in the fifth, they may be consumed in the normal manner.

### 1. **Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:23-25: – The fruit that grows in the first three years of a tree's life is forbidden to eat; that of the fourth is deemed holy.**

And when you shall come into the Land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then you shall count its fruit as forbidden; three years shall it be forbidden to you; it shall not be eaten. And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, for giving praise to God. But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit, that it may increase its yield to you: I am the Lord, your God.

וכי תבאו אל הארץ ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל וערלתם  
ערלתו את פריו שלש שנים יהיה לכם ערלים לא יאכל:  
ובשנה הרביעת יהיה כל פריו קדש הלולים לה': ובשנה  
החמישת תאכלו את פריו להוסיף לכם תבואתו אני ה'  
א-להיכם:

This is the source of the Torah's prohibitions of *orlah* (fruit that grows in the first three years) and *neta ravai* (fruit of the fourth year). *Orlah* is categorically forbidden to eat. *Neta ravai* may be consumed only in Jerusalem, or may be exchanged for something that will itself be consumed in Jerusalem. In determining the age of a tree as regards these laws, Tu B'Shvat is an important date.

### 2. **Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShanah 9b-10a – Tu B'Shvat is the “birthday” of fruit trees in that they all “age” on that date.**

No matter how the growth of the tree is begun – whether by planting, planting its branches, or by grafting – the law is the same: If the growth of the tree begins thirty days before Rosh HaShanah, it is counted as one year old (on Rosh HaShanah) ... but if not, then it is not counted as one year old until the next Rosh HaShanah ... Either way, its fruit will be forbidden as *orlah* or *ravai* until Tu B'Shvat.

אחד הנוטע אחד המבריך ואחד המרכיב ערב שביעת  
שלישים יום לפני ראש השנה עלתה לו שנה ... פחות  
מיכן לא עלתה לו שנה .... ופירות נטיעה זו אסורין  
עד חמשה עשר בשבט, אם לערלה ערלה ואם לרבעי  
רבעי:

**Rashi**

Even though Rosh HaShanah is the New Year for saplings, Tu B'Shvat is the New Year for trees. So the sapling becomes a tree (on Rosh HaShanah) but does not “age” as a tree for the purposes of orlah until Tu B'Shvat.

רש"י

אף על פי שראש השנה תשרי לנטיעה - חמשה עשר בשבט ראש השנה לאילן, וזו כבר נעשית אילן, לפיכך אין שנתה מתחדשת לצאת מידי ערלה עד חמשה עשר בשבט:

The age of a tree is determined by when it was planted in relation to Rosh HaShanah: if it was planted before the 16<sup>th</sup> of Av (one and a half months before Rosh HaShanah), then it will be counted as one year old at that Rosh HaShanah. If however it was planted from the 16<sup>th</sup> of Av and onward, it is only counted as being one year old on the Rosh Hashanah of the following year. That is the meaning of the Mishnah cited above (Part A, Source 1) that the first of Tishrei is the New Year for saplings.

Regarding the fruit of the tree, Tu B'Shvat is the significant marker: only those fruits that begin to grow after Tu B'Shvat of the fifth year may be eaten freely, as described above.

According to some opinions, the date of Tu B'Shvat similarly determines the count of years for the *shmittah* cycle as well. In this cycle, the land is left fallow every seventh year and its fruit may only be consumed once it begins to grow after Tu B'Shvat of the eighth year.

**PART D. WHY TU B'SHVAT?**

Why was the day of Tu B'Shvat chosen as the New Year for trees?

The Talmud explains that this day was seen as the first time of the year in which the effect of the rains could be discerned.

**1. Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 14a, with Rashi – The rainy season has passed.**

“The New Year of the tree.” Why then? Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Oshiah: Because most of the rains of the year have already fallen by then and most of the [winter] season has passed.

**Rashi**

Because most of the rainy season has passed, which is the time of saturation, and the sap has already risen in the trees. From now on, the fruit will begin to bud.

ראש השנה לאילן. מאי טעמא? אמר רבי אלעזר אמר רבי אושעיא: הואיל ויצאו רוב גשמי שנה, ועדיין רוב תקופה מבחזין.

רש"י:

שכבר עבר רוב ימות הגשמים שהוא זמן רביעה ועלה השרף באילנות, ונמצאו הפירות חונטין מעתה:

**2. Rabbi Menachem Meiri, Beit HaBechirah to Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:1 – Tu B'Shvat is the midpoint of the winter.**

Beit Hillel says from the fifteenth of Shvat because from the beginning of Tevet until the fifteenth of Shvat is six weeks, which is half of the [winter] season, for the season goes until Nissan and Tu B'Shvat is in the middle point between the two

ובית הלל אומרים בחמשה עשר בו שנמשכו מטבת עד חצי שבט ששה שבועות שהם חצי ימי תקופת טבת שהתקופה נמשכת עד ניסן וחמשה עשר בשבט הוא תחום אמצעי שבין שתי התקופות ומאחר שעברה

seasons [of Fall and Spring]. Once half the winter has passed, its strength is weakened, the cold is not as intense, and the fruit begins to form more rapidly.

חציה של תקופת טבת כבר תשש כחה ואין כח הקרירות חזק כל כך והחנטה הולכת ומתגברת.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ Tu B'Shvat, as the New Year for trees, carries a number of halachic ramifications. These include determining the produce year for tithing; determining which fruit are free of the orlah prohibition, and which are included in it; and, according to one opinion, determining the year of the seven-year *shmittah* cycle.
- ☞ The aspect of Tu B'Shvat that relates to the laws of tithes teaches us that a wealthy person should consider tithes – and charity in general – as assets of the poor which have been placed into his pocket for distribution, not as gifts that represent his own munificence.
- ☞ The date of the fifteenth of Shvat was chosen specifically since most of the year's rainfall has already fallen, and the tree is now prepared to head towards the fruit-bearing season. The sap, the life force of the tree, has begun to circulate once again.

## SECTION II. COMMEMORATIONS OF TU B'SHVAT

The halachic ramifications of Tu B'Shvat mentioned above apply specifically to fruit and trees of the Land of Israel. Throughout the long years of our exile from the Land, the day has lost its basic significance. However, it was commemorated by Jews worldwide as a day of longing – a “festival day” on which the Land of Israel and its crops are remembered and its bountiful produce cherished. (In the early 1900's, the Teachers' Association of Eretz Yisrael introduced the secular Tu B'Shvat custom of planting trees and forests in Israel.)

In this section we will outline the various customs that have developed for commemorating the day of Tu B'Shvat.

### PART A. SLOW DOWN, DON'T FAST!

Tu B'Shvat is accorded the status of a “festival day” in that it is customary not to recite *tachanun*, a traditional prayer of supplication, nor to fast on Tu B'Shvat. The reasoning behind these laws is that the day, as a Rosh HaShanah, has quasi-festival status. (See further Mordechai to Rosh HaShanah 1:701)

#### 1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 131:6 – Tachanun is omitted on Tu B'Shvat.**

It is customary not to fall on one's face (in the *tachanun* prayer)... on Tu B'Shvat.

##### **Mishnah Berurah**

For it is the New Year for trees.

נהגו שלא ליפול על פניהם... בט"ו בשבט.

משנה ברורה (סעיף קטן לא):  
שהוא ר"ה לאילנות.

## 2. **Ibid. 572:3 – Fast days are not proclaimed.**

If a community wishes to declare a fast of Monday, Thursday, and Monday, and it falls out on the day of Tu B'Shvat, the fast is deferred until the next week, in order not to declare a fast day on Tu B'Shvat, which is the New Year for trees.

צבור שבקשו לגזור תענית שני וחמישי ושני, ופגע בתענית ט"ו בשבט, התענית נדחה לשבת הבאה כדי שלא יגזרו תענית בט"ו בשבט שהוא ראש השנה לאילנות.

According to the commentary of Magen Avraham (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 573), a bride and groom would not fast on their wedding day, as they would customarily do, if their wedding is to take place on Tu B'Shvat.

## PART B. A FRUITY DAY

The best-known custom of Tu B'Shvat is the consumption of fruit.

### 1. **Magen Avraham 131:16 – There is a custom to eat fruit specifically on Tu B'Shvat.**

On Tu B'Shvat ... The custom of Ashkenazim is to consume extra fruit [on this day].

בט"ו בשבט... ונוהגין האשכנזים להרבות במיני פירות של אילנות (תיקון יששכר דף ס"ב כ"ה):

The custom of eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat is certainly not limited to Ashkenazim. The practice is alive and well in Sephardic communities as well. Many people will recall the celebratory eating of fruit in schools, in family Tu B'Shvat feasts, or in other forums. One basic reason for the consumption of fruit is for us to remember the fruit trees and pray for their success.

### 2. **Adnei Paz, commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 131 – Eating fruit reminds us that Tu B'Shvat is good time to pray for fruit.**

As a result of eating more fruit than usual, a person will recall that this is the New Year for trees, and will pray for the fruit to be plentiful. This is akin to the custom of placing trees inside synagogues on Shavuot in order to remind the congregation to pray for them.

על ידי זה שמרבים בפירות יזכור שהוא ראש השנה לאילנות, ויתפלל עליהם שיתברכו הפירות... דוגמא שמעמידים אילנות בבתי הכנסת בשבועות להזכיר להתפלל עליהם.

### 3. **Rabbi Ephraim Fischel Shtein, Otzar Ephraim, Mishpatim – There are different customs as to how fruit is eaten on Tu B'Shvat.**

There are many different customs regarding this. Some ensure they eat from the seven species that the Land of Israel is praised with. Some are particular to eat from fifteen different species of fruit. And some eat from three different types of fruit: fruit with a peel, fruit without a peel, and fruit whose peel must be removed. Sephardim have the custom of reading from the Bible, from Mishnah, Gemara, and Zohar.

והרבה מנהגים שונים יש בזה, יש שהקפידו לאכול מהז' מינים שנשתבחה בהם ארץ ישראל, ויש שמהדרין לאכול ט"ו מינים, ויש גם מנהג לאכול מג' סוגים של פירות, דהיינו פירות עם קליפה, פירות ללא קליפה, ופירות שצריכים להסיר הקליפה, ואצל הספרדים יש מנהג לומר סדר מתנ"ך, משניות, גמרא, ומאמרי זוהר.



Another reason that has been given for the custom to eat fruits on Tu B'Shvat is that the consumption of fruit gives us a reason to recite the blessing upon eating fruits, which fosters the recognition that God is the source of everything we have. This recognition is particularly important on the New Year for trees, when we pray for God to continue to sustain us.

4. **Rabbi Yehudah Prero, “The Power of Blessings,” Torah.org – The custom of eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat is to recite blessings on fruit and recognize our sustenance comes from God.**

The New Year for Trees, Tu B'Shvat, is a day on which we pray that we continue to receive God's blessing in the form of plentiful fruits. We ask that we be allowed to partake from the fruit of the trees in the year to come. It is also a day upon which we should recognize Who provides us with fruit, and sustenance in general. It is a day in which we should illustrate that we use the sustenance provided to us for holy purposes. There is no better way of accomplishing these tasks than by taking out a fruit, and making the blessing upon it before eating.

### PART C. FRUITS OF THE LAND

Some people make sure to eat specifically fruit of the Land of Israel on Tu B'Shvat. It is important to note that even during times of exile, and irrespective of the political condition of the Land of Israel, the Land retains its holiness. Its fruits, therefore, have a special status that is reflected in the blessing recited after eating them.

1. **Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, Sefer HaToda'ah (The Book of Our Heritage), Ch. 13 – Tu B'Shvat is a special day because it relates the praise of the Land of Israel.**

What is special about this New Year that it is celebrated while the others [mentioned in the Mishnah above in Section I, Part A.] (with the exception of the first of Tishrei, Rosh HaShanah) pass without any recognition?

The reason is that this New Year concerns itself with the praise of the Land of Israel, for it is on this day that the Land renews its vigor to give forth produce, to bear fruit, and to show its praiseworthiness – and the Land of Israel is praised for its fruit ...

The day upon which the Land of Israel renews its vigor to bring forth its goodness and its sweetness is a day of joy for the Jewish people for whom it is a heritage, a love, and a longing.

ומה בין ראש השנה זה לשאר ראשי השנה (מלבד אחד בתשרי) שאין עושין בהם שינוי של הַכר יום טוב כלל, ובוה משנים מעט?

לפי שיש בראש השנה זה מענין שבח ארץ ישראל. כי ביום זה מתחדש כח האדמה שבארץ ישראל להניב תנובתה ולהוציא פרותיה ולהראות שבחה; ורוב שבחה של ארץ ישראל על פרות האילן נאמר ...

יום שאדמת ארץ ישראל מחדשת בו כחותיה להוציא שמנה ודובשה, יום של שמחה הוא לישראל נוחליה, אוהביה ומצפיה.

The custom to eat “fruits of the Land of Israel” refers specifically to certain species of produce which are grown prominently in the Land of Israel and constitute one of its distinguishing features.

2. **Devarim 8:8 – The Land of Israel is praised for seven different varieties of produce found there.**

It is a land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs and pomegranates – a land of oil-olives and honey [dates].

ארץ חטה ושעורה וגפן ותאנה ורמון ארץ זית שמן ודבש:

Because of their association with the Land of Israel, these fruits have a special status in Jewish law regardless of where they were actually grown.

3. **Tur, Orach Chaim 208 – The five fruits of the seven species receive a special blessing upon their consumption.**

On five (of the seven) species for which the Land of Israel is praised – grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (because the “honey” mentioned in the verse refers to date honey) – we make the three-faceted blessing after consuming them. As I will make clear, because of their importance a special blessing of its own was instituted for them.

על חמשת המינין שהן גפן ותאנה ורמון וזית ותמרה  
שנשתבחה בהן א"י כי דבש האמור בפסוק הוא דבש  
תמרים מברכין לאחריהן ברכה אחת מעין ג' ולפנים  
תתבאר שמתוך חשיבותן קבעו להם ברכה בפני עצמן.

This requires some further explanation. Why is the fruit of the Land of Israel singled out as a sign of distinction rather than any other aspect of the Land?

4. **Rabbi Yoel Sirkis, Bayit Chadash (Bach), Orach Chaim 208 – The fruit is a reflection of the holiness of the Land of Israel.**

The holiness of the Land, which is endowed by the holiness of the Upper Land, also influences the fruit, which draw from the holiness of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) which dwells in the Land ... Therefore, we add in this blessing “We shall eat of its fruit and be satiated with its goodness,” for in eating its fruit we are nourished by the holiness and purity of the *Shechinah*, and satiated from its holiness.

קדושת הארץ הנשפע בה מקדושת הארץ העליונה  
היא נשפעת גם בפירותיה שיונקים מקדושת השכינה  
השוכנת בקרב הארץ... ועל כן נידח שאנו מכניסין  
בברכה זו “ונאכל מפריה ונשבע מטובה” כי באכילת  
פירותיה אנו ניזונים מקדושת השכינה ומטהרתה  
ונשבע מטובתה.

5. **Rabbi Yehudah Prero, “Fruits of Holiness,” Torah.org – The Bach is teaching us that the holiness of the Land of Israel is not only felt in the spiritual dimension, but also permeates the physical realm.**

The Bach explains why we should (and why indeed we do) request the ability to partake of the fruits of Israel. There is an intrinsic holiness to the Land of Israel. This holiness is not limited to the spiritual realm. The holiness actually manifests itself in a physical form as well. The fruits that are nurtured from the earth of the Land of Israel not only extract water and nutrients from the land – they extract the holiness of the land as well. When partaking of the fruits, we ingest physical nourishment as well as spiritual sustenance.

## PART D. LONGING FOR THE LAND

As mentioned above, there are no halachic ramifications of the day of Tu B'Shvat outside the Land of Israel. This led Jews of the Diaspora to develop a range of customs, which form a collective expression of yearning for the Holy Land. The following source mentions this idea, as well as the special *Seder* for Tu B'Shvat, which is practiced particularly in Kabbalistic circles.

1. **Rabbi Noam Chaim Cohen, “What is Tu B’Shvat,” in Emunat Itech, #51, p. 30 – The celebration of Tu B’Shvat in the Diaspora is an expressing of yearning for the Land.**

Since the time that we were exiled from our land, even though we were prevented from fulfilling the mitzvot of the Land that pertain to the day of Tu B’Shvat, several celebratory customs have developed amid the Diaspora communities to mark this day. We have even found a special liturgy, which is something like an Amidah prayer in honor of this day, which was written in the Land of Israel some thousand years ago.

Most of the customs revolved around consumption of fruit and recitation of prayers, and expressions of praise for the Land and its fruit ...

It is possible that particularly because of the fact that Jews of the Diaspora were unable to fulfill the mitzvot of the Land, Jews strove to mark the connection with the mitzvah of settling the Land in symbolic ways. On the day of Tu B’Shvat *tachanun* is not recited, and fast days are not proclaimed. In the times of the Safed Kabbalists, the “Order for the Night of Tu B’Shvat” was established, which is first mentioned in the book *Pri Eitz Hadar*. This *Seder* includes passages for study from the Bible, from Midrashic texts, and from the *Zohar*, as well as a prayer for the success of the fruit of the Land, which is intertwined with eating different fruit that pertain to different spiritual worlds (*atzilut, beriah, yetzirah, asiah*), and with the drinking of four cups of wine, parallel with the Passover Seder.

מאז שגלינו מעל אדמתנו, אף שהיינו מנועים מלקיים את כל המצוות התלויות בארץ הקשורות ליום ט"ו בשבט, התפתחו בקרב עדות ישראל בתפוצות מנהגים חגיגיים לציון יום זה. בידינו פיוט, שהוא מעין תפילת שמונה עשרה לכבוד יום זה, שהתחבר בארץ ישראל לפני כאלף שנה. רוב המנהגים היו סביב אכילת פירות ואמירת תפילות, ודברים בשבח ארץ ישראל ופרותיה...

ייתכן שדווקא בגלל העובדה שלא קיימו בגלות מצוות התלויות בארץ, רצו היהודים בכל מקום לציין את הקשר למצווה החשובה של יישוב הארץ בדרך סמלית אחרת. ביום ט"ו בשבט אין אומרים תחנון, ואין גוזרים בו תענית. בתקופת המקובלים בצפת נוסד "סדר ליל ט"ו בשבט" הנזכר לראשונה בספר "פרי עץ הדר". ב"סדר" זה ישנם קטעי לימוד מהתנ"ך מהמדרשים ומהזוהר, וכן תפילה להצלחת פירות הארץ, תוך כדי אכילה של פירות שונים המציינים את העולמות השונים (אצילות, בריאה, יצירה, עשייה), ועל ידי שתיית ארבע כוסות יין שונים, ככליל הסדר בפסח.

The following are descriptions of the day of Tu B’Shvat in early twentieth century Lithuania:

*Especially great was the happiness on Tu B’Shvat in Cheder (where children learned Torah). At the Cheder, every student would bring carob, raisins, almonds, and other fruits, which the teacher would pile into one great heap and then begin to hand out to the children. Rich and poor, all received an equal share. With great devotion, the teacher would pronounce blessings upon each variety. Each boy would then repeat these benedictions in a singing, childish voice and then would taste the fruit . . .*

*There was a great to-do in the school when Frieda the Bean Woman would appear with her two huge baskets. On all other days, Frieda would sell boiled beans, boiled peas, ginger candies, and mondlach. On Tu B’Shvat, however, her chief merchandise was carob bread. “May God help me! As I’m telling you the truth: they are Eretz Yisrael bokser (carob). May I live to see the day when I’ll come to the place where these grew!” Frieda would repeat the same rigmarole year after year.*

*We would fall upon Frieda’s baskets like bees upon honey, and buy her bread for pennies, kopeks and half-kopeks.*

We would buy and eat this fruit with great devotion and ecstasy. This was the fruit that was so plentiful in Eretz Yisrael that the goats munched it without hindrance. Oh! How we envied the goats of the Land of Israel . . . (From the writings of A. S. Sachs.)

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ In Biblical times, there was no commemoration of Tu B'Shvat other than the basic halachic ramifications. In later times, however, and particularly during the medieval period, a number of customs were initiated giving Tu B'Shvat its “festival day” status. In accordance with this status, the prayer of *tachanun* is not recited on Tu B'Shvat nor can a public fast be proclaimed on it.
- ☞ The main manner of commemoration has become the consuming of fruit, a custom which today has many variations. Some eat fruit of the seven species; some eat fifteen (or even thirty) species of fruit, etc; some even conduct a Tu B'Shvat Seder.

## SECTION III. THE KABBALAH OF TU B'SHVAT

Many customs and prayers of Tu B'Shvat are derived from Kabbalistic traditions. For instance, the custom of eating three different types of fruit mentioned above corresponds to three distinct spiritual worlds known in the Kabbalistic tradition. The Kabbalistic work *Chemdat HaYamim* is often quoted in this connection and many Tu B'Shvat traditions are based on its writings. In addition, many sources are collected in the book *Pri Eitz Hadar*, which presents a *Seder*, parallel to the Passover Seder, for Tu B'Shvat. In this section we will investigate the more esoteric, Kabbalistic side of Tu B'Shvat.

### PART A. KABBALISTIC TRADITIONS

#### 1. **Mo'ed Lekol Chai 30:7-8 – There are various customs with regard to eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat according to Kabbalistic tradition.**

On the night of Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for trees, most of the Diaspora communities of the Jews have the custom of laying the table with all kinds of fruit and vegetables, according to their means. Each person recites a blessing on a fruit... Following the *Bircat HaMazon*, one recites a blessing over wheat, mentioning the verse “The goodness of wheat shall satiate you,” so that he should have bountiful sustenance ... children should make a blessing on an apple with honey ... The most important thing is that there should be fifteen kinds of fruit ... and one chapter of the Mishnah should be studied over each one: eight chapters of *Pe'ah*, three of *Bikurim*, and four of *Rosh HaShanah*, corresponding to [the three worlds] *Beriah*, *Yetzirah*, and *Asiah*. One should also recite a blessing over the scent of an etrog.

ליל ט"ו בשבט ראש השנה לאילנות, ונהגו רוב תפוצות ישראל לסדר בשלחן מכל פירות האילן ופירות הארץ, עד אשר תשיג ידו, וכל אחד מברך על פרי אחד, האיש מברך על החיטה אחר ברכת המזון, חלב חיטים ישביעך, כדי שיהיה לו מזונות בריוח... דבש ותפוח לתינוקות... העיקר הוא ט"ו פירות... ושילמוד בכל פרי פרק אחד ממשניות, והם פיאה שמונה פרקים, בכורים שלשה, ראש השנה ארבעה, והם נגד בריאה יצירה עשיה. וגם שיברך על ריח האתרוג.

Most people do not follow this practice, but rather read from the book *Pri Eitz Hadar* according to its order, over the fruit that he has. Some make no order of fruit, and some serve specifically fruit of the seven species that the Land of Israel is praised with. See also Chemdat HaYamim. There are places where fifteen psalms are recited, and the teachers of schoolchildren teach the children all fifteen psalms, so that they should study them at their father's table on the night of Tu B'Shvat.

רובא דעלמא אינן נוהגין כן, אלא קורין בספר פרי עץ הדר על הסדר לפי הפירות שיש לו, ויש שאינן נוהגין כלל לסדר הפירות, ויש נוהגין דוקא שבעה מיני פירות הנשתבחה בהן ארץ ישראל, ועיין בספר חמ"י, ויש מקומות דאינן לומדים כי אם ט"ו שירים שבתהילים, ונוהגין דהמלמדי תינוקות מלמדים את תלמידיהם כל ט"ו שירים, כדי שילמדו בשלחן אביהם ליל ט"ו בשבט.

According to Kabbalistic sources, the custom to eat fruit on Tu B'Shvat has an immensely potent spiritual effect.

## 2. **Pri Eitz Hadar – Eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat has the power to rectify the original transgression of Adam.**

My mentor, of blessed memory, stated that one should have intention upon eating the fruit to rectify the sin of Adam, who sinned in eating from the fruit of the tree. Although we have this intention throughout the year, this day has special potency for this intention, in that it is the New Year for fruit of the tree. In this we are able to awaken the upper spiritual lights that should shine with a brilliant light and to influence great blessing and bounty upon the whole world. Therefore, before eating each fruit, one should mention its spiritual root as mentioned in the Zohar and Tikkunim, in order to awaken their spiritual roots.

ומורי ז"ל היה אומר לכוין באכילת פירותיהן לתיקון חטא אדם הראשון אשר חטא בפירות האילן כי אף כל ימי שנה כל כוננתו לתיקון זה מכל מקום חביבה מצוה בשעתה זה היום תחילה וראש לפירות האילן ואשר להיות כבר הודענו בכמה מקומות כי יש בכח הדבור להיות מעורר כח מדות העליונות להאיר באור נפלא יתר גדול מאד להשפיע שפע רצון ברכה ונדבה בכל העולמות על כן נכון להגות לפני אכילת כל פרי ופרי בסוד שורשו הבא בספר הזוהר ובתיקונים בקצת מהם לעורר שרשיהן למעלה.

## 3. **Ibid. – It is important to make blessings and sing praises over eating fruit in order to effect a Kabbalistic “spiritual rectification.”**

It is a good custom to eat many fruits on this day, and to sing songs and praise over them, as I have established with those who are in my company. Although there is nothing stated about this matter in the writings of the Rav, it remains a great rectification.

ומנהג טוב להולכים בתמים להרבות בפירות בעצם היום הזה ולומר דברי שירות ותשבחות עליהן כאשר הנהגתי לכל החברים אשר עמדי, ועם כי בדברי כתבי הרב זלה"ה לא נמצא מנהג זה, מכל מקום תיקון נפלא הוא.

The following is the prayer to recite before the order of eating fruit on Tu B'Shvat.

## 4. **Ibid. – On Tu B'Shvat we ask God to bless the fruit on the trees.**

May it be Your Will, Lord, our God and the God of our fathers, that the eating of these fruit that

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלוקינו ואלוקי אבותינו שבכח

we are about to eat, and the recitation of the blessing over them, and our mention of the secrets of the spiritual roots, should draw spiritual bounty and blessing upon them, and upon the spiritual ministers that are appointed over them, that they should be filled with blessing to bring them to flourish from the beginning of the year unto year's end, for blessing, for good life, and for peace.

סגולת אכילת הפירות שנאכל ונברך עליהן עתה ואשר נהגה בסוד שרשיהן העליונים אשר המה תלויים במ להשפיע עליהן שפע רצון ברכה ונדבה וגם הממונים והמשטרים עליהן יתמלאו מעוז שפע הודן לשוב שנים להגדילם ולהצמיחם מראשית השנה ועד אחרית השנה לטובה ולברכה לחיים טובים ולשלום.

## PART B. PRAYING FOR AN ETROG

Part of the Kabbalistic tradition of Tu B'Shvat is the prayer for a beautiful etrog in the coming year.

### 1. Rabbi Zvi Elimelech of Dinov, Bnei Yissachar, Shvat 2:2 – The Mishnah hints that on Tu B'Shvat we should pray for a beautiful etrog for the following Sukkot.

The reason for which the Mishnah mentions the New Year of the tree ... and the word "tree" is written in the singular, rather than the plural "trees," is to allude to the fact that our Rabbis instruct us to pray on Tu B'Shvat that God should provide us with a kosher and beautiful etrog for the time of the mitzvah [i.e. Sukkot]... Therefore, the Mishnah says "tree" – singular, hinting at the special tree that the Torah specifies for the mitzvah [of the etrog].

טעם שאמר התנא במתניתין... ר"ה לאילן... ונאמר "אילן" לשון יחיד, ולא אמר "אילנות". לרמז מה שאמרו רבותינו להתפלל בט"ו בשבט על אתרוג כשר ומהודר שיזמין הקב"ה בעת שיצטרך למצווה... וזהו שאמר התנא: אילן – לשון יחיד, לרמז על האילן המיוחד המבואר בתורה למצווה.

Based on the above teaching of Bnei Yissachar, Ben Ish Chai composed a special prayer for the etrog. It is noteworthy that Ben Ish Chai, from Bagdad, was influenced by the European Bnei Yissachar, to adopt this custom. This demonstrates the universality of the Tu B'Shvat spiritual tradition.

### 2. Ben Ish Chai, Shvat 2:2 – Praying for an etrog is an expression of longing to perform the mitzvot of Sukkot properly.

May it be Your Will, Lord, our God, and The God of our forefathers, that You bless all of the etrog trees to bear their fruit at the proper time, and that they shall bear etrogim that are good, nice, beautiful, and clean from all blemish, and that no scars should form upon them, and that they shall be complete and they should not have any deficiencies, even pricked by a thorn.

And these etrogim should be available for us and for all of Israel in every place that they are, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of taking [the etrog] with the *lulav* on the Holiday of Sukkot, that shall come to us with good life, and with peace, as You have written in Your Torah by way of Moshe

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו, שתברך כל אילנות האתרוג להוציא פירותיהם בעתם, ויוציאו אתרוגים טובים יפים ומהדרים ונקיים מכל מום, ולא יעלה בהם שום חזזית, ויהיו שלמים ולא יהיה בהם שום חסרון ואפילו עקיצת קוץ,

ויהיו מצויים לנו ולכל ישראל בכל מקום שהם, לקיים בהם מצות נטילה עם הלולב בחג הסכות שיבא עלינו לחיים טובים ולשלום, כאשר צויתנו בתורתך על ידי משה עבדך, "ולקחתם לכם ביום הראשון פרי עץ הדר כפות תמרים וענף עץ עבות וערבי נחל" (ויקרא: כ"ג, מ),

(Moses), Your servant, “And on the first day you shall take for yourselves a beautiful fruit of the tree, a palm frond, and a branch of a myrtle tree, and [branches from a] willow brook ...” (Vayikra 23:40). May it be Your Will, Lord, our God, and the God of our forefathers, that You help us and assist us in this mitzvah of taking the *lulav*, myrtle, willow, and etrog, in the proper manner, in its proper time, on the festival of Sukkot, that shall come upon us for good life, and peace, with happiness and good-heartedness, and that You shall make a nice, beautiful etrog [that is] clean [of all blemishes and deficiencies], complete and kosher according to its laws, accessible to us.

ויהי רצון מלפניך ה' א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו, שתעזרנו ותסיענו לקיים מצוה זו של נטילת לולב הדם ערבה ואתרוג, כתקנה בזמנה בחג הסוכות שיבא עלינו לחיים טובים ולשלום בשמחה ובטוב לבב, ותזמין לנו אתרוג יפה ומהדר ונקי ושלם וכשר כהלכתו.

### KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ☞ There is a rich Kabbalistic tradition concerning Tu B'Shvat, and many of the customs regarding eating fruit have their source in Kabbalistic writings.
- ☞ Those who follow the Kabbalistic tradition add a number of prayers and intentions, and are careful to eat various types of fruit, in accordance with their Kabbalistic meaning.
- ☞ A Kabbalistic custom that has become fairly widespread is praying on Tu B'Shvat for a beautiful etrog for the coming year's Sukkot festival.

## SECTION IV. OF TREES AND MAN

In many places in the Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar, our Sages draw analogies between people and trees, an appropriate topic for study on Tu B'Shvat. What is the source for drawing such analogies?

### PART A. MAN IS A TREE

#### 1. Devarim 20:19 – Is man like a tree or not?

When you lay siege to a city and wage war for a long time against it and capture it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them, for from it will you eat and you shall not cut it down; for is a tree of the field then a man who will come against you in the siege?

כי תצור אל עיר ימים רבים להלחם עליה לתפשה לא תשחית את עצה לגדח עליו גרזן כי ממנו תאכל ואתו לא תכרת כי האדם עץ השדה לבא מפניך במצור:

In the literal meaning of the above verse, the statement “for is the tree of the field a man?” is a rhetorical question implying that man is nothing like a tree of the field. Nevertheless, the verse has been understood homiletically according to its literal (non-rhetorical) meaning to say just the opposite – that a tree **is**, in a certain sense, a man!

## 2. Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer, Choreb 21 – The tree is a metaphor for man.

Man is likened unto a tree, as the verse says, “For man is a tree of the field.”

אדם שנמשל לעץ, שנ' כי האדם עץ השדה.

Due to this metaphor, it stands to reason that as the New Year for Trees, Tu B'Shvat has special significance for human beings.

## 3. Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, Sefer HaToda'ah, Ch. 13 – The Rosh HaShanah for the trees is a Rosh HaShanah for us too.

The Torah says that man is likened to the tree of the field. Therefore, this day [Tu B'Shvat] is a sort of day of judgment for mankind as well.

והתורה המשיילה את האדם לעץ השדה, הרי שיום זה מעין יום הדין הוא גם לאדם שנמשל בעץ.

### PART B. EXPLORING THE METAPHOR

So the Torah likens man to a tree in a metaphorical sense, but how exactly are people like trees? Exploring this metaphor will add depth to our appreciation of Tu B'Shvat, the New Year of the trees.

## 1. Talmud Bavli, Taanit 7a – A fruit-bearing tree is analogous to a person of good character whose “fruits,” i.e. whose teachings, one may freely consume.

What does the verse mean, “For man is a tree of the field,” is man really a tree? Rather, because it also says, “For from it will you eat and you shall not cut it down,” and then later it says, “You may destroy it and cut it down;” how is this to be resolved? If someone is a Torah scholar of proper character then you may eat (i.e. study from him – Rashi) and do not cut him down; but if not (i.e. if the scholar is not of good character), then you shall destroy him and cut him down (i.e. shun him – Rashi).

מאי דכתיב כי האדם עץ השדה, וכי אדם עץ שדה הוא? אלא משום דכתיב כי ממנו תאכל ואותו לא תכרת, וכתיב אותו תשחית וכרת. הא כיצד? אם תלמיד חכם הגון הוא - ממנו תאכל (רשי - למוד הימנו) ואותו לא תכרת, ואם לאו - אותו תשחית וכרת (רשי - סור מעליו).

According to this statement of the Talmud, the tree metaphor teaches us how to relate to other human beings; there are times when we should embrace their presence and learn from them, and there are times when we should shun them. But what similarity exists between a man and a tree?

## 2. Chiddushei Maharsha to Taanit 5b – The fruits of a person are his actions.

Just as a tree bears good fruit, so too the actions of a person are his “fruit.”

כמו שהאילן עושה פירות טובות כך מעשיהם הם פירותיהם.

Thus, the productivity of man is equated with that of a tree.



3. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:17 – Wisdom is likened to branches, while righteous deeds are likened to roots.**

One whose wisdom is greater than his deeds, what is he comparable to? To a tree with many branches and few roots; comes a storm and uproots it, and turns it on its head ... But one whose deeds are greater than his wisdom, to what is he compared? To a tree with many roots and few branches, whom all the storms in the world cannot budge from its place.

כל שחכמתו מרובה ממעשיו למה הוא דומה לאילן שענפיו מרובין ושרשיו מועטין והרוח באה ועוקרתו והופכתו על פניו ... אבל כל שמעשיו מרובין מחכמתו למה הוא דומה לאילן שענפיו מועטין ושרשיו מרובין שאפילו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזין אותו ממקומו.

4. **Maharal of Prague, Netzach Yisrael, Ch. 7 – Man's roots are in the spiritual world.**

Man is called a “tree of the field” as the verse says, “For man is a tree of the field.” But really he is an upside-down tree, for a tree's roots are in the ground below while mans “roots” are above: his soul is the source of his being and it exists in the spiritual world. Man's hands are his branches, his legs the branches off of those branches, while his body is the trunk – for a tree's sustenance is from the ground while Man's sustenance is from Heaven.

באמת האדם נקרא “עץ השדה”, דכתיב (דברים כ, יט) “כי האדם עץ השדה”, רק שהוא אילן הפוך, כי העץ שורשו למטה תקוע בארץ, ואילו האדם שרשו למעלה, כי הנשמה הוא שורש שלו, והיא מן השמים. והידים הם ענפי האילן, הרגלים הם ענפים על ענפים, גופו עיקר האילן. ולמה הוא אילן הפוך, כי העץ שורשו למטה, כי העץ חיותו מן האדמה, והאדם חיות נשמתו מן השמים.

**PART C. APPLYING THE METAPHOR TO TU B'SHVAT**

The analogy of man to a tree clearly has deep significance. What lessons can we draw from Tu B'Shvat, the festival of trees, to apply in our own lives?

One such lesson is based on the timing of Tu B'Shvat. As we have seen (Section I, Part D), the date of the New Year for trees is based on when the majority of the winter has elapsed. But Tu B'Shvat is still in the middle of the cold, rainy season when the growth or blossoming of vegetation is not readily apparent. Why, then, is this an appropriate date to mark the New Year for trees?

1. **Rabbi Avraham Pam, Rav Pam on the Festivals, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 90 – The rejuvenation of the trees on Tu B'Shvat, undetected by the human eye, symbolizes the potential for rejuvenation of the human spirit.**

The great masters of *mussar* and Jewish thought derived many important insights from Tu B'Shvat, which always falls in the midst of winter, while the trees are totally bare of leaves and seemingly bereft of any sign of life. The fields are usually covered with snow, the white shrouds of winter. Yet when this special day arrives, a *techiyas hameisim* (Resurrection of the Dead) begins. Something happens under the earth; life-giving “sap” begins to work its way up through the trees to give them new life. This expresses itself in buds, blossoms, flowers, and, eventually, luscious fruits that the trees will produce in the coming spring and summer.

Man is compared to a tree of the field (see Devarim 20:19). At times it seems that he, too, is totally stripped of any spiritual life, with little or no connection to God and His Torah. Yet the *pintele Yid*, the indestructible spark of one's Godly soul, lies dormant under the surface. It waits for an opportunity to burst forth and flower with spiritual growth, that can erase years and decades of apathy to a life of spirituality.

It isn't always easy for a person to feel inspired. Many times, the vicissitudes of life can cause a person to become depressed and feel unaccomplished. But the message of Tu B'Shvat is that even when a person does not see his own accomplishments or his own value, and even when he feels that it is impossible for him to become uplifted, the potential is still there, beneath the surface, waiting to be realized.

This message of Tu B'Shvat is important for everyone because it is natural for every person to experience cycles of growth and stagnation. By nature, periods of spiritual uplift and flourishing will alternate with periods when a person will feel unaccomplished and depressed.

2. **Rabbi Ephraim Nisenbaum, "Teachings of the Trees," Power Lines – Insights and Reflections on the Jewish Holidays, Targum Press – Tu B'Shvat teaches us how to deal with cycles of natural spiritual growth and stagnation.**

Let us examine the comparison between man and trees in order to understand the message on Tu B'Shvat for humankind. The tree goes through cycles in its life. The heavy-laden tree of summer empties itself of fruit in the autumn, and then slowly loses its leaves, one by one. By winter time, the tree stands shorn of its previous glory. For all purposes, it appears to have died.

But then comes Tu B'Shvat! In the midst of the cold winter days, when all vegetation seems frozen or dead, the sap of the tree starts to flow beneath the surface bark. Rising slowly from roots buried in the hardened soil, the sap pushes its way up, pumping new life into outstretched branches that reach towards the heavens.

In life, we too often go through cycles of growth. Periods of renewal and growth may alternate with times of stagnation or dormancy. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe cites that this cycle is part of man's nature. He adds that a person must not become disillusioned when spiritual growth seems halted; the "low" period will usually be followed by a "high" period that will yield new opportunities for growth (AleI Shur, Vol. I, p. 34).

That is the message of Tu B'Shvat: Even when we feel lethargic, in a rut, and seem to have lost the drive to achieve, we must not despair. Just as winter is an annual hiatus in the life cycle of trees, so bouts of lethargy and unproductivity are necessary phases in the human cycle. Just as with the coming of spring, life-giving sap moves imperceptibly through the trees to branches stretching to the sky, so we too will have renewed energy from deep within our spiritual reservoirs, so long as we set our goal heavenward.

3. **Rabbi Yehoshua Freilich, "Tu B'Shvat Reflections," Jerusalem Gems, Targum Press, p. 256 – The comparison of man to a tree should make us realize our potential for growth and development.**

A tree is connected to the ground and to the beautiful fruit. It takes raw material from the dirt and creates a most outstanding product. In the same way, human beings take physical objects in this world and transform them into spiritual objects, mitzvot. Just as in the natural world, the action begins at this point, so, too, in the metaphysical world, Jews who have been working on themselves since Rosh HaShanah can begin to "feel" and internalize the results – the effect of the mitzvot ...

It takes a long time until a tree grows to maturity. Much investment of time and effort are needed to produce the beautiful fruit. Similarly, for man to reach his fruition, it also takes a lot of effort and time. Now it is winter and the tree seems to be dead. But God introduces nitrogen and the other elements needed to regenerate it. We, too, have low periods in life when we seem to be dead – but we also have the necessary ingredients, Torah and mitzvot, to revitalize and invigorate us.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ The Torah likens man to a tree, thereby making the New Year of the trees particularly relevant for mankind as well.
- ☞ A person's actions are his fruit, the product of the inner quality of his being.
- ☞ Alternatively, a person's deeds are the roots that keep him firmly planted, while wisdom is likened to the branches that display his glory.
- ☞ Another similarity to the tree is that both man and trees have the source of their sustenance rooted elsewhere; for trees it is the ground while for people it is their soul's existence in the spiritual world. As such, man is really an up-side-down tree!
- ☞ On Tu B'Shvat, the rejuvenation of trees is celebrated even though there is no visible sign of any such rejuvenation taking place. In the context of this metaphor, the implication is that man, too, has vast spiritual potential hidden beneath the surface that is waiting to be unlocked.

## SECTION V. TU B'SHVAT AND NATURE

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As the New Year for Trees, Tu B'Shvat presents the perfect occasion to take stock of the world around us and appreciate the wonders of nature (see also the Morasha shiur on Judaism and the Environment). The Jewish view of nature maintains that God's guiding Hand is apparent in the natural world if only a person examines it closely. Furthermore, once a person arrives at the recognition that God has engineered the mechanisms of nature and continues to operate them, it should cause him to be overwhelmed with gratitude for the bounty that God has given us.

1. **Rabbi Avraham Pam, Rav Pam on the Festivals, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 91. – Tu B'Shvat sensitizes us to the goodness we derive from God's kindness.**

On a different plane, the reawakening of the trees from their "sleep" of winter gives us an insight into the miraculous workings of what we call "nature." When one contemplates the countless miracles that take place in the development of even the most simple organism in nature, one cannot deny the obvious existence of a Creator Who controls the world. The more a person analyzes the infinite complexity of Creation, the more he sees the unmistakable imprint of God, Who brought a world into being in order to bestow kindness on His creations.

... A person can live without apples and other fruits, which do not satiate. God created fruits solely to give pleasure to His creations and to show that He desires to bestow goodness upon them. Thus, Tu B'Shvat, with its emphasis on the fruits of the tree, is a special time to contemplate the many different fruits with which God enhances our lives to give us pleasure and enjoyment. This will elicit a desire to express our heartfelt gratitude to Him for His endless kindness to us.

Moreover, the Torah teaches us that God created such a vast world with such a variety of life within it for this very purpose – so that man should recognize Him by examining the world that He created.

2. **Rabbi Yaakov Neiman, Darkei Mussar, pp. 299-300 – Tu B'Shvat is a day to appreciate the great variety in the world and to thank God for it.**

When the Creator prepared all kinds of food and fruits for man and placed all kinds of animals in the world, which are apparently superfluous because man could live without them, it was only because He wanted to give man more means and opportunities to recognize the Creator by examining the creations. Therefore, God made the Creation extremely vast, with its wide assortment of colors and hues, in order to give man constant delight ...

Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for trees, on which we are served all kinds of fruits, should be a day for us to examine and behold the wonders of God's Creation in every fruit, to recognize – through this understanding – the supreme, amazing wisdom of God in His creations. Then every time that a new fruit or a new delight comes before us, we will come closer to God due to our obligation to thank Him for that pleasure.

Tu B'Shvat is therefore a day for examining and looking into the world, and thanking God for all the good that He has given us in His world. The purpose is to recognize the One who spoke and caused the world to come into existence.

וכן מה שהבורא הכין לאדם כל מיני מזון ופירות והכנים לתוך הבריאה בהמות וחיות, שלכאורה מיותרים, כי האדם יכול לחיות זולתם, הוא רק מפני שרצה לתת לאדם אמצעים חדשים והזדמנויות חדשות להכיר את הבורא מתוך הבחינה בנבראים, ומתוך כך הרחיב הבורא ב"ה את הבריאה יותר ויותר עם כל שלל הצבעים וריבוי הגוונים שלה, וכדי לתת לאדם בכל פעם עונג...

ט"ו בשבט ר"ה לאילנות שבו מגישים לנו פירות, מינים ממינים שונים – צריך לשמש לנו כיום של בחינה והסתכלות בפלאי היצירה של הבורא בכל פרי ופרי להכיר ע"י בחינה זו את חכמת ה' העליונה והנפלאה בנבראים, ובבוא לפנינו בכל פעם פרי חדש ועונג חדש נהיה מוכרחים להתקרב יותר אל הבורא ב"ה מתוך חיוב ההודאה על העונג.

ט"ו בשבט, הוא איפוא יום הבחינה וההסתכלות בבריאה, והודאה לכל הטוב שנתן ה' לפנינו בעולמו והתכלית להכיר ע"י כך את מי שאמר והיה העולם.

Indeed, many sages stress that an examination of the natural world will yield an astonishing picture of a vast, infinitely complex, and carefully calculated natural system which could only be the product of a Supreme Intelligence – i.e., God. The classic work Chovos HaLevavos devotes an entire section called Shaar HaBechinah, at the beginning of his work, to describing the wonders of the natural world and how they reflect the greatness of God.

The following is an example by Rabbi Avigdor Miller describing the special properties of an apple reflecting a Designer.

*Let us consider the apple. Today, food is packed in cartons with waxed waterproof wrappers to prevent spoilage. If such wax-wrapped packages grew on trees, it would be a miracle which would impress the beholders with the wisdom of the Creator and His bounty. But the skin of the apple is superior to the most cunning man-made packaging. The fruit skin contains oil, which renders it waterproof, and it is not affected by heavy rains during the months of growth and ripening. But in addition, this oil possesses the characteristic aroma which renders the fruit more desirable. But the fruit skin has additional functions, for by its color it indicates the state of ripeness. As long as the skin is green it advertises the unfitness of the contents for food; and when the fruit has become edible and is ready for use, the skin turns red to announce the fitness of the contents. The color also has the important function of making the fruit attractive, to arouse the appetite of the beholder. The chief lure of the fruit is its skin. Just as the beauty of young people is planned for the encouragement of procreation, so is the beauty of the apple planned to encourage eating.*

Moreover, the fruit has a stem which serves (1) as a support from which the apple hangs, (2) and as a water main and

supply chute through which the materials, which the roots draw from the earth and which rise in the sap elevators, are passed on into the growing fruit. Even if men could ever learn to extract from the earth the materials which compose a fruit, yet the machinery would be extremely massive and complicated. This marvelously complex system of transforming the earth materials into ready-to-eat fruit is performed by machinery fashioned by a great Wisdom.

Inside the fruit, the liquid is not permitted to collect so that it will pour off and be lost when the fruit is opened; but the liquid and the solid are carefully united, so that the fruit may be cut into sections without having the juice spill out. Then consider how masterfully combined are the sugars and the acids, so that the ripe fruit is not too tart or too sweet . . . (Rabbi Avigdor Miller, *Rejoice O Youth*, pp. 84-86).

Thus, examining the wonders of nature helps a person to bolster his recognition of God's handiwork and his faith in God's existence and omnipotence. But there is another principle to be learned from nature as well. God created a vast world. Why did He do so? It is incumbent upon a person to recognize that God created the world for the benefit and enjoyment of man. A person who comes to this understanding will then be able to apply it to his own interactions with other human beings.

3. **Rabbi Yaakov Neiman, Darkei Mussar, p. 302 – God created a vast world for man to enjoy, even though it wasn't necessary for man's survival. We can derive a lesson from this on an individual level, that when we perform acts of kindness for others, we should go beyond providing for their basic needs and do our best to give them "extras" for enjoyment as well.**

God created all the wonderful trees that bear all the species of fruits which sustain human life. Why did God create all of this? After all, man could live without them, on bread and water alone. God, Who is the Ultimate Good, wanted to give man enjoyment and pleasure, and therefore He created many species of fruits to sustain man's life, so that a person could enjoy it and experience satisfaction from constantly having something new with which to satiate himself ...

The Torah says: "You shall go in His ways." Thus, a person must also act in this way, to try not only to be concerned for another man's life alone, but to give his fellow pleasure and enjoyment as much as he can. This is something that a person can do at every moment. When a person goes on the street and sees people, he can do many mitzvot by greeting every person with a happy face ...

הקב"ה ברא כל אילנות טובים אשר יש בהם כל מיני פירות משובחים להחיות נפש האדם. לכאורה בשביל מה ברא כל זה? הלא האדם יכל לחיות בלעדיהם בלחם ומים. אלא הקב"ה שהוא הטוב והמטיב רצה להסב לאדם הנאה ועונג לכן ברא כל מיני פירות, כדי להחיות נפש האדם, שתהיה לו נחת רוח וזה מביא לידי הרחבת הדעת שכל פעם יש לו דבר חדש להשיב את נפשו...

התורה אמרה והלכת בדרכיו, א"כ צריך האדם להתנהג בדרכי זו, להשתדל לא רק לדאוג בעד החיים הפשוטים של האדם, אלא לגרום לו הנאה ותענוג כמה שיכול. זה מסוגל האדם לעשות בכל רגע ורגע, כשיוצא לרחוב ורואה אנשים יכול לעשות מצוות כרימון בסבר פנים יפות שלו, לקבל כל אדם בשמחה.

Tu B'Shvat is an appropriate day to focus upon and appreciate the wonders that God created in the natural world.

**KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:**

- ☞ Tu B'Shvat, as the New Year for Trees, provides us with an opportunity to examine the natural world and perceive the Divine design that it bespeaks.
- ☞ God created a vast and multifaceted world in order for people to perceive His handiwork through it.

- ☞ A person who examines nature through an unbiased lens will perceive clear evidence of Divine creation.
- ☞ This recognition should foster a sense of gratitude toward God for endowing us with nature's bounty.
- ☞ It should also bring us to derive important lessons about how to perform kindness for other people. Just as God created a vast world to give human beings enjoyment, a person who is performing kindness for others should try to give them more than just their basic needs.

## SECTION VI. THE TORAH IS CALLED A “TREE OF LIFE”

The metaphoric significance of a tree is relevant in another fundamental way, as well. King Solomon called the Torah a “tree of life” in the following verse.

### 1. **Mishlei (Proverbs) 3:18 – The Torah is a tree of life.**

It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and those who support it are praised.

עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה ותומכיה מאושר.

What is the significance of this metaphor? In what way is the Torah compared to a tree?

### 2. **Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, p. 47 – The Torah is the source of all that which is good and eternal.**

“It is a tree of life” – i.e., the Torah is the source of all good and eternal life, and God gave us the Torah of truth and eternal life is planted within us ... This is what we mean when we say “Who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah.” This means that the angels said, “What is man that You should remember him and a human being that You should recall him? Place your glory in the heavens [i.e., keep the Torah in the heavens and do not give it to man on earth.]” But God selected the Jewish people from among all the nations and gave them the Torah, which is the eternal life of a Jew, since he connects through it to the Creator of the world and the Source of life, and this connection is only through the Torah ...

The meaning of “those who grasp it” is that they hold onto themselves with it, i.e., they grasp the Torah in order to strengthen themselves. This is like a person who is drowning in a river, God forbid, and he grasps a branch of a tree in order to save himself from drowning. Similarly, when

עץ חיים היא – היינו שהתורה היא מקור הטוב והחיים של חיי עולם. ונתן לנו תורת אמת וחיי עולם נטע בתוכנו... וזהו שאנו אומרים “אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ונתן לנו את תורתו”. והיינו, דמלאכי השרת ושרפי מעלה טענו [שבת פח:]: מזה אנוש כי תזכרנו וכן אדם כי תפקדנו, תנה הודך על השמים [תהילים ח'] [ורק הקב"ה הבדיל ובחר עם ישראל מכל העמים ונתן להם תורתו שהי נצחיותו של אדם מישראל ע"י שמתקשר עם בורא עולם מקור החיים, וקשר זה הוא אך ע"י התורה...]

ופירוש “למחזיקים בה”, שהם מחזיקים את עצמם בה, נאחזים בתורה כדי להציל את עצמם, וכמו שהוא טובע בנהר ח"ו, והוא תופס בענף של עץ כדי להנצל מטביעה, עץ חיים היא – היינו שהתורה היא מקור הטוב והחיים של חיי עולם. ונתן לנו תורת אמת וחיי

a person grasps the tree of life of the Torah, the Torah holds onto him and becomes a tree of life for him. That is the level of “those who grasp it.”

עולם נטע בתוכנו... וזהו שאנו אומרים “אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים וכן הוא במי שמחזיק בעץ החיים של התורה שהתורה מחזקת אותו והיא עברו עין חיים, לתת לו חיי עולם, וכל זה היא דרגת “למחזיקים בה.”

Thus, when King Solomon tells us that the Torah is a “tree of life,” he means that Torah is the true source of eternal life. On Tu B’Shvat, when we celebrate the New Year of trees, there is also a strong connection to the Torah. In fact, the Torah tells us (Devarim 1:3) that Moshe began explaining the Torah to the Jewish people in the month of Shvat, and Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr teaches that this indicates that there is a special potency in the month of Shvat to access and learn the Torah.

### 3. **Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, Ohr Gedalyahu, Shemot (Exodus), pp. 42-44 — The growth of trees as a result of the rain symbolizes the spiritual growth that we can achieve through Torah.**

Shvat is the New Year for trees. In Jewish law, this means that the fruit that blossom before Shvat are produced by the rains of the previous year, and that which begins to grow after Shvat is from the rains of the new year. The conclusion is that Shvat is the beginning of the growth from the rains of the new year. The shower of rain upon the world actually includes a shower of many different kinds of spiritual energies, as we have explained many times that all material bounty in the world is based on a flow of spirituality ...

It emerges from this that the month of Shvat is a time to strengthen our Torah study and to begin rejuvenating our Torah study. The first sparks of the energy of Torah appear already on Rosh Chodesh, and on the fifteenth the rejuvenation is already visible in this world. On this day, when there is a rejuvenation of Torah, all of the spiritual energies that flow from the Torah are also rejuvenated. Therefore, in Shvat we can attach ourselves to the conduct of Torah, for if a person attaches himself to the inner depth of Torah and knows that everything in the world comes from Torah, he can defeat every lust that exists in the world.

שבט הוא ר"ה לאילן, ופירושו בהלכה הוא כי כל אלו הפירות שחונטין קודם שבט הם בכח של הגשמים מהשנה שעברה, ומה שמתחיל לצמוח אחר שבט הוא מהגשמים של שנה החדשה. נמצאת אומר שבשבט הוא התחלת הצמיחה מהגשמים של השנה החדשה, והנה השפעת הגשמים באמת כולל כל מיני השפעות, וכמו שביארנו כמה פעמים כי כל השפעות של גשמיים הניכרים בעוה"ז ביסודם הם השפעה רוחני...

נמצא כי חודש שבט הוא זמן להתגבר בתורה, ולהתחיל התחדשות בתורה, ומראש חודש כבר יש התנוצצות של השפעה בתורה, ובחמישה עשר בו הרי ניכר כבר ההתחדשות בזה העולם, וביום הזה שיש התחדשות בתורה נתחדש עמה כל ההשפעות שיש מהתורה, ולכן בשבט יכולין להיות דבוק בהנהגה של תורה, כי אם האדם מדבק עצמו בפנימיות התורה, ויודע כי כל השפעות שישנו בעולם כולם הם בתורה, אז כבר ביכולתו להיות מושל על כל התאוות שישנו בעולם.

Here Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr reveals a fundamental mystical concept. When the world benefits from material bounty, it symbolizes a deeper flow of spiritual energy underlying the material blessing that comes into the world. Thus, on Tu B’Shvat, when we celebrate the growth of trees as a result of the rain, it is also a time to strengthen our commitment to the Torah, since the potential for physical growth at this time of year symbolizes a deep potential for spiritual growth that is also flourishing.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI:

- ☞ The Torah is called a “tree of life” because it is our exclusive connection to true eternal life.
- ☞ The blossoming that takes place in nature during the month of Shvat symbolizes the potential for spiritual growth that exists during this time. Tu B'Shvat is a time to capitalize on this potential and enhance our connection to Torah.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TU B'SHVAT IN JEWISH LAW?

Tu B'Shvat is the New Year for trees. The age of the fruit of a tree is calculated based on the day of Tu B'Shvat, a calculation that has ramifications for a number of halachic matters including tithes and the prohibition of orlah.

### WHAT RITUALS ARE PERFORMED TO COMMEMORATE THE DAY?

Although Tu B'Shvat was initially not a festival day (neither Biblical nor rabbinic), the day has a number of customary festival characteristics such as not fasting or reciting certain prayers of supplication.

In the Diaspora, where the day of Tu B'Shvat lacks halachic significance, the Jews of the exile saw it fitting to enact the day as a day of longing for the trees and fruit of the Land of Israel. Marking the day was thus a means of expression the Jews' yearning for their long-awaited return to the Land.

### WHAT IS THE SYMBOLISM OF EATING FRUIT ON TU B'SHVAT?

Tu B'Shvat is principally celebrated by eating fruit, over which blessings and prayers are recited. The Kabbalistic tradition has enriched this custom with a number of variations, and added many prayers and intentions.

### WHY DO SOME PEOPLE PRAY ON TU B'SHVAT TO FIND A BEAUTIFUL ETROG FOR SUKKOT?

While praying for all fruit of the trees is an appropriate thing to do on the Rosh HaShanah of the trees, a special hint in the Mishnah alludes to us that it is particularly apt to pray for an etrog on Tu B'Shvat.

### WHY DO MANY JEWISH SOURCES USE TREES AS A METAPHOR FOR PEOPLE?

The Torah itself alludes to this comparison. Different explanations have been offered as to its meaning: A person's character, deeds, and wisdom have all been likened to various parts of the tree.

In a deeper sense people resemble up-side-down trees whose roots, instead of being in the ground, are “above” in the spiritual realm.



## **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES**

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Pri Tzadik, Shemot, Essay on Tu B'Shvat

