

Thoughts on Tu B'Shvat

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(excerpted from *The Rhythms of Jewish Living*, by Rabbi Marc D. Angel"

The first Mishnah in the Talmudic tractate of Rosh Ha-shanah refers to the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat (Tu B'Shvat) as the new year for trees. This date marked the starting point for tithing fruits in ancient Israel. The significance of the date expanded over the centuries so that this minor holiday has become associated with a celebration of the abundance of nature. The observances of Tu B'Shvat were broadened under the influence of Rabbi Hayyim Vital and other 16th century Sephardic kabbalists living in Safed. From Safed, these customs spread throughout Asia, North Africa and Europe.

Tu B'Shvat prayers and readings were arranged in a distinctive order for use in a service. In the mid-eighteenth century, a booklet was published, entitled *Peri Ets Hadar*, which includes a ritual based on the practices of the kabbalists. It lists many fruits which are to be eaten on this holiday, with special emphasis given to those grown in Israel. The booklet calls for the drinking of four cups of wine as at the traditional Passover seder. A prayer for the people of Israel is recited along with a number of Biblical passages which relate to fruit or vegetation.

According to the kabbalists, one should taste at least

twelve fruits on Tu B'Shvat. Moroccan Jews customarily eat a minimum of fifteen different fruits. Iraqi celebrations called for serving at least one hundred kinds of fruits, nuts and vegetables. The text for the occasion includes readings from the Bible, Zohar, and rabbinic writings. A festive meal follows the readings.

The four cups of wine drunk during the service each have their own significance. The first cup is pale white wine. This symbolizes winter and the dormant earth awaiting the planting season. The second cup is more golden in color and represents the time when the earth comes alive and sap starts to flow from the trees. The third cup of wine is a rose, symbolizing the blossoming of the trees. (In Israel, Tu B'shvat is associated with the flowering of almond trees.) The final cup of wine is a deep red, symbolizing the land's ripening fruit and its overall fertility.

(In modern times, Tu B'Shvat has been revitalized as a time to celebrate the fruitfulness of the land of Israel, the remarkable achievements of modern Israeli agriculture and environmentalism, and the re-forestation of the land. The day is marked by eating fruits grown in Israel.)